Sloganeering for AI Safety: "Slip, Slop, Slap"

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The Australian government has adopted a "slip, slop, slap" approach to national workforce planning for the AI revolution. What could go wrong?

It has set exemplary standards for work force roles in AI implementation in the Australian Public Service but appears to have forsaken more challenging obligations to the country as a whole. It prefers instead to sloganise outcomes. It has taken up classic but tired language ("earn while you learn") and setting up a governance concept based on pillars ("Trust, People and Tools"). It seems the true test of government strategies these days is whether it has pillars and not whether the policies are effective.

"Slip, slop, slap" was a highly successful campaign launched in 1981 to convince Australians to take preventive action against sun-related skin cancers. It worked. As we face the AI revolution, the country needs more than slogans and an endless restatement of principles about safety and trust to navigate the grave challenges.

There are at least four key gaps in Australian policy: fragmented governance, timid moves in formal education and training, limited engagement with worker concerns about job-loss, and absence of a plan for workforce transition.

Fragmented governance

The Commonwealth has a broad Digital and Tech Skills Compact (Jobs and Skills Summit commitment) laid out in 2022. It has however failed to embrace a key recommendation of a 2025 report, "Our Gen AI Transition", to "to create a stewardship mechanism for guiding the digital and AI transition, with a focus on both immediate and medium term needs". In contrast, New South Wales has a Digital Skills and Workforce Compact (2023–2030). It constitutes a nation-leading, multi-partner agreement with explicit targets (addressing an 85,000 worker shortfall), updates to action plans every two years, and dozens of signatory partners. It more closely resembles the concrete stewardship mechanism for the digital and AI transition recommended in Jobs and Skills Australia's 2025 "Our Gen AI Transition" report. On the other hand, three years in, and the NSW approach appears to lack a transparent, independent evaluation of its effectiveness. The first two-year update due in 2025 is now overdue.

Timidity in frontline upskilling

The Jobs and Skills Report 2025 calls for embedding contemporary digital and AI skills in qualifications and a "national digital and AI capability uplift". In spite of expanding uptake of AI tools in some Australian higher-ed and VET classrooms, most core programs still do not provide systematic education about AI's wider societal impacts or its profession-specific implications. Graduates in fields outside ICT are not being prepared for the governance, ethical and labour-market dimensions of AI. The National AI Skills Report work is designed to identify training gaps and practical next steps, but as of 2026 such work is still in development. Some insights have been published in the 2025 report and the Gen AI study, but do not appear to have been institutionalised in accreditation requirements or large-scale retraining programs.

Limited worker voice and co-governance in AI deployment

Government AI policies stress risk management and consultation, but most concrete mechanisms sit inside government entities (e.g. accountable officials, impact assessments, registers) rather than in shared forums where unions and workers co-govern how AI reshapes jobs and work design. There is no standing, national tripartite body (workers, government and employers) dedicated to AI to regularly review sectoral impacts. There needs to be a goal of setting transition principles (e.g. "no net loss of job quality") and to negotiate adjustment supports. Participation has largely involved ad-hoc consultations. Policy narratives emphasise "spreading the benefits" and highlight priority cohorts (women, First Nations people, regional Australia). Yet there is not much evidence of concrete, scaled-up pathways for these groups into AI-related roles. Existing measures are focused on aggregate tech-jobs targets (e.g. 1.2 million tech jobs) rather than binding commitments on transition support, re-training guarantees, income protection or equitable transition programming specifically tied to AI adoption.

Absence of plan for workforce transition

According to a May 2026 study, "Australia can be characterised as strong on high-level AI and digital workforce framing but relatively under-developed in explicitly articulating AI cyber workforce development." The APS AI Plan mandates foundational AI training for public servants, with clear expectations that "every public servant" will receive capability support and access to secure AI tools. Equivalent, system-wide AI literacy uplift for the broader workforce is still emerging: outside pilots and sectoral initiatives, there is no universal baseline on AI literacy that employers are expected to meet, nor a widely adopted national framework for worker-level AI skills across occupations.

Studies such as "Our Gen AI Transition" provide detailed evidence on where AI is likely to augment or displace tasks, but there is not yet a robust mechanism that regularly ties this evidence into adjustments in labour law, social protection or proactive retraining funding at occupation level. Regulatory work on "safe and responsible AI" is moving (ethics, assurance, risk-based approaches). It remains more focused on system safety

and rights than on concrete labour-market transition instruments like negotiated redeployment pathways or statutory training rights linked to AI change.

An AI Act

The federal government considered and then rejected overarching legislation to scaffold Australia's AI transition. It would appear that its preferred solutions are only incremental and non-strategic, akin to sleep walking. All this while the country and the world are facing an AI crisis at many levels. The crisis can be seen in calls from the IT industry itself for a pause in AI development, a papal encyclical warning of existential moral threats, and growing outrage over the environmental threats from data centres.

This commentary has been prepared as teaching materials for the Social Cyber and Tech Academy workshop on "Navigating the Crisis in AI and Cyber Policy".