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THE ASTRA PROGRAM: SPEARHEADING PEER-LED WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT IN
AUSTRALIA'S SPACE SECTOR

Abstract

The question of how to bridge the gap between education and industry in the space sector, one that is still so young in Australia, has often been brought to attention during conferences, industry panels and university discussion. However, it seems the thought of peer-led educational programs does not often come to mind as most programs are led by established experts in the field. This abstract explores the collaboration between government bodies, industry partners, emerging professionals and the Australian Youth Aerospace Association in the delivery of the Astra Program, a trailblazing initiative designed to propel the growth of the Australian space sector and its global influence. Structured around subject matter expert presentations, Q&A panels and mentoring sessions, the Astra Program provides a platform for understanding and influencing the Australian space sector. Being nationwide and online run, it encourages participants from diverse backgrounds to work together, gaining insight into current trends, challenges and opportunities for growth in the space sector with the final deliverable of writing a white paper & recommendations on a critical topic in the space sector. Previous topics have centred around space infrastructure, earth observation and workforce diversity. Participants range from tertiary students to young professionals, with no disciplinary barriers, encouraging innovative thinking and problem solving that couldn't be achieved otherwise. The program also offers networking opportunities with sponsors and experts, as well as scholarships and awards, leading to job opportunities and partnerships. The program champions collaboration at the early stages of a space career, fostering a belief among participants that they can make a significant impact in their respective industries. Research indicates that early career mentorship leads to more disruptive industry actors. While the Astra Program is young, its impact is already evident in the transferrable skills and industry connections participants gain. Long-term data is not yet accessible, but participant satisfaction is high among a subset of 23 participants with 100% agreeing that coordinators effectively guided their teams and fostered an environment for challenging assumptions and embracing diverse perspectives. For those working in the space sector, the Astra Program serves as a model for how to ready the next generation of space industry leaders. It demonstrates the value of multidisciplinary collaboration, industry engagement and mentorship in fostering innovation and growth. Thus, the space industry should consider wider implementation of these types of programs to drive progress in the sector. The Astra Program offers valuable insights for global applications.