



Hammering it home: Tony Abbott with apprentices Daniel Smith-Burton, Samuel Thesinger, Kane Sturzebecher, Peter Wojciak and Ashley Heinrich. Picture: JAY TOWN

Play for tradies

Libs' blue-collar pitch

TONY Abbott's big pitch to blue-collar workers will include a new loans scheme for apprentices, providing up to \$20,000 for young workers.

The Opposition Leader will launch his campaign in Brisbane today with a HECS-style loans scheme designed to help buy tools and equipment and encourage apprentices to complete their training.

As a wave of polls continue to confirm Mr Abbott is on track to be elected on September 7, the Coalition will today launch a pitch to Labor's heartland.

The interest-free loans will be available to apprentices in areas of national skill shortages providing up to \$20,000 over four years.

Eligible trades will include plumbers, diesel mechanics, electricians and fitters. The independent Parliamentary Budget Office has costed the scheme at \$80 million.

But tradies will be asked to pay back the cash when they start earning more, at the same thresholds as FEE-HELP loans for university students. Currently, university students start paying back their loans through the

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tax system when their salary hits \$49,000.

Apprentices will have a big incentive to complete their apprenticeships — an immediate 20 per cent discount on their trade support loans if they finish their training.

Debts will not have an interest rate charged but will be indexed annually to the consumer price index to maintain their real value.

The policy document outlining the scheme states that, "Australia urgently needs more apprentices".

"We need more young people to take up a trade career to ensure future growth and jobs," it said.

"Fewer and fewer apprentices are actually completing an apprenticeship once they start. Completion rates are now 48 per cent.

"Many apprentices face considerable costs when they start their apprenticeships. Standard 'tools kits' for plumber, carpentry, automotive and electrician apprenticeships cost about \$800 and costs of over \$1000 are not uncommon."