

Temporary Skills Shortage Visa Workshops

Australia is in the midst of the largest infrastructure boom in its history.

However, a widely acknowledged skilled labour shortage is threatening to derail delivery schedules and blow-out budgets on key projects in the pipeline.

Roads Australia's Capacity Stream is working with members and stakeholders - including other industry representative bodies - to develop strategies that will help grow local skills and capacity. However, this in itself isn't enough. As an industry, we also need to recognise and take advantage of overseas skills to supplement our 'home grown' capacity.

In a bid to streamline the process of accessing overseas skills, the Federal Government last year replaced the old 457 visa system with a new approach, known as the Temporary Skills Shortage (TSS) visa system. While this change has generally been welcomed as an improvement on the old, it has had unintended consequences for the transport and infrastructure industry, the two most significant being:

- an overall reduction in the uptake of visas and significant delays in accessing labour due to a lack of industry knowledge about how the new system works, and
- the ineligibility of industry-critical skill sets under the new TSS arrangements.

With the support of sponsors Cardno and PwC, RA recently ran a series of workshops to address both these deficiencies – firstly, to promote greater industry understanding of how the TSS visa system works, and secondly to identify specific roles that aren't included on the current skilled occupations list and begin to develop a case to take to government to get them added.

RA Capacity Stream Chair Scott Olsen and Deputy Chair Dan Reeve hosted workshops in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane attended by about 90 senior industry representatives and the following expert speakers:

Melbourne, Friday 12 July

- Dr Collette Burke, Victorian Chief Engineer, Office of Projects Victoria
- Carter Bovard, Partner-Immigration, PricewaterhouseCoopers
- Keith Jolly, Acting Assistant Director, Department of Human Affairs

Sydney, Tuesday 16 July

- Lindsay Le Compte, Executive Director, Australian Constructors Association
- Carter Bovard, Partner-Immigration, PricewaterhouseCoopers
- Vikash Solonki, Acting Assistant Director, Department of Human Affairs

Brisbane, Tuesday 23 July

- Jon Davies, CEO, Queensland Major Contractors Association
- Stacey Tsui, Director – Immigration, PricewaterhouseCoopers

In the workshop discussions with attendees, we sought input on three critical questions:

- *Generally, how do you rate accredited sponsorship as an option, and would increased access make a difference?*
- *Does the regional focus for skilled migration offer opportunities our industry can leverage?*
- *Generally, how do we think emerging trends such as Free Trade Agreements and labour market testing will impact our ability to source overseas skilled labour?*

The answers to these questions are captured in the following summation, as are suggested actions we can take as an industry to improve the processes and requirements of the TSS visa system.

Where do we go from here?

Our workshop participants identified a pressing need to develop and prosecute a case to include industry-critical skill sets in the current TSS skill profile.

If we are to achieve the outcome we want, acquiring up-to-date information and data – both from within the industry itself, and from key government stakeholders – is a critical first step.

One such way is for the Capacity Stream Working Group to take action and work together with key representatives of industry and government to share knowledge and consolidate the data.¹

This proposed forum would create a platform for open and honest dialogue between government and industry. The latter, in particular, would be encouraged to provide regular updates on skill needs, which could be fed via the Capacity Stream Working Group to the Department of Jobs and Small Businesses and those reviewing the skills list.

RA could potentially manage the reporting of current industry skill needs to the Capacity Stream Working Group by being the data collection point; i.e. surveying its individual members on a regular basis and aggregating and disseminating the information to the working group.

A number of other suggested actions were put forward at the RA Capacity Stream workshops:

- Roads Australia to continue to talk to Federal and State governments on the importance of a transparent pipeline of projects, thus enabling industry to better marshal its resources.
- More regular and effective communication to RA members and the industry about TSS visa requirements, accredited sponsorship and processes.
- Encourage proactive engagement and partnering between industry and local government to establish Designated Area Migration Agreements (DAMA) for major regional projects.

RA Actions

1. *Explore opportunity for the Capacity Stream Working Group to work closely with other relevant industry representative groups and representatives of local/state/Federal government (Department of Jobs and Small Businesses).*
2. *Investigate industry survey options to 'feed' skills data into the working group.*
3. *Promote TSS visa system and DAMA engagement proposals to key stakeholders (e.g. RA newsletter/social media channels).*

¹ The Terms of Reference for the Policy Stream Working Groups will be presented to the RA Board at the 28 August meeting.