

Industry first research finds skilled migrants crucial to resource projects

GROUNDBREAKING research into the use of migrant workers in Australia's resource industry will be unveiled today at a Perth conference dedicated to overcoming specialised skills shortages in mining, oil and gas operations.

Releasing interim findings from the industry-first study, researcher Dr Susanne Bahn will tell an audience of resource employers that temporary migrant workers play an essential role by filling highly skilled vacancies that cannot be met domestically in the short term.

The Edith Cowan University (ECU) academic is presenting at the AMMA Migration and Labour Sourcing Conference in Perth from 3.40pm this afternoon.

"This study is the first of its kind in Australia and shows that although the resource industry prefers to employ Australian workers first, some of the skills required are specialised and only taught in one or two institutions globally, which means the skill set required is simply not available," Dr Bahn said ahead of her presentation.

"Due to the lack of specialised skilled workers in Australia these companies are using their global workforce and employing them where and when they are needed."

AMMA executive director industry Minna Knight, said Dr Bahn's findings dispelled any misinformation that migrant workers on 457 visas were preventing Australians from gaining resources jobs. She reiterated skilled migrants ultimately created jobs for Australian people in the long-term.

"Highly-specialised overseas workers are utilised as a short-term solution to ensure resource projects move through construction and into the operational phase where employment and training opportunities will be generated for decades to come," Ms Knight said.

"Contrary to misinformation from some in the union movement, it costs employers significantly more to hire overseas workers, with employers also required to implement training programs to ensure key skills are passed onto the local workforce and remain in Australia."

Ms Knight also said the research results call for a 'genuine discussion about labour mobility' as employers are relying on temporary migrant workers to fill jobs that skilled Australians won't relocate to. She said improving social services and infrastructure is one way of attracting Australian workers to the west, but this strategy is unlikely to address the issue entirely.

Dr Bahn's research backs this position, with the study finding some skilled Australian workers based in the eastern states are reluctant to relocate to Western Australia.

"We identified cases where recently retrenched workers declined to relocate to WA and this was due to a range of reasons from social and family commitments to the cost of living and a lack of infrastructure in some areas," she said.

The study titled *457 Visa Workers in the WA Resource Industry: The benefits and costs for business, migrant families, and the community* is a joint initiative of the ECU School of Management and resource industry employer group AMMA. A final report will be released by the end of 2012.

Earlier in the AMMA conference program, delegates will hear from Labor Senator Louise Pratt and LNP Senator Michaelia Cash on their respective parties' plans for easing the skills shortage in the resource industry.

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