

To the Honourable Members, Productivity Commission.

Building a skilled and adaptable workforce.

I note constant reference in the media regarding a skills shortage in Australia, which is a factor in limiting productivity across a range of industries, the housing sector, health care, mining, manufacturing and aged care, to name but a few.

I also note that one of the solutions sought by industry employer groups is increasingly the import of skilled migrants to fill these vacancies. I note too that increasing immigration contributes to the housing crisis as we cannot house those currently living in Australia and then must find accommodation for those skilled migrants and their families.

Perhaps the Commission needs to consider the root cause of the skills shortage. I postulate that the root cause for this shortage is the reluctance of industry to invest in skills training, preferring to rely on immigration for a quick fix to a situation of their own making.

I recall a time, when I first entered the workforce, that industry trained people in the skills they needed, electricians, diesel fitter/mechanic, carpenters, fitters & turners, motor mechanics, boiler makers, engineers, and a lot of other trades. Back then I had options available from, likes of BHP, Railways, airlines, and others, who employed apprentices in droves. Today this seems to be much less so, with limited options for those wishing to learn a trade.

I do not oppose programs to import skilled tradespersons, but I do believe that there should be conditions placed on lazy employers who wish to import these skills. Why not make it a condition that if an employer seeks to import this skill, that they are compelled to employ and train an apprentice in that trade, for each imported tradesperson? Perhaps there could even be government incentives to encourage participation, like tax concessions for training apprentices, a grant to new apprentices to assist in purchasing tools, trade appropriate work wear, living away from home grants or tax breaks so that those from rural and remote areas can access trade training?

Australia needs to produce more “home grown” skills instead of relying on immigration to fill the need. As part of a program to achieve this perhaps we need to consider adding to the education curriculum basic trade training for those who wish to pursue a trade. I recall when I entered the workforce, as a first-year apprentice electrician, the employer ran an Apprentice Training Centre where apprentices for all trades were taught basic skills. This could be offered by TAFE an adjunct to the school curriculum.

Unfortunately, Australia has shot itself in the foot by privatising a lot of industry, like state railways, the national airline, which were a big source of skilled tradespersons from many trades.

It appears that “big industry”, like offshore mining companies, want and need skilled workers, but how many of them are they training? Or are they reliant on migrant labour?

In a nutshell, Australian industry needs to be compelled in some way to contribute to overcoming the skills shortage by training the skills they need, instead of relying on immigration to fill these needs.

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