

**Submission
No 20**

SKILL SHORTAGES IN NSW

Organisation: Fletcher International Exports Pty Ltd
Name: Mr Roger Fletcher
Position: Managing Director
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Mr David Elliott MP
Chair
Committee on Economic Development
Legislative Assembly
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000

Friday 21 June 2013

Dear Mr Elliott

Re: Inquiry into skill shortages in NSW

On behalf of Fletcher International Exports Pty Ltd I wish to make the following submission to the Committee's inquiry into skill shortages in NSW. As the managing director of an international meat and sheep skin export company employing over 1200 staff in regional NSW and Western Australia, I make the following observations about the existing skills training programs available through the education sector, from our secondary schools through to our TAFE colleges and universities and the importance of migration as a means of addressing the skill shortage in regional communities.

As a frequent overseas business traveller, I am constantly amazed by the practical approach adopted by businesses operated in countries like China and Korea to the training and development of their respective workforces. It would seem that we have lost the ability in this country to adequately prepare school leavers for a lifetime of useful employment. Many of the old skills are being lost, with too much emphasis placed upon theoretical rather than practical skills.

I believe a significant component missing from current apprentice training is earlier exposure to the work environment. There is little point in undertaking an apprenticeship unless, upon completion of that training, the student has a clear understanding of what the job really involves. That is where greater concentration on obtaining work experience comes in. Some years ago my company was intimately involved in a program that was designed with this purpose in mind. The Get Real program provided a means by which local students, who would otherwise have struggled to remain at school and complete their education, were given the opportunity to spend one day a week in a business like Fletchers that provided them with practical experience in the workplace.

It would appear students here are presented with a wide variety of course choices, perhaps too many choices, yet the skills acquired in those courses do not properly equip them for the reality of the modern workplace. I speak from personal experience when I say that our TAFE colleges and universities are turning out highly educated young people without much of an idea of what work is really about. Sadly, many of our locally educated students compare

unfavourably with the attitude and aptitude for work demonstrated by overseas educated and trained employees.

At any given point, Fletchers International relies to a very large extent upon the significant contribution made to the business by overseas trained workers. Around thirty per cent of our staff are either back packers or on student visas. Many of them are self-starters, are highly motivated and aren't afraid of hard work. Rarely do we have to resort to advertising to recruit our staff. In fact many of our overseas workers seem to find us through word of mouth or contacts.

With a heavy dependence upon overseas workers, most agricultural industries in this region find it difficult to firstly attract and subsequently retain a pool of workers capable of undertaking this type of work. Such is the nature of their student visa requirements, employers are obliged to let many of their better workers go, and with them disappears the training and experience gained during their time in the role. This is a constant source of frustration from the employer's perspective and must be addressed by the Federal government if we are to make better use of skilled migrant workers in regional centres especially. Another challenge facing the attraction and retention of skilled migrant workers in regional centres like Dubbo has been a shortage of affordable housing options in the city. Many of our workers are forced into commuting a considerable distance to and from their place of work.

The importance of on the job training and apprenticeships in a business like ours was recognised some years ago when, with the assistance of former Minister for Employment, Education and Training Simon Crean, Fletchers established its own purpose built training facility to educate and promote better work practices among our staff. We operate the business in one of the most highly regulated and safety conscious work environments in the country. The safety of the product we process for consumption locally and for the export market therefore has to be of the highest order.

One interesting development that has arisen as a result of the introduction of overseas trained labour to supplement our workforce has been the gradual transformation of the workplace from its traditional, tightly structured origins to a less formal, more diversified work environment. There is far greater social interaction between employees today than there would have been a generation ago. A greater social cohesiveness among workers has emerged as a result of this workplace diversification. Perhaps the lesson to be learnt here is that the skilled migration experience can often help transform attitudes within the workplace. Certainly we can learn just as much from our overseas workers and their attitude to work as they do from us.

I trust that the observations and examples touched upon in this submission provide some insight into the extent of the skills challenges confronting regional communities and the significant part skilled migration plays in addressing the inadequate skill set possessed by many local workers. I understand that the Committee is contemplating holding public hearings in the region and would strongly encourage the Committee to do so in order to gain a better perspective of those challenges while seeking to address current inadequacies in the provision of skills training in agricultural based industries.

Yours sincerely


Roger Fletcher
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Fletcher International Exports Pty Ltd