

THE FUTURE OF SKILLS IN THE AUSTRALIAN PORTS INDUSTRY: A CASE STUDY OF FOUR SELECTED PORTS

Australia's massive investment in new port infrastructure around the country may be stymied by the chronic shortage of skilled maritime workers to run it safely, productively and at capacity, according to a research study commissioned by the Transport and Logistics Industry Skills Council (TLISC).

The study, 'The future of skills in the Australian ports industry: a case study of four selected ports', was undertaken by Dr Victor Gekara from RMIT University, Victoria. Dr Gekara conducted the study using three methods: a literature review, an expert panel convened as a Delphi group, and a series of qualitative interviews, site visits and informal data-gathering with key stakeholders in the case study ports (Dampier, Botany, Adelaide and Gladstone).

Dr Gekara's research addressed five key questions.

1. What are the key and critical skills in port operations?
2. What is the current situation regarding skills in the Australian ports sector?
3. In what areas of port operations are skills shortages being experienced?
4. How sustainable are current approaches to skills formation and recruitment in these areas and what alternatives may be considered?
5. What would be the most appropriate skills formation model for the industry to prevent future shortages?

The ultimate aim of the research study was to provide information for new policy considerations on how to effectively build skills and workforce capacity for Australia's ports to ensure that the infrastructure expansion can be translated into higher efficiency and greater productivity.

KEY FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

1. The maritime skills acquired and developed by seafarers are still critical to effective and safe port operations, particularly for port pilots and harbour masters. However, the national pool of these skills has declined drastically, forcing ports to look overseas for skill labour.
2. Most regional ports cannot attract and retain the skilled people they require because of a combination of remote location, lack of essential infrastructure and high cost of housing.
3. Bigger, wealthier port operators or port-based operations are offering highly inflated salaries to attract the skilled people they need, creating an environment of staff poaching and wage expectations that most operators cannot meet.
4. Salary distortions in favour of port pilots and mariners staffing floating production storage and offloading (FPSO) vessels for resources platforms has made it increasingly difficult to fill harbour master roles with Master Class 1 mariners.
5. The current maritime workforce profile is dominated by people over 45 years old. The average age for pilots is 45 and for harbour masters it is 50. Among stevedores, the permanent and highly skilled workforce is dominated by older people, with young people comprising the casuals and semi-casuals.
6. Australia is undertaking a significant expansion of port infrastructure to increase its cargo throughput, but the pool of skilled workers (particularly maritime specialists) needed to run this infrastructure will not be sufficient.
7. The stevedoring side of port operations is not experiencing workforce shortages, although changing technologies are requiring reskilling of the workforce.
8. The introduction of new technologies is changing the skills sets and training required for maritime workers.
9. The ports industry is considering new shore-based training pathways to deal with the shortage of people with traditional maritime skills developed through seafaring. There is strong support for this, but still concern about whether this will be able to maintain the quality standards of skills.
10. There is a need for coordination of industry stakeholders in the process of skills development. At the moment it is 'every port for itself', although stakeholders realise a more centralised approach, with everyone pooling resources, would ensure a more sustainable workforce.

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To obtain the full, comprehensive report of this study, which contains extensive data, email your request to the TLISC at research@tlisc.org.au.