

Submission to the inquiry into workforce challenges for the Tourism Industry.

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Guiding Organisations Australia (GOA) is the national organisation representing the interests of Australian Tour Guides. It is the peak body for tour guides and an umbrella organisation made up of the leading Tour Guide Organisations and Associations throughout Australia.

GOA has a long-term commitment to identifying required standards, encouraging training, promoting best practice and reducing unethical guiding practices and recently released the national tour guide accreditation – Guides of Australia.

Tour Guides work in a variety of areas (cities, regional and remote), work in any number of natural, historical and culturally significant environments and conduct tours of varying length from 30 minutes to over 30 days. They may be considered Activity Coordinators, Educational Officers, Adventure Guides, Interpretive Rangers, Tour Managers, Driver Guides or Tour Guides. GOA uses the term Tour Guide to mean any person who leads or presents to a group of tourists on an organised tour or activity, of any length, regardless of their employment status.

Preamble

Over the last decade tourists have become more informed, more environmentally aware and have increasingly higher expectations. To continue to compete effectively in the market place Tour Operators/Companies have been looking to the tour guide to provide a higher standard, a more professional product and be more informative.

As such the tour guide has to be more informed, more knowledgeable and more professional. Today's typical tour guide has come a long way from the "retired bus driver/teacher" perception of even 15 years ago and is now a career for many. However there are still 'rogue operators' or 'cowboy' tour guides.

The tour guide can no longer go into the job and not continue to learn. This growth must start with effective basic training and continue with participation in professional development and have access to appropriate further training and skills development within the company or through training organisations.

Like many other industries, training in tourism has become an issue and recent incidents regarding liability/duty of care/risk management, and other issues regarding ethics, have ensured tour guiding be heavily scrutinised on a national front. Tour guiding is an intangible product that can make or break the experience of a tourist – domestic or international.

Current and future employment trends in the industry

1. Company based Recruitment and Training

There continues to be tour operators/companies that provide little or no training for tour guides and rely on the first available person to provide a service for their guests. The company's issues may be:

- A lack of experienced tour guides in the region
- The pool of potential tour guides is small – related to population size and remote regions
- The company and regional industry retention rates are low – related to company culture, remuneration and regional opportunities
- An unexpected onset of the main season – yearly variations and unpreparedness

Too often we put blame on the guide for not being trained and yet little is done to assist the company/operator to improve their training system in which the guide learns what is required of them in that company and in that region.

2. Seasonal work

In most regions, tourism and thus tour guiding is seasonal work that facilitates little or no employment for 4 or 5 months of a year. Tour guides tough it out during the off season and often find short term work (usually in an unrelated field) or go elsewhere to find opposite-season work. There are many tour guides who have skills in other areas and decide to leave the tourism industry because of the need to have a more secure job.

Although the phrase "tour guiding is a lifestyle choice" may be so for some, it certainly isn't for many. This is a chosen career but constant work may need a little more coordination. We can not continue to improve the industry unless we encourage both young and more mature people to stay within it.

3. Use of local or domestic tour guides

Every region has a number of local tour guides available to conduct tours and provide local specific knowledge. Some tour operations (particularly inbound operations) do not use these local tour guides and so the tour guiding is undertaken by a person from outside of the region or even the Australian workforce – including if it is an English speaking tour. Thus reducing the amount of work for the local/regional tour guide and contributing to seasonality of work..

Australia has a shortage of tour guides speaking some languages (see next section) and so in some cases it is necessary to bring in an appropriate language guide. However there is no assurance that this guide knows anything about Australia or the region of the tour. Where a language speaking guide is required, a local/regional guide should also be on board as the local/regional specialist.

4. Knowledge and Training

The tour guide is required to become more knowledgeable and the trend is for tour guides to obtain qualifications (certificates or degrees in tourism or related fields) but to then follow that up with suitable experience and further training to fill in their skills gaps for the job. However, further training is not occurring leading to tour guides who have great knowledge but little customer service/industry skills or one who has great customer service/industry skills but little knowledge.

To clarify - a student who has studied environmental science obtains work in ecotourism as a tour guide in their first year out of university. They have great knowledge of the environment but have little knowledge of customer service, group management or duty of care and generally have no knowledge of preparing tour commentaries or presenting to tourists. The opposite occurs when a student who obtains a qualification in tour guiding has great knowledge of tours etc but little knowledge of their surroundings.

This deficiency occurs because competency based training does not lend itself to acquiring specific knowledge and the standard of training (and trainers) amongst training organisations

varies enormously, even with current Australian Quality Training Framework requirements. While university study doesn't lend itself to practical on the ground skills required by a tour guide.

The tour guide needs to have both abilities – specific knowledge of the surrounding environment in which they work (natural, cultural or heritage), and knowledge of running a tour with tourists. Currently the only accessible way for a tour guide to achieve this balance is through their own study or, too often, not at all.

Until now there has been no national program that encourages tour guides to achieve standards or continue with professional development. Guides of Australia accreditation does, but while there is little pressure put on tour guides (and operators/companies) to meet these standards, we will continue to accredit mainly tour guides who are already committed to meeting and exceeding them.

5. Variation in Remuneration

Tour guides are generally not paid well and where state awards exist (Qld) they refer mainly to the guides ability to speak another language. Wage rates often relate to the region in which the tour guide is working and not necessarily to their skills or commitment to professionalism.

Where the use of international students for tours occurs, wage rates are often much lower than the norm or below board.

6. Use of Accredited Guides

The introduction of GOA's Guides of Australia Accreditation will assist employers to identify tour guides who have the required standards as a tour guide in Australia. It also assists tour guides in identifying those same standards and help provide professional development opportunities for continuing skills development.

The use of accredited tour guides across the nation will also ensure that the tourist is provided with a safe and ethically sound tour experience while in Australia. As previously mentioned there needs to be pressure for the whole tourism industry to improve.

Current and emerging skill shortages and appropriate recruitment, coordinated training and retention strategies

Currently there are skill shortages of specific language speaking tour guides - Chinese and other emerging or even current markets. Some markets prefer a tour guide who is of the nationality of the group because of cultural reasons. This is not to be confused with the use of international students as tour guides when appropriate language speaking guides are available.

Indigenous tourism is an expanding market in most regions but in some regions there is a shortage of skilled indigenous tour guides to conduct the tour or show the product. There are currently business mentoring programmes for indigenous operations but few that deal with the guiding aspects or are run by indigenous people.

Suggestions:

- (1) A coordinated use of existing agencies who can identify where language speaking tour guides are available and possibly organise for their transfer to be able to conduct a tour – particularly for extended touring or where a guide is familiar with the local area.
- (2) Effective indigenous tour guide training and Indigenous/Indigenous mentoring programmes.
- (3) Coordinated off season training and professional development for tour guides conducted by tour companies and training organisations. This may occur as a series of short courses on skills development and technical knowledge to encourage tour guides to remain in the

region. Possible assistance could be given to the tour guide via Austudy, or to the provider (and thus the tour guide) via funding grants.

- (4) Ensure that training is conducted by suitably experienced Tour Guides – particularly in training organisations.
- (5) Encourage tour companies to provide suitable training for staff and to become more professional themselves.

Labour shortages and strategies to meet seasonal fluctuations in workforce demands;

During the peak times there is a need for a great number of experienced tour guides for cruise ship shore tours, conventions, increased numbers of tourists etc. However, as mentioned, during the off-season the possibility of work opportunities is minimal. Many southern freelance tour guides go without work for days at a time even sometimes for weeks while northern tour guides will go without tour guiding work for 4 months. Thus, no income.

They then seek other sources of income and, having found a permanent job, they leave the industry altogether. This then leaves a shortage of experienced guides to cover the following peak season. And vicious circle is created. Operators then source alternative replacements. Too often these replacements are unsatisfactory and create a bad image for the tourists and thus for Australian tourism.

To overcome this vicious circle a constant and better supply of work opportunities is needed. This in turn would lead to a more professional approach to tour guiding as it would provide a full time career opportunity that in turn would lead to an improvement in standards.

Suggestions

- (1) Australian tour guides should be used for all local touring - e.g city sights and day tours in regional areas (Wine regions, visits to historic venues, local sites etc)
- (2) All City Sights tours should have an experienced tour guide on board to give the commentary. For reasons of passenger safety, whilst driving in major cities Coach Drivers should not be required to give commentary. Their concentration should be solely on the traffic conditions.
- (3) International Tour Managers and/or tour guides arriving in Australia with inbound groups should not be permitted to act as guides unless they have completed some form of Australian training and assessment/accreditation.
- (4) Overseas tour operators should be encouraged to use local guides for their touring.
- (5) Tour Guide Sharing – similar to job sharing but where the tour guide is used by two companies/regions that have opposing seasons and a coordinated effort is made to identify start/finish dates. This can be done for tour guides who are able to move around easily.
- (6) A more coordinated effort in regional areas to assist tour guides in finding temporary work for the off-season. Possibly utilising some of the latent skills - improvements to tour product, development of tracks, maintenance, procedure manuals etc. The availability of work will encourage tour guides to stay in the area rather than leave.

Strategies to ensure employment in regional and remote areas

Suggestions:

- (1) Assistance could be given to operators or regions who provide training courses that encourage tour guides into the area. This could be a collaborative regional effort of a number of operators.
- (2) Promotion of the regions employment opportunities in a collaborative effort and not necessarily just individually – perhaps an employment expo in major cities where unemployment is higher.

