



# Call for Aussie hires first, as apprentice numbers plummet

## EXCLUSIVE

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EMPLOYERS should hire "Australians first", the Abbott government declared yesterday, as new data exposed a 26 per cent crash in the number of young Australians starting an apprenticeship or trainee last year.

Assistant Immigration Minister Michaelia Cash said yesterday the government's welfare-to-work crackdown would dampen the demand for migrant workers.

"Employers should employ Australians first, that's it," she said. "We will have more (Australian) workers coming on to the market and I expect there will be less need for foreign labour.

"But if a business has to close because it can't get labour, it employs no one."

Senator Cash defended the 457 visa system, which lets employers sponsor skilled migrants on four-year work visas if they cannot find an Australian do to the job.

As revealed in *The Australian* yesterday, employers have recruited 37,620 foreign managers, professionals and tradespeople this year, despite a growing pool

'If you don't have to source labour locally ... why bother training?'

MICHAEL O'CONNOR  
CONSTRUCTION UNION

of 191,000 unemployed Australians qualified for the same jobs.

The opposition employment spokesman, Brendan O'Connor, called on the Abbott government to maintain labour-market testing for 457 visas, requiring employers to advertise jobs locally.

"At a time when the labour market is softening, the government must ensure Australians workers are first in line for job vacancies," he said.

Senator Cash said she would wait for advice from an independent review of the 457 visa systems next month before deciding whether to retain labour-market testing.

New Industry Department data reveals the number of apprentices and trainees in Australia fell 13 per cent to 392,200 last year, as commencements plunged 26 per cent and 119,900 apprentices dropping out of training.

Trade commencements — for traditional apprenticeships such

as carpentry, hairdressing and plumbing — rose by 2.3 per cent, to 98,300 at the end of last year. Traineeships for other on-the-job training — including bricklaying, childcare, aged care and clerical or sales work — fell 37.5 per cent.

Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry chief executive Kate Carnell said the reduction was a "real worry" and would worsen existing skills shortages. "It's important that people are trained for the future in a range of industries," Ms Carnell said.

"But this shows lots of businesses are under pressure and often the thing that goes is training."

The Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union said migrant workers were replacing apprentices.

CFMEU national secretary Michael O'Connor said the number of Australians starting an apprenticeship in the construction trades had fallen by 3700 from 2006-07 to 2012-13.

The annual number of 457 visas granted in the construction trades nearly doubled to 2450 in that time.

"The problem is that if you don't have to source labour locally, and can get short-term labour from overseas, why bother training?" he said yesterday.

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Tabled by: Senator Cameron