FEDERAL Skills Minister Chris Evans has told mining companies they must try harder to recruit Australian jobseekers if they want to be allowed to import foreign workers to meet skill shortages.

Speaking in Sydney yesterday, Senator Evans said the resources sector needed to recognise a growing sense of frustration in the community that Australians who wanted to work in the mining industry were not being given the chance.

Unions and some Labor MPs were furious in May when the government signed a special deal to allow Gina Rinehart’s Hancock Prospecting to import more than 1700 workers for its Roy Hill iron ore project in Western Australia.

Senator Evans said more than 3500 people had registered with the government’s National Apprentice Program. He said each of these people had been assessed as having at least 40 per cent of the competencies of their trade, but wanted to complete a formal qualification and were prepared to relocate or fly in and out.

But only four companies had signed up to the scheme, and between them committed to taking 650 apprentices.

“If you want me and the government to argue the case for the use of overseas skilled workers . . . I want to know why all 3500 have not been snapped up,” Senator Evans said.

Companies that had not signed up to the apprenticeship scheme and programs like it should not complain to him about not being able to find skilled workers, he said.

Hancock Prospecting has not committed to take any apprentices through the scheme, and did not respond to a request for comment yesterday.

Senator Evans said there would remain a need to import workers to meet the peak of labour demand during the construction phase of projects, but he said employers needed to provide greater opportunities for Australians.

“Employers must demonstrate they are doing their part in giving Australians the first job opportunities,” he said.

Senator Evans’ comments came as research from Edith Cowan University said that contrary to public perception, temporary migrant workers were not preventing skilled Australians from getting work in the resources sector.

The findings of the research, which was partially funded by the Australian Mines and Metals Association, will be presented at a conference in Perth today.

The association’s executive director, industry, Minna Knight, said the use of migrant workers was a short-term solution to address urgent skill shortages in order to secure large-scale projects.
Migrants boost local jobs: study

Natalie Gerritsen and Joanna Mather

The use of highly skilled foreign workers helps secure the major projects that create local jobs, according to research out today.

Skills Minister Chris Evans warned resources employers yesterday that foreign labour had to be a last resort. "The mining sector has to recognise the growing frustration in the community that people who do want to work in the industry are not getting a chance," he said.

But Edith Cowan University researcher Susanne Bahn said that without skilled migrants such as those brought in on 457 visas, many projects would not get off the ground.

"Evidence from our study shows there does appear to be reluctance to move to WA for these jobs," she said.

She will detail preliminary research to a skills conference in Perth today.

The research did not examine new enterprise migration agreements such as the one negotiated for Gina Rinehart's Roy Hill project, which allows the use of foreign semi-skilled workers as well as skilled ones. Unions have led a backlash against the federal government over EMAs.

Resources industry group AMMA is hosting the conference in Perth and collaborated with ECU on the research. Dr Bahn said that did not compromise its findings.

Maritime Union of Australia WA state secretary Christy Cain, who will speak at the conference, says unions want foreign workers to be the last resort, and more effort given to train local workers who could get qualifications in a relatively short time.

Mr Cain has been a vocal critic of EMAs and last month led a march to the offices of Mrs Rinehart's Hancock Prospecting.

Federal Labor Senator Louise Pratt and her Liberal counterpart, Michaelia Cash, will address the conference, alongside recruiters, union leaders and staff from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship.
School is named excellent finalist

BUSSELTON Senior High School is one of four finalists in the WA Training Awards’ Vocational Education and Training in Schools Excellence category.

Training and Workforce Development Minister Murray Cowper announced the finalists on Wednesday, which will compete for the titles in 14 categories and were chosen from more than 200 entrants.

Mr Cowper said the awards celebrated the efforts and achievements of individuals, employers and training providers which excelled in their field.

The presentation dinner will be held on September 14.
Grattan’s penny-pinching on unis music to Abbott’s ears?

Author: Dean Ashenden, author, academic and political adviser on education issues

The Grattan Institute is cutting a dash in education policy. Earlier in the year its Learning from the best asked some hard questions about why our schools are spending so much more money without producing any more education. Now Grattan poses another very good question: why is the taxpayer coughing up $6 billion a year to subsidise undergraduate education?

The political answer is that people have come to expect it. Three in four Australians think that students already pay more than they should have to. The intellectually respectable answer is that while graduates themselves benefit from higher ed, so do the rest of us. And that’s where Grattan makes its stand. It argues that we’re paying more than our fair share, to those who least need it. Public subsidies range from 81% of the cost of a science degree to 16% for law. Most undergrads are charged only a quarter or a third of the cost of their degree.

Graduate winners author Andrew Norton points out that this haphazard arrangement owes more to history than to logic. His logic would lead the federal government to charge according to actual public/private benefits and thereby save about $3 billion a year.

There are debates to be had among economists about Grattan’s calculations. For example, ANU economist and architect of the transformational HECS Bruce Chapman argues that public benefits are more elusive, diffuse, and cumulative, and therefore larger, than Norton allows.

But the big questions won’t be coming from economics. Economics is good at revealing who’s in for their chop, and, specifically, how higher education ends up being a form of middle-class welfare. It runs a nice, clear, testable argument, a relief from the cant and waffle of so much debate in education. And economics forces us to confront choices. Will we spend the money here? Or there?

So economics is attractive to think tanks. They need to cut through the noise
with sharp, clear policy, numbers attached. But life, and therefore policy, is
more complicated.
For example, only an economist could make the heroic assumption that all
the public consequences of higher education deserve to be called “benefits”,
nearly divided into “financial” and “non-financial”. For Norton the latter
include, for example, graduates' tendency to be better behaved (less crime),
healthier (lower public health costs), and more tolerant.
But what about the blinding wizardry of the MBAs who brought us the GFC?
Or the contribution of university-trained lawyers to an ever-more litigious
society? Or medicos who congregate where need is least?
More generally, higher education contributes to intellectual arrogance, a
sense of entitlement, and a disdain for knowledge won from practice and
experience, and it therefore does an ordinary job of its main task,
occupational education.
Only an economist could fail to wonder whether the road to hell is paved
with good economics. What Grattan proposes is one more step along a
journey started in the mid-1980s, when HECS and full-fee places for
international students were introduced. These policies have been pursued
by both sides of politics, and in a common direction: to market, to market.
Markets often look rational when you look at the choices of individuals, as
Grattan does. Can and will they pay more for a degree? Grattan says yes,
they can, so let’s do it.
But millions of such decisions can leave everyone worse off. The
marketisation of higher education has fuelled credentialism, with every
occupational group chasing ever-longer and “higher” (i.e. theory-based)
qualifications in pursuit not of a bigger pie but of a bigger slice of it.
Aside from the waste involved in padding out courses with abstract fluff,
market-fuelled credentialism in Australia has helped diminish the scale and
appeal of work-based education, the so-called “skills” sector. And it has
helped to produce a lot of graduates nominally trained for their occupations
but in fact just about useless. Consider teacher education.
Economics doesn’t notice such complications. But where do they take
policy? In directions different from both what we’ve got and what Grattan
recommends, I would guess. Perhaps the next Grattan project could make
the economists sit down with people wearing other intellectual specs and
see what they come up with.
In the meantime, Grattan is on the money. The savings it finds will be
irresistible to an Abbott government. And, who knows, perhaps Labor will be
tempted by the carrot of $3 billion? It would go a long way towards paying
for Gonski.
*Dean Ashenden has been a consultant to state and federal education
ministers and agencies, and was co-founder of the Good Universities
Guides
Boost to education hopes

By Bianca Martins

The federal government has bridged the gap between Fairfield High School students and universities across Sydney following the launch of the Bridges to Higher Education program on Thursday.

The government injected more than $21 million into the program which helps students from lower socio-economic backgrounds take part in programs offered by the five universities partnering the project.

Bridges to Higher Education aims to equip students, their families, school staff and community groups with tools and information so that school leavers can make informed decisions about their future.

It also hopes to engage students through learning opportunities and other activities that support academic outcomes.

Fairfield High School principal Robert Mulas was recently joined at the school for the program launch by the government’s Senate leader and Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills, Science and Research Chris Evans, as well as representatives from the five universities: University of Technology Sydney, Macquarie University, University of Western Sydney, University of Sydney and the Australian Catholic University.

“I am very pleased the government has given this funding,” Senator Evans said.

“I want to know that in a few years, 40 per cent of students at university are from Fairfield, not 40 per cent from the north shore.”

University of Western Sydney chancellor Peter Shergold agreed and said the program was "of course a gold medal for Australia".

Mr Mulas said he was thrilled with the new program.

“These kids are full of potential,” he said.

“I know that whatever we throw at them, they will thrive.”
Miners told: train more staff here

LAUREN WILSON
JOE KELLY

SKILLS Minister Chris Evans has demanded resource companies employ more Australian apprentices or else Labor could rethink its support for the enterprise migration agreements that provide foreign workers jobs on massive mining projects.

Senator Evans delivered the threat in a speech to a skills conference in Sydney yesterday, telling business to increase its use of the national adult apprenticeship scheme before turning to government to lobby for the right to import foreign labour.

The speech was delivered just a week after Immigration Minister Chris Bowen lauded the Gillard government’s decision to allow Gina Rineheart’s $9.5 billion Roy Hill mining project permission to import 1700 foreign workers — the first of Labor’s signed EMAs — which sparked a backlash from Labor backbenchers and unions.

Senator Evans told business he wanted more evidence they were doing everything possible to employ local workers, specifically through the adult apprenticeship program, which assesses the skills of local mature-aged workers.

It has 3500 people registered who are at least 40 per cent fully skilled, want to complete their qualification and will relocate or take up fly-in fly-out work.

“If you want me and the government to argue the case for the use of overseas skilled workers to convince the public on the need to access enterprise migration agreements then I want to know why all 3500 have not been snapped up,” Senator Evans said. “I am not interested in employees complaining they have shortages of trade skills and labour if they have not signed up to a strong local training program and opportunities like the NAP provides,” he said.

A spokeswoman for Mr Bowen, who announced the decision to allow Roy Hill to use foreign workers in May, yesterday defended the government’s position on foreign labour. “Our EMA policy gets the balance right. It provides certainty for the mining sector, while delivering jobs and opportunities for Australians,” she said.

It is understood construction and mining giants Bechtel, Macmahon, Anglo America and John Holland have all employed workers under the apprenticeship scheme, but Roy Hill has not.

Preliminary research to be released today at an Australian Mines and Metals Association conference will suggest temporary migrant workers fill shortages in oil, mining and gas operations that cannot be supplied domestically.

AMMA spokeswoman Minna Knight said yesterday construction employers in the sector faced short notice of upcoming projects and it was “too simplistic” to say that apprentices should be available immediately.

“The reality is that industry is implementing extensive workforce development and planning programs which will reap rewards in two to four years. However, in the immediate future, we need to plug some gaps which is why skilled migration is a small but important short-term solution.”

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