

INTEGRATING SKILLED MIGRANTS INTO AUSTRALIAS ENERGY SECTOR



ADVANCE
CAREERS

Realising Australia's Renewable Energy Potential

Renewable energy, sustainable power, responsible solutions – in recent years, Australians have begun to recognise the acute need for genuine alternatives to finite and damaging fossil fuel-driven energy sources. In 2022, we find ourselves beyond the conceptualisation stage.

Now is the time for action and implementation, and for moving towards directly beneficial outcomes.

This is creating challenges of its own.

Here in Australia – and in Australian industry in particular – we recognise what needs to be done to shift from antiquated forms of power generation towards newer, cleaner, more sustainable methods.

One significant obstacle, however, is the skills gap – the current lack of qualified technicians, specialists and other personnel needed to implement renewable energy on a broad scale.

This talent is out there, but it may be found beyond Australia's borders.

Businesses in the renewable energy sector need to be able to source this talent, bring it into the Australian domestic workforce, and then integrate this talent with that of homegrown workers. Some organisations are hesitant to do this simply because of the perceived difficulties in terms of integration and training here in Australia.



The question of integrating overseas personnel into the domestic energy sector sits at the intersection of two key issues in Australian society at the moment.

On the one hand, there is the skills shortfall, and the changes to immigration policy designed to alleviate this.

On the other, there is the Australian renewables sector itself, and the high levels of investment that have been pumped into this area of business.

Permanent and Long-Term Immigration in Australia

In 2022, Australian Immigration is changing. At the beginning of September, Minister for Home Affairs Clare O'Neil MP and her Labor Party colleague Andrew Giles MP released a joint statement to the media.

This statement described plans to raise the cap on permanent migration visas from 160,000 to 195,000 in 2022-2023, providing an additional 35,000 opportunities to permanent immigration into the country.

Further Support for Visa Processing

The move will be supported by \$36.1 million earmarked for visa processing costs, and an investment in around 500 new staff to cope with surging demand.

It is expected that there will be a broader review of Australia's immigration policy in 2023, as the country seeks to make sure approaches to border control and migration serve its own economic and social needs.

Alleviating the Skills Shortfall

Why is this happening, and why specifically now? It's happening because Australia is struggling to maintain its own skilled labour force, leading to shortfalls in key positions, from engineers to nurses.

It is hoped that raising the cap on permanent migration will attract qualified and experienced personnel from overseas, who will then fill these gaps on a long-term basis.



Australia's Renewable Energy Sector

29%

of all energy produced in Australia, as of 2021, came from renewable sources. Of this 29%,

12%

was generated purely by solar,

10%

generated by wind and

6%

contributed from hydroelectricity.

Never before in Australia's history has such a high proportion of generated electricity been renewable.

Fulfilling Australia's Enormous Renewables Potential

On the surface, this appears to be positive news and a step in the right direction. However, this does not take into account the enormous potential of renewable energy in Australia. It is estimated that the potential output for renewable energy sources in 2013 was 500x the installed capacity at that time.

While Australia has increased renewable energy output over the last decade, the country is still way behind world leaders like Norway, where renewable electricity comprised 98% of their total output in 2016, and neighbouring New Zealand, which achieved 84% in 2020 and is targeting 100% by 2035.

To get closer to this potential, Australia needs a conceptual and social shift away from the fossil fuel mining and processing operations that have gripped the economy for decades. In addition, high levels of investment and an injection of skilled personnel are also necessary.



Changes Required at Unprecedented Speed and Scale

A study conducted by Net Zero Australia earlier in 2022 found that the country needs a renewable energy rollout on an "unprecedented scale" and at an "unprecedented speed" if it is to meet net zero emissions targets by 2050. This essentially means producing around 40x more than the current max capacity of renewables in the country.

Changes are needed, and they are needed quickly, if Australia is to become a new standard-bearer for renewable energy in the world.

Government Investment Priorities

The federal government recognises the challenges Australia faces, and has pledged significant investment in making this happen. This includes the generation of \$75 billion for the sector, as well as creating **604,000 new jobs in renewable energy by 2030**.

On top of this, around \$20 billion will be spent on upgrading the current electricity grid to support renewables, \$200 million on optimising Australia's rooftop solar output, and \$100 million on household solar banks.

Funds have been pledged to help Australia reach its targets, but the skills shortfall remains. It is hoped that the recently announced changes to immigration policy will alleviate this.



Integrating Skilled Migrants into Australia's Renewables Sector

Of course, it's not simply a case of attracting global talent. This talent needs to be integrated into the domestic renewables sector, delivering the advantages required to push Australia into the next phase of sustainable energy production. While the changes to the immigration cap have been broadly welcomed, there is also criticism from some quarters.

Many Solar CEOs Welcome Migration Changes

Back in July 2022, two months before the announcement of the policy changes, Australian solar executives called for a re-evaluation of immigration in Australia. CEOs of some of the top firms in the industry said greater flexibility was required, as well as improved safeguards and support for workers who arrive here from overseas.

Some CEOs, such as Amanda Lacaze of Lynas, said that they had not yet experienced a significant skills deficit in Australia, but highlighted how greater consistency and flexibility would provide an enormous benefit. "We find there is not a lot of rhyme or reason on the people who apply for a visa and get it almost overnight and those of whom are asked everything, including what they've had for breakfast," Lacaze said in July.

Comments like these suggest there is a significant appetite and need for skilled labour in Australia's renewable energy sector.

Some Pushback Against Changes

Not all industry figures have been so impressed with the prospective changes. Tony Wolfe, who serves as the vice chair for the Gippsland Climate Network, described the immigration policy changes as "naive."

Instead, Wolfe argued, Australia should be focusing on developing and training its own homegrown talent. "The rest of the world is also critically building renewable energy," he said, "so there is not going to be skilled workers overseas looking for work, they'll get jobs in their own countries."

"We need to be training our people to take up these roles."

This uncertainty uncovers one of the potential challenges of integration – if we view overseas migrant workers as something of a quick-fix or a 'magic bullet' that will solve the problems Australia currently faces, we may be disappointed. Instead, attracting and integrating talent from overseas must be handled in a careful and considered manner, supplementing and augmenting homegrown talent rather than replacing it.





Challenges Remain for Integration

Successful integration means breaking down barriers and establishing pathways for introduction and inclusion into the domestic workforce. In 2022, it appears that we still have some distance left to go before we can leverage the overseas migrant talent we need within our own renewable energy sector. Significant challenges remain, and these challenges are putting the brakes on progress in this area.

1. Reluctance to Hire Overseas Talent
2. Uncertainty Over Responsibility
3. Ongoing Domestic Development
4. Geographical Disparities

1. Reluctance to Hire Overseas Talent

One of the key challenges is simply reluctance from business owners and industry figures themselves. As discussed earlier in this paper, not everyone agrees that overseas talent is the right choice for the industry. Some believe that turning to talent from overseas could harm the generation and training of domestic talent here in Australia. This may lead to hesitancy and reluctance in hiring professionals from other countries – even if these professionals have direct, valuable experience. Some business owners may be unsure of how to go about training and integrating these overseas migrant personnel. Without direct support from government structures, or without full backing from unions, these business owners may be concerned that they will need to shoulder the burden of integration themselves, further fuelling reluctance.

2. Uncertainty Over Responsibility

It's not always clear exactly who is responsible for overseeing and supporting integration into local organisations, workforces and broader social structures. Studies conducted in Canada have found that the onus is often placed on skilled migrants themselves to ensure that they properly integrate into the societies they arrive in. While this approach can work, the lack of systematic support can be problematic.

If Australia wants to benefit fully from increased skilled migration into the country, this will necessitate a more comprehensive approach to integration. The federal government may need to do more to support integration, adopting programs of their own or incentivising Australian organisations to take responsibility for integration when they hire overseas skilled migrants. According to the study cited above, this may involve supporting migrants as they acquire cultural skills "such as language proficiency, communication skills, and an understanding of the tacit norms of professional behavior and organizational culture" rather than expecting migrants to do so independently.

3. Ongoing Domestic Development

Skills shortages have been detected across numerous areas of the renewables sector. While Lynas' Amanda Lacaze stated that her organisation had not encountered an acute shortage themselves, other aspects of the field – including wind turbine blade technicians or crane and hoist operators – are in short supply in Australia.

But bringing in overseas talent to fill these roles may not be the long-term fix it is hoped to be. Permanent migration does not necessarily mean "permanent," and these migrants may decide to leave Australia even after having spent multiple years here – this could simply delay or defer the challenge until a later date. Instead, overseas talent will need to be integrated into the development, training and education structures here in Australia, sharing their expertise and helping with training and upskilling for homegrown talent.

A report from the Australian Council of Trade Unions found that there are no systematic, industry-wide programs in place for making this happen. This translates to a significant missed opportunity for spreading and disseminating skills and experience throughout the country.



4. Geographical Disparities

Australia's largest solar farm is currently under construction, but it will be located near the town of Uralla, around 465 kilometres north of Sydney and 485 kilometres south of Brisbane. The largest wind farm in the country is at Coopers Gap, around 250 kilometres northwest of Brisbane.

Metropolises like Melbourne are ranked among the world's most liveable cities and represent desirable locations for many of the world's top professionals. However, renewable energy developments are not located in these areas, and instead require significant commitment on the part of the professionals themselves. It may also prove more challenging for businesses seeking to integrate overseas migrant talent into areas that do not have an existing international community.



Clearer Pathways to Integration, and a Consensus in the Industry

These challenges are certainly significant, and overcoming them will be difficult. However, this is not an impossible situation. Instead, we simply need clearer pathways to integration – a more transparent landscape in which businesses feel supported when they bring in overseas personnel. In addition to this, the industry will benefit from training and skill-sharing programs that make sure domestic, homegrown professionals can benefit from the talent and experience that migrant personnel bring in.

All of this will support a more positive outlook in the renewables sector, bringing about a consensus in the industry. With this consensus, it will become easier for businesses to source the overseas talent they need while continuing to develop and nurture Australian professionals within the domestic sector.

Who are Advance Careers?

Advance Careers recruits talent across Australia, New Zealand and throughout Asia. Specialising in Energy, Sustainability and ESG, we seek out emerging markets and build networks with the best people – often in uncommon roles that are the hardest to define.

Our experience in energy, renewables, and cutting-edge technologies allows us to target a unique range of professionals with the right skills for the role.

With experience and insight, we listen closely to understand hiring needs, and map the market to find remarkable talent. Our shortlists are often highly specialised, and require extensive search, networking and screening before interview.

Our proven history gives hiring managers the confidence that once we begin a search, we complete it with exceptional results.



How we can help

Advance Careers has been supporting businesses and not-for-profits grow through sourcing and engaging candidates in energy and sustainability.

We have a large and highly engaged network of candidates we're already talking to across APAC. We can access a range of solutions to tap into passive talent who aren't yet looking for their next role.

Our team has hands-on experience working in the energy sector in many of the roles we recruit.

We also bring experience sourcing niche roles and selling employee value propositions from around Asia, Europe, New Zealand and Australia. We build long term relationships with our clients and have grown teams on an ongoing basis.

[Book a consultation](#) with us to discuss how we can help you attract and engage best in class energy and sustainability talent.

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