Integrated Solutions for Infrastructure Development
*Edited by* Lau, H. H., Tang, F. E., Ng, C. K., and Singh, A.

ISBN: 978-0-9960437-3-1

# INVESTIGATION INTO WH&S ISSUES WITHIN THE RESIDENTIAL CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRIES MIGRANT WORKFORCE

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The migrant workforce is a prominent feature in the Australian construction industry and is equivalent to approximately 24% of the industry. Out of these migrant workers, 11.8% comes from English speaking countries and 12.2% from non-English speaking background (NESB) countries. The aim of this study is to investigate the issues surrounding migrant workers within the Australian residential construction industry. A number of recent studies have shown links between the increasing migrant dominated workforce and a subsequent deterioration of safety standards and quality levels of construction trade work. The main purpose of the study is to further explore this issue, in an attempt to expand on previous research and to identify the reasons behind these trends. The methodology of the research undertaken included a case study of a NSW residential construction companies. The case study applied the theory of triangulation through a range of structured formal interviews. These interviews were carried out on a range of people occupying various roles within the construction industry including site supervisors, WH&S officers and top level management. Research findings have shown considerable challenges existing today amongst the migrant workforce. Communication barriers and cultural differences are shown to have created significant challenges with regards to the safety of migrant workers and the quality assurance related to various construction trades.

*Keywords*: Constriction safety, Migrant workers, Australia, Quality assurance.

## 1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In 2014-15, direct construction industry output contributed 7.8% to Australia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). This makes the construction industry Australia's third largest contributor to GDP in terms of the volume of its output. Only the financial and insurance services (8.7%) and mining (8.8%) sectors contribute larger shares of direct output to GDP. The construction industry employed 1.05 million employees (around 9% of all workers) in May 2015 (Australian Industry Group 2015). In 2009-10, the construction industry reported one of the highest OH &S incident rates in comparison to any other industry and ranked as the fourth highest contributor of serious incidence claims among all industries. Safe Work Australia's workers compensation data for 2009–10 show there were 13,640 serious worker's compensation claims in the construction industry in that period. This figure accounts for 11% of all serious claims and equates to 37.4 serious claims per day. This is equivalent to 19.6 serious claims per 1000 employees requiring one or more weeks off work because of work-related injury or disease. In terms of hours worked,

the frequency rate in the Construction industry was 9.8 serious claims per million hours worked, 29% higher compared to the average across all other industries frequency rate of 7.6 (Safe Work Australia 2012- construction fact sheet). Work related injuries, illnesses and deaths impose costs on employers, workers and the community. These include both direct costs and indirect costs. Direct costs include items such as workers compensation premiums paid by employers or payments to injured workers from workers compensation jurisdictions. Indirect costs include items such as lost productivity, loss of current and future earnings, lost potential output and the cost of providing social welfare programs for injured workers. The level of costs varies with the severity of the injury or disease (Johns 2012). While measures of direct costs are understood and reasonably simple to measure, these costs cover only a fraction of the total cost of work related injury and disease. According to Safe Work Australia (2012), workers compensation incurred an economic loss of approximately 57.5 billion for the 2005-06 financial years within Australia. More recently work related injury and illness were estimated to cost $60.6 billion in the 2008–09 financial years. The Australian construction industry has sought to contain and reduce costs. This has resulted in construction corporations to focus on project management and contract out the actual physical work of construction. The outcome has been an extended division of labour, and one aspect of this has been that many subcontractors are hiring migrant workers in order to source skill requirements and contain or reduce labour costs (ILO 2012). Past literature has established a link between the migrant workforce and the construction industry's high accident rates (Trajkovski and Loosemore 2006, Loosemore and Andonakis 2007, Salleh *et al.* 2012). The migrant workforce is a prominent feature of the Australian construction industry, equivalent to approximately 24% of the industry with 11.8% originating from main English speaking countries and 12.2% from non-English speaking background (NESB) countries (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012- Labour Force). However, it has been identified there is also a significant number of illegal immigrants working in the industry that the above figure does not account for (Wallace 2011).

It is suspected that a combination of communicative and cultural barriers, amongst non-English speaking migrant workers, has been detrimental to safety and quality standards within the residential construction industry. Recent literature has shown links between an increasing migrant dominated workforce and a subsequent deterioration of safety standards and quality levels (Rosewarne *et al.* 2012). This study further explores this issue, in order to expand on previous research and to identify the reasons behind these trends. The need is created for an investigation into work health and safety issues within the Australian residential construction industry's migrant workforce.

## 2 OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY IN THE AUSTRALIAN CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

The construction industry has one of the highest OH & fatalities in comparison to any other industry and is ranked as the third highest contributor of fatalities among all industries as per Figure 1 (Safe Work Australia 2014). Transport, postal and warehousing industry recorded the highest proportion of fatalities in 2014 with the construction industry accounting 15% of all workers fatalities.

In 2012 workers statistics relate to 73% excluding self-employed workers within the construction industry who are eligible to lodge a worker's compensation claim (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012- Labour Force).

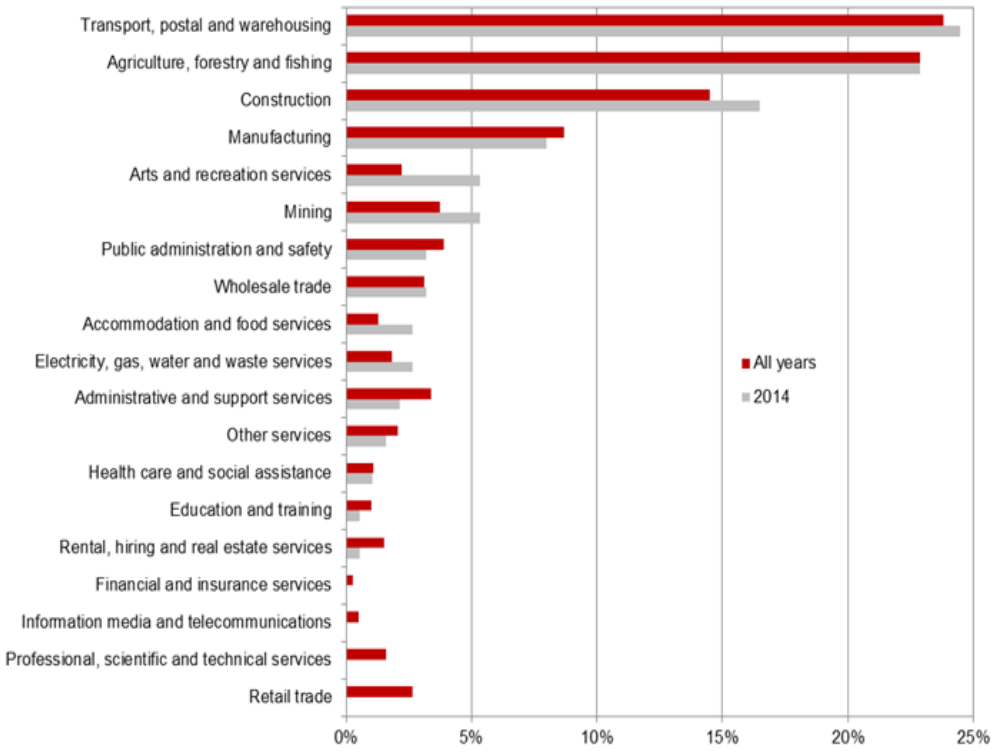


Figure 1. Worker fatalities: proportion by industry of employer, all years (2003 to 2014 combined) and 2014 (Source: Safe Work Australia 2014).

Over the 2003–13 period 77% of the fatalities in the construction industry involved employees with the remainder self-employed workers. The 311 deaths of employees in the construction industry over the 2003–13 period equates to a fatality rate of 4.20 fatalities per 100 000 employees. This is 37% higher than the fatality rate for self-employed workers of 3.06 fatalities per 100 000 self-employed workers over the 2003–13 period. Every four years, The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) surveys workers on work-related injuries sustained in the previous year. The last Work-related Injury Survey (WRIS) conducted by the ABS was for the 2013–14 period. Unfortunately the results from the survey are not yet publicly available for analysis.

The last WRIS survey available is for the 2009-2010 period. The survey reported that 57000 construction workers had suffered an injury while at work. This means approximately 156 construction workers were injured each day or 5.9% of the total construction workforce (Safe Work Australia, 2016). Main injuries incurred were: i) muscular stress a result of manual handling or repetitive movement(35% of claims) ii) falls, trips and slips (26% of claims) and iii) being hit by moving objects (16% of claims). Furthermore, research on an international measure show statistics on incidence rates between different countries vary in range and the construction industry is recognised as one of the most dangerous industries to work in. This could be due to different rates of economic growth and developments. The types of developments of a particular country may have an influence on the incidence rates, as every project encounters its own individual risks, OH&S issues and requirements. The countries standards and OH&S requirements may be different and therefore no universal OH&S method exists. This contributes to different methods of prevention, construction sequences and rates of injury and fatalities in the

construction industry worldwide (ILO 2012). Therefore, those who come from other countries to work in the Australian construction industry may adopt the standards of their home land country which could lead to differences in safety and construction works.

## 3 MULTICULTURALISM/DIVERSITY IN THE AUSTRALIAN CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

Multiculturalism is an increasingly prominent feature of the Australian construction industry. It is defined as communities that contain a number of different cultures. When different cultures interact it provides opportunities for the cultures to communicate with each other to create multiculturalism. Australia is a multicultural country and implements a multicultural policy which promotes equality, fairness and inclusion for all. It supports a variety of cultural, religious and linguistic diversity, shared values and cultural traditions with the law and free from discrimination (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2011-Australia's Multicultural Policy). Therefore, steps must be taken to ensure safer working environments for all. According to the government of south Australia multiculturalism is defined through policies and practices that identify and respond to ethnic diversity of communities where members of the community may maintain distinctive cultural heritages, participate and use their skills to benefit the economic, social and cultural life of the community and live and work together harmoniously. The Australian multicultural policy suggests Australia is very diverse and multicultural. The statement below summarises this: "Australia is a multicultural nation. In all, since 1945, seven million people have migrated to Australia. Today, one in four of Australia's 22 million people were born overseas, 44 per cent were born overseas or have a parent who was and four million speak a language other than English. We speak over 260 languages and identify with more than 270 ancestries. Australia is and will remain a multicultural society." (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2011-Australia's Multicultural Policy).

## 4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A case study method has been completed on a NSW residential construction company in order to grasp on past research and the current situation. Furthermore, a multiple perspective observation method is undertaken through interviews on various construction personnel within the residential construction industry. The main purpose of the research is to gain first-hand knowledge and experience in relation to WH&S on a typical residential construction company. The research will also enable data collection and insight into the current situation to fulfil the research topic and satisfy the objectives of the research aims. Results has been analysed and tabulated in order to see the current trends and overview of the residential construction industry. This would show the first-hand experience of various construction personnel including site supervisors, WH&S officer, top level management and the experiences they come across when dealing with the migrant workforce. Emphasis has been placed on work subcontractor trades that do not mandate the completion of an apprenticeship including the trades of painting, plastering, tiling and final clean. An examination is conducted on issues construction personnel face with WH&S in consultation with migrant workers over the mentioned trades. Through this study, improvements in the way WH&S strategies are conducted to migrant workers has been be assessed and suggested, and implementation procedures to correct and eliminate the current problematic areas will be identified through formed suggestions and recommendations.

## 5 FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The findings from the case study have reiterated that the residential construction industry is a part of a multicultural workforce. In this study numbers of participants were interviewed including site supervisors, top level managers and WH&S officers. Findings suggest that due to the workforce diversity, a number of problems are apparent related to WH&S issues. The case established that communication is the major problem and this has a number of implications within the industry. The established language barrier results in problems associated with communicating safety requirements, simple work instructions, conducting site inductions and training. Further problems included the workers resorting to cultural norms by means of not conforming to safety requirements through the use of PPE, safe tools and resorting to unsafe work practices. Many reports of miscommunication, non-compliant work and incidents have been made apparent. Construction personnel record confusion, stress and frustration when working with Non English Speaking (NES) workers however advantages include large groups completing works fast, available to work anytime with speed. Various construction personnel do not have efficient means of dealing with the migrant workforce and they resort to the use of third party communication and documentation to aid the language barrier. Furthermore, findings established the use of new technology to aid in communication and language barriers (e.g., Apple iPhone translator application and Google translate). The result findings demonstrate deteriorated safety and quality assurance within specific areas of the residential construction industry, particularly in trades such as painting, tiling and plastering.

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