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## Australian Government - National Skills Commission Stakeholder Survey for the Commission's 2023 Skills Priority List (SPL)

### Background:

The Australasian Sonographers Association (ASA) was invited by the Australian Government, National Skills Commission to respond to the Skills Priority List (SPL) Stakeholder Survey to provide evidence towards the 2023 Skills Priority List.

### Response:

The ASA's response was submitted 13 December 2022, via the online survey link on the National Skills Commission website. The content of the response is outlined below.

## Online Survey Response

**Contact Details:** ASA phone, [policy@sonographers.org](mailto:policy@sonographers.org), ASA office address

**Type of organisation:** Peak Body

**Industry:** Health care and social assistance

**Question 1: Please select the major occupation groups for the ANZSCO occupations you would like to provide input on.**

*Skip (see Q2 below, as all contained in one ANZSCO)*

**Question 2: Please select the ANZSCO occupation(s) you would like to provide input on**

Occupation > Sonographer 251214

**Question 3: Please select SPL rating you recommend and outline why**

In national shortage, across all states/territories, in both metro and regional areas.

**Why do you recommend this rating:**

- It aligns with the 2022 rating, and the challenges and issues apparent in 2022 remain.
- The Australasian Sonographers Association (ASA) undertook a survey of major employers in Nov/Dec 2022; 83% of respondents indicated the shortage is widespread, ongoing, and national. This is particularly so for sonographers with experience, and in the public sector where salaries tend to be lower and are influenced by state awards.
- Anecdotal evidence indicates that employers are struggling to secure applicants for advertised positions, with some receiving no applications, or only one or two per advertised role.



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- A current search of Seek for 'sonographers' in the medical imaging industry, suggests there are currently 540+ vacancies being advertised Australia-wide. This likely underestimates the true situation, as multiple stakeholders indicate that finding sonographers is so challenging that some employers simply do not bother advertising at all.
- Employers report pressure to offer increased salaries (beyond award rates), sign-on bonuses, and flexible conditions to attract staff, and often need to consider employing sonographers without the desired experience. Other solutions being utilised including short stay visits from metro to regional areas, and increased reliance on locums, despite the cost.

Examples of survey comments in response to the question 'In your opinion, is there a current shortage of sonographers?':

- *Industry wide shortage. Constant struggle to get any applications for positions across [the state].*
- *Shortages in metro and regional in our organisation, requiring short stay visits from metro to regional.*
- *EVERYWHERE!!! We have shortages in both our regional and rural areas – it is impacting on patient safety and care.*
- *Our shortages are across all markets – metro, regional and remote. Remote and regional areas are having to resort to paying extreme rates to recruitment agencies for locum staff.*

#### **Question 4: What is the current supply of workers for these occupations as reported by your members?**

Undersupply.

##### **Details and Evidence:**

The ASA undertook a survey of major employers in Nov/Dec 2022; 88% of respondents indicated an undersupply. Only 4% indicated meeting demand, and none reported an oversupply. When asked to quantify the current undersupply of sonographers in their organisation, employers provided the following:

- Many suggested a current undersupply of 10-20%, with some indicating 40%+. A small number indicated 60-100%.
- The survey provided frequent anecdotal evidence that service providers are regularly closing ultrasound (US) exam rooms in response to undersupply. Survey comments include:

*Only running 4 out of 6 rooms on 2-3 days per week; currently closing 10% of the service (being 3-4 rooms per day); currently have to close 3 out of 7 ultrasound rooms a week due to shortages, etc.*

- One employer indicated they are currently 40 FTEs (55-65 individual) sonographers short nationally ~ 10% of workforce.



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- Another employer indicated 44 current vacancies.
- A significant factor impacting the undersupply is the chronic lack of clinical training placements. Student sonographers are required to complete up to 2,200 hours, or approximately three days per week over two years, to complete their training and apply to become accredited. One employer indicated they recently advertised a single trainee position and received over 80 applicants. They regularly receive cold calls from students seeking placements.
- Other factors influencing the current undersupply include the proportion of sonographers who work in part-time and casual positions, as seen in the 2021 ASA Employment and Salary Survey (attached). This indicates that 53% of the current workforce work part-time, and a further 7% work in casual/locum positions. The proportion of sonographers working in part-time and casual/locum positions has increased since the survey was last undertaken, 2 years prior. 76% of sonographers indicate that their primary role is in private practice. Only 43% of sonographers work in one location for the same employer. 41% work in multiple locations for the same employer, with the remaining 16% working in different locations for different employers.
- Approximately 80% of the profession is female, who have a greater propensity to work part time, and/or reduce working hours to accommodate family commitments.

**Question 5: Do your members expect demand for the workforce in these occupations to change over the next 5 years?**

Increase.

**Details and evidence:**

- The diagnostic imaging sector has predicted this, based on previous experience, the shortage of sonographers, and growing service demand.
- The ASA undertook a survey of major employers in Nov/Dec 2022; 81% of respondents indicated they expect it to increase, a further 4% expect it to remain the same, while 4% were unsure. The remaining 11% expect it to reduce.
- The issues contributing to the current shortage will take many years to resolve.
- In addition, we know that around 25% of the current workforce will reach retirement age in the next decade, meaning that if changes are not enacted, the shortage of sonographers is expected to get worse.  
In our recent survey of employers, an employer indicated that in one department they expect one third of their sonographers to retire or move to reduced hours in the next 5 years.
- Demand for ultrasound services – which is currently the most frequently utilised diagnostic imaging service – is expected to continue increasing due to the aging population, increased application, and its cost-effectiveness compared to some other imaging services. Demand related to obstetric and paediatric application is also expected to remain, if not increase.



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- Medicare statistics indicate that the cost of CT imaging is approximately twice as expensive as ultrasound, while MRI imaging can be 3-4 times as expensive.

**Question 6: Have any of your members reported using employer sponsored visa programs in the past 12 months?**

Yes (Some. 30% of employers surveyed).

Experience was mixed, with some employers indicating positive experiences, while others indicated that they found it unreliable and expensive, with poor retention rates, negatively impacted by COVID-19, and experienced difficulties with the process for having overseas qualifications recognised for accreditation purposes.

**Question 7: Please select the occupations that members have used employer sponsored visa programs for.**

Occupation: Sonographers

Comments.

**Question 8: Have you received direct feedback from your members that employers have used employer sponsored visas for any other ANZSCO occupations in the last 12 months? (ANZSCO occupations not listed above).**

No.

**Question 9: Would you like to provide any additional comments on your nominated ANZSCO occupations?**

Yes.

**Question 10: Please provide any further comments here (2,000-word limit)**

The Australasian Sonographers Association (ASA) is the professional organisation for Australasian sonographers, who are the experts in ultrasound. With over 7,000 members, and representing more than 70% of Australasia's sonographers, the ASA's purpose is to foster a sonography profession that delivers high quality ultrasound with a vision to create a healthier world through sonographer expertise.

There are currently 7,150 accredited medical sonographers and 1,117 student sonographers in Australia (Source: Australian Sonographer Accreditation Registry). After taking part-time hours into account, this equates to 5,628 FTE accredited medical sonographers. (Source: 2021 ASA Employment and Salary Survey)

In 2021, there were 12.1 million Medicare-funded diagnostic ultrasound examinations undertaken; most performed by sonographers. Ultrasound examinations account for 43% of all



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Medicare rebateable diagnostic imaging services utilised (Source: Medicare Statistics, Group Reports)

We have attached the ASA 2021 Employment and Salary Survey report.

The recent survey of employers mentioned above was undertaken on the condition of confidentiality. We have sought to include highlights in the above comments. However, please feel free to contact us if you would like to discuss findings further by email at [policy@sonographers.org](mailto:policy@sonographers.org)

**Question 11: If you have evidence or documents that support your feedback on ANZSCO occupations, please upload these documents here.**

2021 ASA Employment and Salary Survey Industry Report.

**Question 12: Would you like to provide information on any occupations not specifically covered in ANZSCO?**

No.