

Communiqué from the Spatial Education and Skills Development Strategy Workshop held in Canberra on 27 April 2006. Jointly released by participating bodies.

Meeting the growing demand for people with spatial skills

National bodies in the Australian spatial industry have agreed to a coordinated strategy to address the growing shortage of people with spatial skills in Australia. The strategy will focus on recruitment, retention and user needs.

Demand for spatial products and services are increasing and need for skilled people are at high levels not only in traditional disciplines like surveying, hydrography and cartography but also in growth areas like application of geographic information systems, location based services and remote sensing.

There is a real risk that skills shortages will limit industry growth and ability to meet changing and growing demands for services and products in areas such as land markets, environmental management, disaster management, national security, community services and transportation. Shortage of skilled people also limits Australia's ability to develop and export innovative spatial services in a world where application of spatial information is becoming pervasive. Think Google Earth or Microsoft Virtual Earth.

Indications are that there is decreasing spatial literacy being taught in schools. Providers of relevant courses in Australian tertiary education and training institutions point to significant recruiting difficulties in both quality and numbers of students in their courses. There is also concern about levels of current investment in workplace training.

Significant effort to close skill gaps has already been undertaken by all parts of the spatial industry, but these are fragmented, under-resourced and focus on only some of the overall problems facing the industry. Consequently, many bodies within the industry have called for a more coordinated effort to increase investment in education and skills formation (E&SF).

Recognising the problem, twenty leaders of the industry nominated by peak government, professional, business, research and education bodies gathered in Canberra on 27 April to discuss development of a coordinated national E&SF strategy for the industry. Two senior officers from the Skills Analysis & Research Strategy Branch, Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training also participated in the workshop.

It was agreed that all parts of the industry needed to work together to solve the fundamental problems all were having in attracting new entrants, dealing with an aging workforce and developing flexible skill sets to meet changing user needs and expectations.

The starting point for the spatial industry is that people are its greatest resource. The Australian spatial industry should provide the capacity to meet both present and future demand of its users for relevant spatially enabled services and products. It can only do this by creating and maintaining a highly skilled, competitive and innovative workforce.

There was agreement that a coordinated strategy was needed that encompassed all players, was national in scope but focussed on particular outcomes to meet specific needs in sectors, disciplines and regions of the industry. If possible, any sector, region and discipline action plans that are developed should be nested within a common national plan. The national strategy would need to be pragmatic and realistic, focusing on quick results while gathering more information about skill gaps. The strategy would need to have relevance to user and employer needs and meet aspirations of current and future employees. The strategy must be flexible enough to grow as more information comes to light and can be improved as experience shows what works and what does not.

The workshop participants agreed on the elements making up a strategy, immediate priorities and short-term action. These actions focused on better defining demand and supply for

spatial skills and where gaps are occurring. Priority can then be assigned to fill these gaps. Significant effort will be put into increasing investment in E&SF from sources both within and external to the industry. In the meantime, innovative solutions to particular problems that already exist will be assessed for national implementation. Peak bodies have agreed to pool resources to kick-start early delivery of the strategy. The existing Spatial Education Advisory Committee will be given a strengthened coordination role to push implementation of the strategy.

Details of the strategy and action plan will be published on www.crcsi.com.au or are available from ANZLIC, Spatial Sciences Institute or Australian Spatial Information Business Association.