

Plumbers		Queensland
ANZSCO Codes: 3341-11,-12,-13, -14,-15	September 2009	
Labour market ratings:	3341-11 Plumber (General) – Shortage 3341-12 Airconditioning and Mechanical Services Plumber – Unable to rate 3341-13 Drainer – Shortage 3341-14 Gasfitter – Shortage 3341-15 Roof Plumber – Shortage	
Comment: <i>There were insufficient vacancies to rate Airconditioning and Mechanical Services Plumber.</i>		

Occupational demand

General plumbers install and repair water, drainage, gas and sewerage pipes and systems. Gasfitters work with piping systems downstream of the billing meter and the appliances and ancillary equipment associated with fuel gases and liquefied petroleum gas systems. Drainers work with underground drainage systems and the associated sewerage or effluent disposal systems. Mechanical services plumbers are skilled to work with piping, ducting and equipment for the heating, cooling and ventilation of buildings or vessels. Roof plumbers work with flashings, metallic roof and wall claddings, as well as rainwater products such as gutters and downpipes. Plumbing activities range from domestic maintenance to high-rise construction with most tradespersons either self-employed, working in small firms or working for government departments concerned with public works. Although employment opportunities may be found across all industry sectors, 2006 Census data indicates that 86 per cent of plumbers in Queensland are employed in the construction industry.

Population growth, government stimulus measures and unprecedented infrastructure development all contributed to sustained demand for plumbing services in Queensland over the last twelve months. In 2008-09, Queensland recorded population growth of approximately 2000 persons a month, with the strength of this growth driving steady building and construction activity across the State. Despite falls in residential and private sector building in the wake of the recent global financial recession, the total trend volume of construction work done in Queensland continued to strengthen by a solid 6.9 per cent over the year to June 2009. Apart from the prevailing demand stemming from the building industry, demand for qualified plumbers has been stimulated by recently announced government rebates and the subsequent increase in orders for the installation of home hot water heater and solar energy systems. At the same time, calls for plumbing maintenance services continued to flow regularly from all industry sectors which added further to the demand for plumbers across the State.

Occupational supply

Trade recognition as a general plumber, gasfitter and drainer can be obtained by completing a 48-month apprenticeship in *General Plumbing*. Mechanical services and air-conditioning plumbers are required to complete a 48-month apprenticeship in *Plumbing (Mechanical Services)*. Once qualified, and depending on the apprentice's choice of core and elective subjects, graduates are able to apply for a plumbers, drainers, gasfitters or restricted plumbers licence. Entry to the trade of roof plumbing is via the completion of a 36-month apprenticeship in *Roof Plumbing*. In Queensland however, and for all plumbing trades, if an individual or company wants to carry out work valued over \$1100 they must hold the correct licence as determined by the Building Services Authority. To acquire a licence, tradespersons are required to pay costs and complete an approved course.

Data from the Queensland Department of Education and Training indicate that 839 students commenced general plumbing courses in 2004 and this number grew on average by 12.4 per cent annually to reach 1502 in 2007, before moderating to 1278 in 2008. Historically, wastage from training for this trade has averaged approximately 45 per cent and if completions stay commensurate with the growth in commencements, it is anticipated that around 520 newly qualified plumbers will enter the labour market at the end of 2009. Although numbers are considerably lower, the corresponding data for roof plumbing and mechanical services and air conditioning plumbing courses show similar patterns of growth, with 46

roof plumbers and 13 mechanical services and air conditioning plumbers completing apprenticeships at the end of 2008. In an effort to help ease skill shortages and attract more people into roof plumbing, the duration of the roof plumbing apprenticeship was reduced from 48 months to 36 months in 2007. Since that time, further modifications include a reduction in annual classroom attendance from 16 weeks each year to 12 weeks each year. Arrivals and departures data from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship indicate that overseas migration may be providing some aid to supply as Queensland recorded a net gain of 88 self-identified plumbers to the State in 2007-08.

Employer and industry comments/current labour market

There was general consensus among the respondents that although the quantity of applicants had improved over the last twelve months, the quality of applicant skills remained unchanged and the recruitment of suitably qualified, licensed and experienced plumbers (across all areas of expertise) continued to be difficult. Consequently, only 55 per cent of the overall vacancies for plumbing trades in Queensland were filled within four weeks of initial advertising. This figure is notably lower than last year's filled rate of 65 per cent. A breakdown of filled rates according to specialty indicates that roof plumbers fared the worst with only 33 per cent of vacancies filled, licensed gasfitters and drainers performed slightly better at 50 per cent and general plumbing employers filled 67 per cent of their vacancies. There was very little demand for mechanical services and air-conditioning plumbers and employers seeking this trade reported using word of mouth or training their own as the most effective methods to secure suitable workers.

Employers regarded 82 per cent of the applicants as unsuitable, in most cases because they did not have the appropriate license or the specific experience needed for the role. A number of employers reported that plumbers have already completed a four year apprenticeship and the time and cost of any additional study acts as a disincentive to most plumbers obtaining a licence. In their view, the current licensing regulations are compounding the shortages. In an effort to combat the current shortages, other contacts from this study suggested changes to training that may help boost supply. For example, they would welcome the introduction of a two-year apprenticeship for the specific roles of domestic, commercial or maintenance plumber, giving apprentices the opportunity to gain skills and experience in one area of service and enter that labour market more readily. For those apprentices wanting to work across all industry sectors, they could complete two or all three apprenticeships. As noted in previous reports, employers appealed once again for training organisations to provide a 'day release' option as the preferred duration for classroom training and called for the abolition of 'block releases'. According to most employers, block releases delay apprenticeship completions and impede business operations and productivity, especially in the very busy last quarter of the year and for those businesses employing large numbers of apprentices.

This year respondents also reported receiving a strong response from overseas applicants or current visa holders in Australia. In most cases, these applicants were not given serious consideration because past employees from this cohort were found to have work practices and training that were not consistent with Australian practices and standards. The majority of contacts stated that while the recent economic downturn provoked some concerns, forward orders are showing positive growth and demand for plumbers should remain firm. Most employers were confident that activity looked set to strengthen over 2010.

Labour market outlook

It is anticipated that demand for plumbers will remain steady and could grow further as ABS data shows that building approvals strengthened for the fifth consecutive month to be 8.3 per cent higher in July compared to their low point in February 2009. In non-residential building the value of work approved has held up reasonably well so far over 2009, remaining almost equivalent to the previous year in original chain volume terms and these factors combined are likely to strengthen demand for all plumbing trades. The increasing apprenticeship numbers may help boost supply until the end of 2010 but then supply from training weakens and based on this years study the increases to date have not been enough to satisfy the extent of demand for plumbing trades. Given that demand looks set to strengthen, the current State-wide shortage of plumbing trades in Queensland is not only expected to continue, it may intensify over 2010.