

# Firms stung by visa fees in battle to fill the gaps

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**EXCLUSIVE**By **BERNARD LANE**, ROVING EDITOR, LEADER WRITER, DATA JOURNALIST32 MINUTES AGO MAY 9, 2019 •  COMMENTS

The government is refusing to refund almost \$8 million in fees to employers denied permission to bring in skilled migrants to fill job vacancies.

Businesses had 2137 requests for 482-class temporary skilled migrant visas knocked back between mid-August and the end of December last year, sometimes for minor flaws in advertisements that have to be run to prove no locals want the job.

Employers have been left with workforce gaps unplugged and out of pocket because the Home Affairs Department will not refund \$7.9m in visa fees or give a credit to use with a tidied-up - application.

“We’re not getting a result yet, they’re charging us,” said Sydney migration agent Allan Pitman, who helps hospitals and aged-care facilities recruit overseas nurses to keep pace with demand.

“I’ve worked for international companies and we’d get skinned alive (if we charged for no result) — this is just unconscionable.”

Skilled migration is a politically hot issue, with the Coalition and Labor each accusing the other of presiding over abuses involving the 482 visa and its predecessor, the 457. The Coalition says it cleaned up Labor’s mess after 457 visas blew out in 2011-13, while last month Bill Shorten threatened a “crackdown on 457-style visa rorts” if he wins government. Debate about the issue has reignited, with new data showing a 28 per cent increase in 482-visa grants in the nine months to the end of March, although this involves onshore visa renewals as well as foreign workers given the green light to enter Australia. The trend in grant numbers had been downwards since the Abbott government won power in 2013.

In December, Nationals MP Barnaby Joyce lobbied Immigration Minister David Coleman on behalf of an Aboriginal health service chief executive, Sherly Jose, who wanted to bring in an - Indian nurse for an Armidale job, and paid \$4800 in fees, but got caught out by a new rule that media advertisements to test the local labour market had to include the salary. Mr Coleman did not budge.

“This nurse had experience in Coober Pedy, in a similar Aboriginal service, so she was perfect for the job, she’s got a masters degree, she’s got all the qualifications in the world,” Mr Pitman said. “Everything was fine, there was just this one thing about the labour market testing (ad).

“We want a credit, because this nurse is still there (waiting in India), and the health service still has the need.”

He said the Home Affairs Department was usually fair and reasonable but a delegation of - migration agents to Mr Coleman’s office was told “talk to Treasury, they’ve got the money”.

Last night, a Coalition spokeswoman said: “We make no apologies for putting Australian workers first by ensuring labour market testing is undertaken and businesses contribute to a fund that helps train up local workers.”

She said Coalition reform of the 457 visa had brought numbers down to fewer than 65,000 visa grants in 2017-18, compared with the peak of 126,000 in 2012-13 when Mr Shorten was employment minister and Julia Gillard employed British political operative John McTernan on a 457 visa.

Indian-born nurse Divya Mathews, 31, is one of the success stories of a country area attracting overseas talent. At first she found Armidale quiet but her husband joined her, they had a son Aiden in 2016 and she warmed to the place.

“It’s very easy, a quiet life, you’re at work in five minutes (at a private hospital) — things are great,” she said yesterday.

#### **BERNARD LANE, ROVING EDITOR, LEADER WRITER, DATA JOURNALIST**

Bernard Lane was named 2012 Higher Education Journalist of the Year. He was chief editorial writer for the newspaper and covered the High Court. He is a psychology graduate and language student.

