

Hotel quarantine: poor quality training and another disaster

by Bruce Mackenzie, Mackenzie Research Institute

The resurgence of COVID-19 in Melbourne, allegedly caused by the inappropriate behaviour of security guards, has created a social, political and economic disaster for Victoria and Australia. Industry sources claim that the recent shutdown is costing \$1 billion per day, millions of people in greater Melbourne have had their lives severely curtailed and lives will be needlessly lost. From a political perspective a strong and progressive government has been cowered.

This decision to engage private security companies is understandable. These companies can only employ security guards who hold an Australian government qualification (Certificate II) and are licensed by Victorian Police to work in hotel security, shopping centres, clubs and so forth.

One would think that nothing could go wrong if the guards are nationally qualified, licensed by the Victorian Police and, in the case of two companies, prequalified to provide services to government. Well maybe the advice to government wasn't up to scratch.

The security industry and training standards have for a long time been subject to significant criticism.

The Coroners in Victoria, Queensland and New South Wales in investigating deaths of patrons as a result of restraint intervention by security personnel in the course of incident control, suggested that the following were contributing to fatalities:

- poor quality training, that does not equip people with the right skills;
- inadequate work-based training and assessment;
- security personnel with poor language, literacy and numeracy skills;
- inadequate on-the-job supervision; and
- inadequate content in qualifications.

The Victorian police declined to act on the Coroner's advice.

In 2016, the national regulator in a detailed report suggested that poor quality training and assessment were posing fundamental challenges to ensure that licensed security people were equipped to carry out their duties.

Curiously, given the subcontracting arrangement entered into, the Victorian government has been conducting an inquiry into the security industry and its training since 2018. The inquiry discussion paper identifies systemic weaknesses in the industry and the quality of training.

There are now three inquiries currently being conducted in Australia into the security industry, one by the Commonwealth and two in Victoria. It is well documented that the industry has within it shady operators, wage theft and sham contracting. But then the same could be said of many industries some of whom are members of the Business Council of Australia.

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Putting aside the industry weaknesses, the primary cause of the failure of the hotel quarantine experiment was poor training coupled with inadequate supervision.

A security officer qualification in Victoria requires an individual to be a minimum of 18 years and undertake a 136 hour course (3 ½ weeks) in which there is no requirement for on-the-job training. There are no entry requirements, other than year 10 literacy, and there is no requirement to be an Australian resident. On graduation the student receives a Certificate II in Security Operations and applies for a licence from Victoria Police to operate as a security officer.

In contrast Victorian police are required to undertake 31 weeks of training, Protective Service Officers 12 weeks, Police Custody Officers 8 weeks and prison wardens 8 weeks, including 2 weeks on-the-job.

Normally a Certificate II course will take between 600 to 1200 hours of learning. This qualification is regarded by the National Centre for Vocational Education as lower than year 11 and usually is undertaken to maintain engagement with education rather than leading to employment. There is no suggestion anywhere that a Certificate II would qualify an individual to work independently.

Australia's decision to focus primarily on university education as a means of creating a productive economy has hollowed out the workforce and led to an economy with high and low skilled jobs. Supervisory jobs have all but disappeared, yet middle level/supervisory jobs are vital if those with lower skills are to perform effectively. The security industry needs strengthening at the supervisory level as do most service industries in Australia. The Coroners have made similar comments.

The last government intervention in the face of disaster was in the global financial crisis. The Pink Batts Scheme also focused on short-term, low level training, unsupervised work and it killed people.

Australian vocational education training has been in need of reform for many years. We continue to develop curricula which is narrowly focused in an age when all jobs in the service industry require strong communication and numeracy skills and digital competence.

The volume of learning associated with the security industry training is manifestly inadequate for a Certificate II. It should not be a qualification in its own right, it should be part of a wider foundation course, for example emergency services, a component of which can be security operations.

Australia has put billions of dollars into university education, yet when a crisis occurs it is lower level skills that prove to be as critical and as important as professional skills. We may learn little from this crisis, and perhaps nothing from the enquiries into the hotel quarantine fiasco, but one thing we can learn is that low-level qualifications need to be broadened and need to have resources allocated to them to protect this country and its citizens.

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