



Tuning up your Rural Skills and Experience with a Certificate or Diploma

Sometimes expanding a farm business or starting a new business activity can be easier with training, and qualifications may make it easier to get the loan you need or even get extra off farm income. Throughout Australia, farm workers are starting to undertake customised, individual learning which leads to nationally recognised qualifications from Certificate I to Advanced Diplomas. Mature-aged people are achieving qualifications while working on farms – some of them while managing multi-million dollar beef, dairy cattle or local government enterprises.

Former music teacher Marie Dilley of Coolup in WA gained her Advanced Diploma in Agriculture (Rural Business Management) recently. She achieved this through long, hard experience and learning on the job, by setting up a partnership, farming operation and office systems from scratch, and by working hard on committees and boards serving the dairy industry and the wider farming community.

Marie's qualification came through the Skills Recognition for Industry Leaders Project, sponsored by the Australian National Training Authority and implemented through the Rural Training Council of Australia (RTCA). The project demonstrated, by example, how mature-aged people could receive formal recognition and qualifications based on their current knowledge, skills and experience.

To achieve qualifications, people of all ages are assessed on how competent they are, not on how long they have been studying a subject or how many courses they have completed. For example, Marie's Advanced Diploma took a matter of days collecting the relevant documentary evidence and a rigorous two-hour assessment interview to prove she had the required knowledge and experience.

"It did take hours to go through the various four-drawer filing cabinets, some with dairy farm records and some with industry stuff in them, and extract what was relevant to providing the documentary proof for the various competencies," Marie said. "It was a great business and personal review process. I ended up with three archive boxes full. On the business side, it showed up a couple of things that needed attention."

Ever since Marie and husband Kevin formed their own partnership and began a new dairying operation, she has taken responsibility for bookkeeping and much of the indoor management side of the business. They have 190 milking Friesians, out of a total herd of 450 cattle, on 400ha (1,000 acres) about 120km south of Perth.

"It was a case of establishing an office from scratch and was all done on the basis of, if you don't know, find out," she said.

Marie was fortunate that she had gone to Claremont Teachers' College to learn how to learn. Her Teacher's Certificate took only two years, instead of three, because she already had a music qualification. On marrying a dairy farmer, at first she continued to teach part-time and on relief. Since becoming a full-time dairy farmer in 1985, she has concentrated on office and dairy business management matters, gradually increasing her involvement with agri-politics.

She was on the Dairy section of the WA Farmers' Federation (WAFF) for 10 years, being President in 95-96, and has also served on various national Dairy Farmers organisation boards for a similar period. With the WAFF, Marie has held the economics portfolio and therefore been a member of the economics committee of the National Farmers Federation since 1997, during a period of enormous demands in relation to trade issues and the GST. She also served on the Agricultural and Pastoral Industry Employment and Training Council, and is still a member of the Primary Industries Training Council (PITC).

"I was quite delighted to participate in the Skills Recognition pilot project, using the new competency based system, because I was on the PITC when the competency standards were being developed," she said. "I was instrumental in ensuring the competencies met the needs of dairy farmers throughout most of Australia, where milking is year-round, rather than just the seasonal milking they operate in Victoria."

Marie believes her new qualification is capable of opening a range of new opportunities associated with their dairying business. She said that having the Advanced Diploma would be important in sending a signal to potential clients that you knew what you're on about.

"I can see that, with the Advanced Diploma, I could set up a bookkeeping/dairy financial records service for the industry. You do things a little bit at a time, or consistently year-after-year, and you never understand how much you've learned over the years. . . Once you've put all that you've done, all that you've learned, into boxes it really adds up. I think it's an endorsement of ability, a formal recognition of all that you've done over the years."

Marie said you don't analyse the total scope of what you do, of what you're capable of doing, unless an opportunity like 'Skills Recognition' comes along. She said she was sure all farmers would find the same thing: they would be surprised at how much diverse knowledge and widespread skills they possessed.

"I'd like to encourage all rural people to analyse the options now open to them under the new system. Pieces of paper are important in our society, no matter how much you might wish that wasn't the case. This new system gives mature-aged, experienced people the opportunity to have their knowledge and skill recognised, and also provides a lifelong learning framework for younger people in the dairy industry."

Asked whether she had done any other courses since her school teaching days, Marie said she had completed a HACCP training course (hazard analysis at critical control points) in 1999. "Handling all the bookkeeping, helping with the milking, and raising three kids, you don't have time to do courses," she said.

More Information

For further information on Skills Recognition or the career opportunities now available through the Rural Production Training Package, contact the Rural Training Council of Australia on

1800 688 157



◀ Marie Dilley, of WA, had her years of acquired knowledge and skills formally recognised through achieving a qualification