



1. Submission to the Inquiry into Agricultural Education and Training from Rural Skills Australia
2. Attachment 1

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Rural Skills Australia Submission

- *What agricultural based education and training courses you offer, and any available data on enrolment and completion rates;*

For 16 years Rural Skills Australia (RSA) has worked with rural industries stakeholders to enhance the skills and capacity of new entrants, existing industry workers and primary producers alike. As such, we are not a Registered Training Provider (RTO), but have been working closely with the RTO sector and have been collecting and collating data on the commencements of Agriculture and related sectors trainees and apprentices to provide feedback to the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). See attachment 1.

Over the past 10 years, as shown in the attachment, drought has had significant effect on the take up of trainees in our sector, with the numbers of commencements fluctuated in line with the state of the climate. In most recent times the situation seems to have improved with solid numbers appearing in 2010.

The number of Certificate II trainees is particularly impressive as a large majority of these are school-based trainees. This is in addition to those school students undertaking Certificate II in Agriculture and part of a VET in Schools or VCAL program. Many of the school-based trainees will progress onto Certificate III in Agriculture as trainees with their farming employers taking advantage of the Commonwealth incentives and the trainees accessing the additional 'tool for your trade' incentives.

- *Key benefits and issues surrounding agricultural education and training courses, including any identified gaps in existing educational opportunities;*

The introduction of competency-based training into the agricultural sector in around 1998 was a significant step forward for the industry. At the time the 'Farm Trades Apprenticeship' was literally dying, with many providers unable to fill classes. The Dairy sector was the first to embrace this form of training with a Commonwealth funded Australian Vocational Training Scheme (AVTS) pilot. This pilot operated in the three dairy regions of the State – Gippsland, Northern districts and the South-West. 118 trainees undertook the first round of this pilot with the program centred on a range of competencies over an 18-month period. More than 80 of the initial intake graduated. Competency-based training was off and running. In the early days of this new form of training one RTO reported that they had moved from having only 5-6 Farm Trades Apprentice's one year (and declining), to the next year, utilising the Agriculture National Training Package, having more than 25 Agricultural Trainees. In addition these trainees were each undertaking a slightly different study program – one that suited their individual work situation, something not possible under the old system. Agriculture training in this state has benefited from the move to competency based training and the traineeship method where the trainee can complete the training and gain the recognition of the qualification when they are

actually competent not just 'do the time and get the ticket' method of the old system – a system that still exists in the 'Trades'.

The 'gap' that now exists for agriculture is that as many of the traditional trades are only now embracing competency based training and showing reluctance in making the transition, the focus and financial effort is being poured into these sectors at the expense of agriculture. We are being told that there will be no funding for Certificate II studies in the future. Certificate II in Agriculture is equivalent to the first year of a 4-year apprenticeship. It is the entry point, the level where key basic skills are developed and underpins the whole learning structure and it is we are being told that funding for delivery will not be available in the future. If this is to be the case why then is funding available for the delivery of the first year of a trades apprenticeship when it equivalent to a Certificate II level of skill? Let the 'trades' cope with that if there is to be fairness and equity in the training system.

The training system for too long has 'played favourites' to the traditional trades – they have been reluctant participants in competency-based training and the whole training reform agenda of successive governments, Federal and State. Whilst agriculture has played by 'the rules' and is now being penalised, we have continued to train people in an endeavour to feed and clothe the nation.

Another 'gap' is the perception that training delivery cost the same no matter where it is delivered or what is being delivered – a one size fits all mentality does not work for Agriculture and regional Victoria. Even when there is a loading for our sector it still does not take into account the real costs of operating in regions and in often thin markets. Many RTO's indicate to us that they are finding increasingly difficult to make the dollars fit. In addition the amount of funding that does not make it to the 'coal face' but is absorbed by RTO administrations should be looked at as a matter of urgency.

- *The availability and effectiveness of pathways that allow the transferability of skills acquired through informal industry training with competencies provided in formal education and training;*

Recognition of Prior Knowledge (RPL) has been a real challenge for many RTO's. The TAFE sector has in the past blindly ignored RPL or made it so difficult and expensive that people walked away from it – and the TAFE in a lot of cases. The situation has changed slightly in recent times but there is still a reluctance to fully embrace an RPL process. The participation of the agriculture sector in 'extension' activities and workshops largely goes unseen, unrecognised and understood by the 'training system'. Those in the area of 'extension' delivery similarly do not understand the training sector. Is it any wonder then that RPL in agriculture is difficult? It should not be so. There needs to be greater interaction by those in the training system with those in extension, with a sharing of knowledge and resources and recognition of the 'training' that extension offers to those in agriculture.

As with any training program the use of RPL need also to be monitored for quality and relevance.

- *The role and effectiveness of the agriculture sectors' current involvement and its future capacity in developing agriculture education and training;*

It is not so much about agriculture keeping up with the developments in education and training – it is about the education and training system keeping up with developments in agriculture. Industry is progressing at a far faster rate than what the education and training system can keep up with in the way of content and process. It has taken more than 5 years for the training system to review and implement the new National Training Package for Agriculture AHC10! Any new training program (in any industry sector) takes far too long to get 'on the ground'. Many of the TAFE RTO's will not be utilising the new AHC10 until 2013. It is not for the want of meeting the needs of industry, it is the red tape and bureaucratic process of the whole training system

that holds everything up. Meanwhile industry is out there doing their thing – advancing and implementing new technologies and processes.

Often it is difficult to get the agriculture sector to engage with the training sector because the industry cannot see the value in the training as it is not up with 'current practice'. The bureaucratic process must be changed and made more responsive to meet industries needs

- *The capacity of current and future on-the-job training and other alternative training programs to enhance the skill levels of new and existing workers in the agricultural sector;*

Competency-based training should not be code for 'tick and flick' training. It is about the development of the skills required to complete a particular task and about being assessed that the task is undertaken consistently to the required standard. That requires a 'blended' approach – one of gaining the knowledge about the skills and practicing the skill until competent. The same as learning to drive a tractor cannot be done entirely in a classroom so too the development of the competencies of many agricultural skills requires the reading of reference material and the discussion with topic experts. On-the-job training is not for everyone and not every employer has the capacity or the competence to undertake this form of training. On-the-job training must be supported by a clearly set out training plan that involves the employer, the training provider and the learner. It must also have clear and precise assessment strategies for the measuring of progress towards competence. It should also have regular documented visits from the RTO to check on the progress with feedback given promptly.

Done properly, with the ability to interact with peers and other industry segments, an on-the-job training program can be very successful. It can also go terribly wrong if not well managed by all parties.

The use of online programs to deliver agriculture program is increasing. Rural Skills Australia has been involved in this field for a number of years with our Rural Skills Online program. We have seen the development and use of technology to deliver agriculture program grow significantly in recent years. We are currently involved with about 20 RTO's across Australia with in excess of 1000 participants with access to web-based learning resources for over 100 units of competence from the AHC10 Training Package. We expect the take up of usage will continue to grow as will the range of learning resources. At a recent presentation to a group of agriculture providers interstate one senior executive commented that 'online training was coming at us at a hundred miles an hour whether we like it or not'. So it is important that it is there for the benefit of industry, but more importantly to support quality training. Feedback from most of the users of Rural Skills Online has been very positive, allowing the RTO to better service their clients and expand the opportunities for both learner and training provider.

- *The quality and availability of existing teaching staff in the VET sector and higher education institutions and the potential impact of the ageing workforce in the agriculture sector on the availability of qualified trainers and teachers in the future;*

Like most workforces the VET sector is experiencing the challenges of attracting younger teachers. Not only do they have to contend with an ageing workforce but also the attraction of more interesting and rewarding positions in industry. A common complaint amongst VET staff is the level of paperwork and compliance activities that must be undertaken often to the detriment of 'teaching and assessing'. One comment recently was that the VET teacher felt more like a 'facilitator' than a teacher with all the bureaucratic compliance activities that had to be 'ticked off'/recorded and reported on before they actually 'taught'.

One aspect of addressing the ageing VET workforce would be some sort of cadetship and the ability to return to industry to keep 'current' and return to the VET sector to impart the new knowledge. Difficult to implement - but something that must be looked at if we are to have a VET workforce into the future.

- *Curriculum development to respond to the future needs of the agriculture sector;*

As indicated above the structures of the bureaucratic process in the development and implementation of curriculum/competency standards and Training Packages that need addressing to better respond to the needs of not only agriculture but all industry sectors.

It just takes too long to develop and implement new programs currently- there seems to be too many layers to go through and the decision makers do not seem to be able to make decisions. The focus of program funding often seems to be more about sector 'favourites' and locations than on what is good for industry. Why do the traditional trades and mining get so much attention and funding when agriculture is the second largest contributor to our national wealth and it is the sector that feeds us. In a future where food security will be a huge issue it should be important that we train the next generation of agriculture technicians.

- *How to increase the participation of existing agriculture sector workers in education and training courses;* Participation by existing agriculture sector workers in education and training courses can be increased by addressing the inequities in the eligibility rules that apply currently to all sectors bar the traditional trades. Level the playing field and participation will increase. The exclusion of workers with pre-existing qualifications, often in non relevant sectors, to education and training courses in agriculture flies in the face of the theory and rhetoric of 'lifelong learning' and career change. Eliminating or placing a 'sunset clause' of 5years on the 'existing qualifications' rule would benefit the participation of existing agricultural workers. Another mechanism to increase participation would be to ramp up the promotion agriculture education and training programs at the same time as encouraging the providers of the programs to fully embrace flexible quality delivery. Offering the right courses at the right time to suit industry and not the provider is important, as is the use of technology in the delivery. Time spent 'of-farm' is critical and the training providers, as well as the bureaucrats developing the funding models, must take this into account when framing their programs
- *How to improve public perceptions around pursuing a career in agriculture, and potentially increase the enrolment of young people in agriculture education and training courses.*

Promotion of agriculture into the secondary school system has long been a challenge for all. A key issue is that of perception – little Johnny puts his hand up to do agriculture and everyone says 'you are going to be a Farmer'. Wrong! The perception that Johnny will leave/finish school and be a 'Farmer' is not going to happen. The message should be –Johnny will finish school, undertake some further training and work IN agriculture – the FARM will come later.

There are many interesting, wonderful and rewarding Agricultural jobs out there that most careers teachers, VCE co-ordinators and parents do not know about and none of them require the title 'Farmer'. Communicating the message about agriculture rather than farm ownership is a key element to improving the perception. A number of years ago Rural Skills Australia, with Commonwealth funding assistance, facilitated the placement of a team of 'Schools to Industry Advisers' that were located with the State Farming Associations to work with schools to build awareness of agriculture as a career. The placement of the Schools to Industry Adviser with the Victorian Farmers' Federation (VFF) was most successful, as it was before the time of the

Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLEN) and there was little in the way of 'connection' between the schools and industry.

The time is right again for a similar program to be instigated, this time with a dedicated person working with, but not for, the key community organisations, like the regional LLEN, to play that agricultural liaison and promotion role that schools are unable and often reluctant to do. The role should focus just on agriculture, because we have seen that with similar programs in recent times, such as the Regional Industry Careers Advisers (RICA), funded by the Commonwealth, that expecting one position to cover all industry sectors is not possible. Rural Skills Australia is well placed to play a coordinating and management role, as we have done in the past, should such a program be viewed by Government as a way of improving the public perception of agriculture education and training.

Attachment 1

Australian Apprenticeships in Agriculture Commencements

Compiled by Rural Skills Australia with data supplied by Skills Victoria (and their predecessors)

Australian Apprenticeships in Agriculture	2001	2002	2003*	2004	2005	2006	2007*	2008	2009
Certificate II	335	271	236	271	255	213	189	155	201
Certificate III	282	294	276	386	556	518	406	648*	441
Certificate IV	80	70	71	87	55	72	27	89	43
Total	697	635	583	744	866	803	622	892	685

\*Brief notes:

2003 – Drought hits

2007 – Drought hits

2008 – Certificate III skewed by large number of commencements in the shearing sector