

## **Rural Skills Australia**

### **Submission to the Senate Inquiry - Higher education and skills training to support future demand in agriculture and agribusiness in Australia**

#### ***About Rural Skills Australia***

Rural Skills Australia (RSA) is a 'not for profit' incorporated association established in the mid-nineties to promote education and training in rural and related industries. The association's board includes representatives of the National Farmers' Federation (NFF), the Australian Workers' Union (AWU) and some commodity groups that are members of the NFF.

RSA has looked to foster improved rural industry involvement in education and training with a view to enhancing the skills and capacities of new entrants, existing workers and primary producers alike by working in conjunction with the NFF and its member bodies, AWU, related industry bodies and training system stakeholders including registered training organisations (RTOs), Australian Apprenticeship Centres (AACs), group training organisations (GTOs), and employment placement providers.

The association's primary aim is to combat an ageing rural workforce, shrinking rural communities, and to work to equip the current and next generation of farmers and rural workers with transferable, recognised and valued skills. In our view, it is critical that industry maintains its involvement in structured education and training and identifies further opportunities to up-skill members of its existing workforce to tackle current and future skill and labour shortages.

#### ***Introduction***

Rural Skills Australia is providing this submission to the Senate Committee of Inquiry: Higher education and skills training to support future demand in agriculture and agribusiness in Australia and terms of reference.

Our evidence is based on considerable industry information, knowledge and experience. RSA representatives can appear, if required, before any public hearing to provide commentary on selected points detailed within the terms of reference.

This submission is a collection of views, opinions, suggestions and relevant supporting information compiled by officers of RSA with an interest in selected matters covered by the inquiry's terms of reference. It does not, nor purports to in any way represent or express the views, opinions or policies of the RSA board or any of its member bodies.

For many years RSA has utilised funding assistance provided by the Australian Government through the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations' Industry Training Strategies Program. This employs a network of Education and Training Advisers (ETAs) around Australia to provide advice and assistance to rural and related industries on education and training matters, with a particular focus on Australian Apprenticeships.

During the 2011-12 financial year, in line with established practices, individual Education and Training Advisers will maintain their involvement with:

- the promotion of Australian Apprenticeship pathways and available Government assistance measures, including opportunities for up-skilling existing workers;
- Government-initiated consultative forums, policy reviews and education and training policy development, and the provision of industry advice to Government on specific vocational education and training matters;
- monitoring rural and related Australian Apprenticeship commencements across Australia, noting under-performing or 'problem' sectors, inhibiting factors, systemic impediments and related implementation issues;
- expanding industry involvement and understanding of vocational education and training (VET) – particularly Australian Apprenticeships, VET in Schools and Australian School-based Apprenticeships; and
- the promotion and dissemination of information on government policy changes and initiatives to members of the NFF, commodity councils, and associated and affiliated bodies using a variety of mediums including websites, industry journals, newsletters, publications and media releases.

Detailed information on ETA activities undertaken by RSA through a formal sub-contracting arrangement with Nationwide Farmers Australia Ltd is included at Attachment A.

### ***Framework for skills development – training packages***

Broadly speaking, the framework for skills development and learning opportunities in many agricultural sectors at the Certificate I to IV, Diploma and Advanced Diploma levels is provided through the Agriculture, Horticulture and Conservation and Land Management Training Package AHC10. This training package was endorsed by the National Quality Council in late November 2010 following the completion of an extensive review and amalgamation process by Agrifood Skills Australia that combined the Rural Production (RTE03), Amenity Horticulture (RTF03) and Conservation and Land Management (RTD02) Training Packages.

While it is generally accepted that many identified deficiencies of the previous training packages were remedied through this process, a number of remaining issues do require additional work through established and agreed Industry Skills Councils' 'Continuous Improvement' processes.

Generally, rural industry input to and cooperation with progressing training reform and enhancements to existing training arrangements, in particular the development and implementation of national training packages have been positive and broadly effective. These development processes have involved extensive consultations between industry associations, unions, individual employers, registered training organisations and the wider community primarily under the umbrella of the Agrifood Skills Australia Industry Skills Council.

The new AHC10 Training Package provides qualifications for the following sectors:

- Agriculture: agriculture, dairy production, horse breeding, pork production and poultry production.
- Horticulture: arboriculture, floriculture, horticulture, landscaping, parks and gardens, production nursery, retail nursery and sports turf management (green keeping).
- Services: agribusiness, beekeeping, irrigation, commercial seed processing, rural operations, commercial composting, rural machinery, rural merchandising, conservation earthworks, shearing, wool handling and wool classing.

Production horticulture: production horticulture

CLM: Conservation and land management, Indigenous land management, lands parks and wildlife, natural area restoration, vertebrate pest management and weed management.

An electronic version of the Rural Skills Australia publication *AHC10 Qualifications and Australian Apprenticeships Guide* is included as Attachment B. It was produced as a project funded under the Australian Government's Industry Training Strategies Program: Industry Pathfinders, administered by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relation This guide will provide committee members with an overview of the nature, content and scope of qualifications accommodated under the AHC10 Training Package. It should be noted that the availability of specific qualifications can vary significantly across jurisdictions.

The implementation arrangements, available qualifications, and time taken to facilitate the adoption of the AHC10 Training Package will vary across states and territories.

As the AHC10 Training Package is progressively adopted across jurisdictions it will, in our view, have the capacity to provide an appropriate range of skills development and learning opportunities within all educational sectors, except the higher education tertiary sector that operates under different arrangements for undergraduate degree students and post-graduate degree students.

Vocational skills in rural industries can be acquired in the schools sector through work experience programs (mainly Year 10 or equivalent), structured work placements (mainly Years 11 and 12 or equivalent), VET in schools programs (Years 10, 11 and 12 or equivalent), and through school-based, part-time Australian Apprenticeships (predominately Year 11 and 12 or equivalent). These programs are very successful for agriculture in terms of participation.

Whilst it may be possible to gain a Certificate II, or higher qualification, as part of these programs, it should not be a given that students will gain the qualification. It is critical that the assessment process is rigorous and well maintained to industry standards. Factors such as the seasonality of agriculture does not always fit with the education system to achieve an outcome (to demonstrate competence in some areas may mean that the student only gets one chance a year to prove competence. i.e. sowing a crop, harvesting a crop, calving etc). The education system needs to

recognise that these situations need special attention as well as the funding requirements and assessment strategies.

If the fundamental basic skills (competencies) are to be delivered via VET in secondary schools there must be some recognition, by the education system, that agriculture has seasonal challenges and requires a different approach to other industries: that the development of the basic skills are important; and that the achievement of competence is a progressive approach from Certificate II to Certificate III and so on. Too often the schools and education bureaucrats are chasing the prestige of higher qualifications at the expense of the development of quality industry skills.

While agriculture may be delivered at VET level in schools, a fundamental question relates to the real outcome in terms of whether the training translates into jobs or contributes to the resolution of rural skills and labour shortages. We have no figures to indicate how many students continue along the agricultural career pathway based on the VET course they may have done at school. With people having so many career changes in their working life, the inclusion of some agricultural units/program being introduced into other disciplines may be what attracts people to the agricultural industry at a time they are looking for a change.

Vocational skills in rural industries can be acquired in the vocational education and training sector through VET courses provided by registered training organisations, both public and private, and through contracted training arrangements between apprentices or trainees and employers where both off-the-job and on-the-job training is undertaken.

### ***Participation rates***

Over the last couple of years the availability of disadvantaged job seeker and existing workers training places through the Australian Government's Productivity Places Program, and Enterprise-based Productivity Places Program has allowed for greater rural industry involvement in higher-level qualifications at the Certificate IV, Diploma and Advanced Diploma levels. Participation rates across jurisdictions have varied considerably and unfortunately these programs may have distorted the training market and regrettably inflated and increased the nominal cost of many of these qualifications.

It should be noted that opportunities may exist for persons to seek formal recognition of their skills, knowledge and capacities through Recognition of Current Competencies (RCC) or Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) processes regardless of where the knowledge, skills and capacities were acquired, through previous training, work or life experiences. It is widely recognised that progress towards establishing readily accessible, user-friendly and affordable RPL or RCC processes for farmers and their employees has generally been slow. However, progressive RTOs are now actively looking to encourage greater industry involvement with RPL or RCC processes so skills can be better identified for legislative, quality assurance, retraining, up-skilling and other purposes.

The operation of the Australian Government's Australian Apprenticeships program, with varying levels of state/territory government support and supplementary

funding assistance, has provided an excellent mechanism to assist industry and individual employers improve their capacity to train new entrants around Australia, and in some jurisdictions up-skill their existing workers.

During the 2010 calendar year, 8,849 rural and related Australian Apprenticeships commencement were recorded across Australia, a 19.6 per cent increase on the 7,401 recorded the previous year. For information, a breakdown by qualification/level and state and territory compiled from figures sourced from various state and territory training authorities and NCVER is included as Attachment C.

Committee members should note that approximately 25,000 agricultural traineeship commencements have been recorded across Australia over the last nine years. The nominal term of these traineeships vary across jurisdiction from 12 to 36 months, as does the level of state and territory funding support provided to support delivery.

This positive development clearly indicates a growing acceptance within agricultural industry sectors of the value and capacity of Australian Apprenticeships pathways to assist with the resolution of skill shortages by skilling new entrants and up-skilling existing workers. Currently, agricultural trainees at the Certificate II, III and IV level attract the Commonwealth Government's 'Tools for your trade payment' initiative (around \$1,800 at the Certificate II level and up to \$5,500 at the Certificate III and IV level) as well as other Commonwealth Government incentives, including living away from home allowances, if they have to relocate to undertake their traineeship. As a general rule there are no impediments to family members of an enterprise/farm business being engaged as rural Australian Apprentices providing an employer/employee relationship exists. This means sons, daughters, nieces, nephews, grandsons and granddaughters can be taken on almost anywhere in Australia, (subject to satisfying no prior qualification requirements).

Nevertheless it should be noted that a continuing failure of both the national and state and territory training systems is their inability to allow for the consistent adoption within similar timeframes of notionally available training package qualifications and Australian Apprenticeship pathways across jurisdictions. Inadequate communication processes and inconsistent advice on training packages and their working arrangements during their implementation have often generated considerable confusion among stakeholders and in many instances contributed to significant delays in facilitating industry access to new qualifications and expanded Australian Apprenticeship pathways.

Unfortunately, funding pressures linked to increased industry involvement with traineeships and apprenticeships is resulting in some states and territories implementing significant cuts to the level of funding support provided for traineeship delivery.

### ***Adequacy of state/territory funding support***

Funding levels for NSW agricultural traineeships

#### **NSW**

RSA has spent almost 10 months pursuing the out-going Keneally and incoming O'Farrell governments about inadequate funding levels determined by the NSW Department of Education and Training, now the Department of Education and Communities, for lower-level agricultural traineeships for the 2011-12 financial year, particularly at the Certificate II level.

Curiously, in the latter part of 2010, the department determined that from 1 July 2011 base funding levels for agricultural Certificate II traineeships would be reduced by a further 31.4 per cent or \$550 to a paltry \$1,200, or about 35 per cent of what was provided up until two years ago. At that time, a similar significant reduction took effect from the commencement of the 2009-10 financial year. The previous reduction resulted in an almost 40 per cent decline in Certificate II agricultural traineeship commencements across the state.

The new base funding amount determined for Certificate II agricultural traineeships of \$1,200 is some \$900 less than the amount determined for lower-level horticultural traineeships (\$2,100), despite having similar delivery requirements in respect of content and cost. Although the base amount can be increased through the nominal availability of Indigenous, disability, small business and rural and remote loadings, the amounts to be provided is patently insufficient to secure quality training outcomes.

It remains our view that if the base funding rates are left at these ridiculously low levels there will be a further reduction in the number of RTOs servicing the needs of rural industries, and a significant decline in the quality and accessibility of rural training across NSW. In addition, it potentially may reverse recent gains in improving occupational health and safety standards across rural industries in NSW.

We understand that over the last two years or so many RTOs have struggled to fully satisfy their Australian Quality Training Framework responsibilities based on the previous base funding of \$1,750, which was barely adequate. It must be noted that this amount is a far cry from the funding level of \$8.00 an hour for rural traineeships (up to 400 nominal hours) that had been available for many years previously.

Base funding levels for higher-level agricultural traineeships at Certificate III and IV were reduced also by about 10-20 per cent to \$3,200 and \$3,700 respectively. In addition from 1 July 2011, the Department will no longer fund any existing worker traineeships; this too is very disappointing from our perspective.

### ***Tasmania***

In our view the Tasmanian Government is not providing adequate funding to vocational education and training either. This is complicated by splitting TAFE into The Skills Institute and the Tasmanian Polytechnic two years ago. Resources that could be utilised in better equipment and facilities are being used up by the duplication of the administration needed to run two organisations instead of one and the challenging financial situation of the Tasmanian Government since the amount of federal funding to the state from reduced GST distributions. Both organisations have been under pressure to price programs at full cost recovery, pricing them out of reach for courses that do not attract user choice funding.

### ***Northern Territory***

We have been advised by the Northern Territory Department of Education and Training that approximately \$200,000 was spent on agricultural training in the territory in the 2010-11 financial year. Given the size of the rural industry's contribution to the NT's economy this level of funding support is patently inadequate.

Undoubtedly the most significant impediment to greater rural industry participation in education and training, and a continuing major concern of industry, is an ongoing reluctance of governments at all levels to acknowledge and commit the required additional resources to adequately service thin rural training markets across wide geographical areas. Many agencies/service providers looking to provide services in rural and remote locations often receive payments based on the costs of providing similar services in major regional centres or metropolitan areas.

Increasingly there is a tendency for many service providers to meet the needs of local (town/city based) industries to satisfy contractual requirements, often at the expense of rural and remote client groups. This is clearly evident in the approaches adopted by some Job Services Australia providers, Australian Apprenticeships Centres and RTOs.

A whole-of-government approach in conjunction with peak industry associations may provide scope for better coordination of Commonwealth and state efforts for meeting industry's current and future skill needs. A continuing difficulty for primary producers is the lack of coordination and cooperation between levels of government and between agencies.

### ***Decline in agricultural and educational facilities***

Over the last eight to 10 years across Australia funding pressures and falling full-time student demand have clearly impacted on the number of institutions involved in full-time rural training delivery and the nature and type of rural training provided at some levels. This is coupled with very difficult seasonal conditions, persistent and unrelentingly droughts, flooding and related catastrophe natural disasters

The availability of improved technology, better internet access and new and expanded on-line training options would have also compounded existing pressures on remaining institutions looking to provide full-time residential agricultural VET programs.

The closure in December 2003 of the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture at Yanco by the NSW Department of Primary Industries (formerly NSW Agriculture), primarily because of low full-time student numbers, is one of the most significant losses in NSW. At that time although the college had less than 40 full-time students, it was meeting the needs of over 10 per cent of the state's agricultural trainees (60 -70).

Curtin University in Western Australia has closed its residential campus at the Muresk Institute of agriculture farm, agriculture and agribusiness. Degree programs will now be delivered from its city-based campus. This is a serious loss to higher-level training capacity and seems to reflect similar losses in other states. We understand that the state government has announced that Muresk will become a self-financed

'centre of excellence' offering vocational training across several industries. A business plan is yet to be developed. However, the government has committed 10 million dollars from the Royalties for Regions Fund for capital infrastructure.

Over the last six to seven years in Queensland the number and structure of agricultural colleges involved in full-time residential agricultural programs has changed substantially. Five stand-alone facilities that were combined under the umbrella of the Australian Agricultural Colleges Corporation operating in Mareeba, Burdekin, Dalby, Longreach and Emerald have been reduced to two operating facilities at Longreach and Emerald.

Similarly, in both Victoria and South Australia there has been definite shift away from residential full-time agriculture VET course delivery that once occurred at Roseworthy in South Australia, and Dookie and Glenormiston in Victoria. Longerenong College is now one of the only remaining facilities in Victoria providing residential full-time agriculture VET courses.

The decline in facilities in Tasmania would stem primarily from a lack of demand in the first instance manifesting itself in an inability to keep courses open and facilities viable. This is driven by three factors:

- Industry is reluctant to invest in training at the farm level and often has difficulty attracting good labour;
- Family farms put very little investment in training (unless it's free);
- Image of the industry impacts on people's decision to enter the industry. The industry still has an image of being staid and traditional and generalist, rather than innovative and full of opportunities, especially in broader agribusiness and service industries supporting agricultural production.

In Tasmania there is no separation of the farm operations and training in evaluating the economics of running the facility. For instance, the economic model of the Polytechnic farm at Burnie (Tasmania) is such that the farm must break even financially over a 5-year period, yet the farm operations become inherently inefficient when proper training is provided on farm to students. The viability of training farms is compromised because they can never make enough money. They cannot operate as commercial farms and will not be properly resourced to provide up-to-date equipment for training. This often leads to criticism of training by industry. Training and educational facilities need to be focussed on educational outcomes and not the ability of their farms to generate income.

Agricultural programs are often seen as being disposable compared with others when cut-backs need to be made. Agricultural programs in secondary schools are often seen as too complex, requiring space to operate, resource intensive and time consuming for staff, especially over summer holidays when the school farm still has to be maintained.

Agricultural colleges traditionally have been focussed on extensive agriculture whereas increasingly demand appears to have shifted to intensive agriculture/production horticulture and therefore many traditional models have become unsustainable. Traditional agricultural and related educational facilities need to become market-driven and change their delivery models to fit the market.

Attracting younger teachers and trainers across many rural education sectors is one significant challenge. Not only do they have to contend with an ageing workforce but with more interesting and rewarding positions in industry. A common complaint from VET teaching staff is about the level of paperwork and compliance matters that must be undertaken, often to the detriment of the actual training and assessing processes. Options to routinely provide 'return to industry' placements for trainers, assessor and teachers should be pursued with vigour across all rural educational sectors.

### ***The widening gap between skill and demand***

In March 2001, the report 'Skills needs for the rural industry' developed with funding under the Australian Government's National Industry Skills Initiative was presented to then Minister of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, the Hon. Dr David Kemp MP. The report contained a detailed analysis of rural industry skill and labour shortages. It was produced under the guidance of a Rural Industry Working Group, chaired by Wayne Cornish, a former Vice President of the National Farmers' Federation.

While the report focused on four discrete commodity sectors - wool production, viticulture, production horticulture, and cotton - the findings were generally considered to apply across most agricultural sectors. In respect of current and future skills needs, at that time, the report concluded:

Both skill gaps and skill shortages were identified in rural industries. Skill gaps imply a need for up-skilling within the existing enterprises and workforce, while skill shortages occur when skilled job vacancies are hard to fill at reasonable wages and conditions. Specific skill gaps and skill shortages were identified in the four rural industry sectors under analysis, and a number of factors were identified that influence the supply and demand of skills in rural industries. These include differential changes in output and productivity across industry sectors, variations in employment prospects and farm incomes, an ongoing need for replacement and improvement in the skill base because of the age and gender profile of the workforce, poor technology uptake and a range of education and training needs. Training needs related to on-farm training in language, literacy and numeracy and new farming methods and technologies, training in finance and management, new management skills and office practices and more flexibility in Training Packages. There is a need to implement the available flexibilities in arrangements for New Apprenticeships in the rural industry. There is also a need for cross-sectoral or cross-occupational training and cross-industry vocational training. (Extract from Executive Summary)

Regrettably, 10 years on it could legitimately be asked, 'Has any anything really changed?'

### ***Impact of the drought***

The almost Australia-wide drought that persisted in many regions for seven to eight years has tended to create smaller labour pools in many rural, regional and remote

areas. Rural workers and others were forced into alternate employment, where available, or to relocate to other areas chasing employment opportunities.

Unfortunately, many will not return to those regional areas or employment within rural industries. Before the drought severe labour shortages existed for full-time employees at all skill levels in most areas and for seasonal workers, in particular for:

- Production horticulture – seasonal labour skills, plantation skills, management
- Viticulture – middle management, supervisors, managers
- Wool – shearers, shedhands
- Tractor operators – seeding, harvesting
- The deregulated dairy sector, and
- Northern Australia beef cattle production

Rural employment projections indicate little growth in overall employment numbers for the industry. But factors such as an aging workforce, population shifts away from rural areas, high levels of competition for labour from other industries – particularly mining - and fewer people choosing rural careers will make maintaining current employment levels a particularly difficult task. With expected growth in industry requirements for more skilled workers it is widely expected that all sectors of industry will face significant and continuing difficulties in resolving existing and future skill and labour shortages.

Such was the severity of the last drought that many industry people are expecting many sectors to take three to five years to recover. This time frame indicates that future training efforts will need to focus on new entrants at entry level and beyond, and further up-skilling of current staff to meet projected requirements. Improved approaches to land management, water and fodder conservation and adaptation to climate change will undoubtedly be high priorities. Continuing difficulties in attracting new entrants to careers in rural industries will necessitate a significant shift of focus and resources to fast track the up-skilling of the existing rural workforce.

With the exodus of families moving from rural and regional areas we need to demonstrate and promote careers and pathways into agriculture more to help stem the flow and to encourage others into the sector. For this to happen we need to actively target rural and regional students and students based in urban/metro areas who often know very little - if anything - about agricultural career and employment opportunities.

### ***Changing perceptions of a rural career***

Available career and employment opportunities in agricultural industries are not particularly well promoted or publicised. Consequently they are often not even considered viable pathways. Many parents still think of farming as it may have been 25 years ago, with limited qualifications and opportunities. They are unaware of how it is today and what is now available, so it is immediately dismissed as a viable

option. Every effort should be made to highlight advances in agriculture, the application of new technology, improved production methods, innovation and science that underpins agriculture in Australia today.

We are competing against all sectors in various industries, in particular mining, for labour and skills. We compete with other sectors that are actively promoting the positives and opportunities in their respective industries using accumulated funds. Agriculture may need government funding support for this to occur. If we can't promote these opportunities into schools and the wider community, fundamentally things may only get worse.

This high level of competition for labour and skills between different industries is replicated. Our view mirrors the high levels of competition to attract students that routinely exist between education providers in all sectors – schools, vocational education and training and tertiary. Regrettably, in some rural education spheres there appears to be a preoccupation and unhealthy attachment with events and participation levels of the past.

The growth and evolution of the Australian economy over the last 25 years would preclude any return to the way things once were, coupled with a substantially altered population demographic, a myriad of new and emerging industries and changed policy settings and funding arrangements.

### ***Vocational enrolments***

While there may have been twice as many agronomy students in the mid-eighties as there are today, at that time rural industry engagement and participation in vocational education and training was almost non-existent. An update on rural training activity included in the Rural Task Force Report for 2001- 2003, finalised by RSA, demonstrated the significant growth in agricultural and horticultural VET course enrolments achieved in 2002 compared to 1999.

Course enrolments in agriculture qualifications increased from 7,084 in 1999 to 28,515 in 2002, and course enrolments in horticulture qualifications increased from 7,767 in 1999 to 32,765 in 2002, as indicated in the table below.

Number of VET course enrolments by agriculture and horticulture training package and sectors examined in original NCVET research, 1999 and 2002

VET course enrolments, 1999 *	Diplo mas	AQF Cert IV	AQF Cert III	AQF Cert II	AQF Cert I	Total
Agriculture training package	306	2565	740	3087	386	7084
Sheep & wool	82	34	13	15	0	144
Wool harvesting	0	393	30	200	0	623
Cotton	0	0	6	0	0	6
Horticulture Training Package	368	775	2633	2598	1393	7767
Production horticulture	52	2	140	390	0	584
Total	674	3340	3373	5685	1779	14851
VET course enrolments, 2002 *						
Agriculture training package	2290	7811	7798	9512	1104	28515
Sheep & wool	32	286	31	66	0	415

Wool harvesting	0	2547	295	1464	0	4306
Cotton	0	0	105	0	0	105
Horticulture training package	1968	2817	13176	12351	2453	32765
Production horticulture	210	191	825	1090	63	2379
<b>Total</b>	<b>4258</b>	<b>10628</b>	<b>20974</b>	<b>21863</b>	<b>3557</b>	<b>61280</b>

Source: NCVET 2002, course enrolments in publication.

\* VET Activity in this table excludes school data submitted by states and territories

Though dated, this information has been included hopefully to correct the widespread and inaccurate perception that the sky is falling in, with respect to participation levels in rural education and skills development activities at various qualification levels. Other organisations like the National Centre for Vocational Education Research or Agrifood Skills Australia would be better placed to provide definite and accurate data on current student enrolments across agricultural qualification levels.

### ***RSA seeks to bridge the gap***

In an effort to assist with bridging the widening gap between agricultural skills supply and demand RSA during the 2010-11 financial year undertook and successfully completed a special project with funding support from the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations to develop a Rural Australian Apprentice Recruitment Resource. The project sought to provide:

- A readily available, up-to-date and accurate human resource management tool for primary producers and other employers of rural and related Australian Apprentices for use across Australia.
- Streamlined, accurate and relevant award and related information to assist employers to engage rural Australian apprentices under appropriate industrial instruments.
- Better human resource management practices within agricultural industries, and guidance to employers on processes linked to the selection of apprentices, their induction, training and mentoring with a view to improving retention and completion rates.
- Readily available fact sheets, forms, templates to assist employers with all facets of the recruitment and apprentice selection and induction processes.

Through the conduct of this special project Rural Skills Australia, working on behalf of Nationwide Farmers Australia Limited, was seeking to:

- Facilitate Australia-wide access to a user-friendly, downloadable employer resource to guide and assist employers to successfully attract, recruit, induct, mentor and train their rural and related Australian Apprentices.
- Improve apprenticeship recruitment practices adopted and utilised by rural employers with a view to assisting them attract, induct, train and mentor their apprentices until they successfully complete their apprenticeships.

- Assist employers to address their skills needs by utilising available apprenticeship pathways and positively contribute to improving retention and completion rates.

### ***Overview of developed rural Australian Apprentice recruitment resource***

**Planning and decision-making** - Employing Australian Apprenticeships, What employment options are available? Beginning the recruitment process, Awards and employment contracts, Government incentives

**A guide to recruiting rural and related Australian Apprentices** - Defining the vacancy, Attracting appropriate applicants, Quickly and effectively getting to know your applicants, Selecting the right person, Working within legislative requirements, Employer's action list

**Farm induction** - Preparing for your apprentices first day, Doing the paperwork, Contracts of training and employment contracts, Procedures and expectations, Practical occupational, health and safety, Regulatory requirements and procedures, Providing an overview, Introducing job specific tasks, Completing induction, induction checklist

**Apprentice retention** - Why do apprentices leave? Good workplace practices, Performance appraisal and feedback, Building incentives and recognition, Career paths, Celebrating achievements

**Useful forms** - A variety of useful forms, templates etc were identified, reviewed, and amended 'as required' to meet Fair Work Australia requirements.

Interested committee members can access this resource via the following link: - <http://www.agrifoodcareers.com.au/farmrecruit/>

### ***The incorporation of animal welfare principles in agriculture education***

We believe that rural industries in most jurisdictions would provide in principle support to the concept of incorporating animal welfare principles in agriculture education, including the introduction of some units around the Animal Welfare Code of Practice. However, in our view most rural industries would be unlikely to support the introduction of Greens style animal welfare policies or the discussion of ethics around animal welfare or animal rights.

As the Bureau of Rural Sciences notes in its 2006 'Australian Animal Welfare Strategy Stakeholder Analysis' Phases 1- 4 (Page 5): "Achieving sound animal welfare practices is a key challenge for Australian governments, because different social sectors, organisations, the stakeholders affiliated with these sectors or organisations, and the wider community, have differing values, attitudes and belief systems. So 'animal welfare' is subject to varying interpretations, and what constitutes good animal welfare practices may be both controversial and contested. These varying values, interpretations and priorities may affect support for the AAWS and its implementation."

The incorporation of animal welfare principles should probably be incorporated into all education as there are far more animal welfare breaches in urban and peri-urban areas than there are in rural areas. Rural animal welfare cases often get greater

press because many are initiated by fringe groups such as PETA, Animal Liberation or driven individuals of similar ideologies.

It is important to note that not all of agriculture involves animals so the further incorporation of animal welfare principle in agriculture education may need to be selective. References: Australian Animal Welfare Strategy Stakeholder Analysis Phases 1- 4, 2006, Bureau of Rural Sciences

[http://adl.brs.gov.au/brsShop/data/aawsanalysis\\_phases\\_final.pdf](http://adl.brs.gov.au/brsShop/data/aawsanalysis_phases_final.pdf)

### ***Other related matters***

RSA notes that an Industries Development Committee Workforce Skills and Training Working Group established in 2008 under the Primary Industries Ministerial Council produced a 'Final Report on Workforce, training and skills issues in agriculture' in October 2009. This report's executive summary included the following key findings and seven recommendations: -

#### **1. Greater industry ownership and responsibilities:**

Finding: That the industry needs to play a crucial role in providing leadership to address agriculture workforce, training and skills issues, including working closely with educators and relevant government agencies to develop and drive the implementation of integrated and long-term solutions to agriculture labour and skills needs.

#### **Recommendation 1**

That Ministerial Council request peak industry bodies to work with their member organisations and Agrifood Skills Australia to develop strategies for industry to lead the development of solutions to workforce issues across agriculture sectors; and where appropriate to work with primary industry departments and review activities.

#### **2. Promoting agriculture and career opportunities:**

Finding: That consistent promotion of the agriculture industry as a successful, sustainable and responsible industry, with a diversity of challenging and rewarding careers is needed to attract more skilled labour in the industry.

#### **Recommendation 2**

That Ministerial Council request that Primary Industries Education Foundation (PIEF) to work with Rural Skills Australia and the Primary Industries Centre for Science Education to improve access for school children, young people and the broader community to consistent information and resources on careers, education and training in agriculture and related fields.

#### **3. Human resource management skills:**

Finding: That the agriculture industry needs to adopt a particular focus on workforce development and planning, including human resource management, as part of a strategy to become 'employers of choice' in the labour market.

#### **Recommendation 3**

That Ministerial Council request peak industry bodies to work more closely with Agrifood Skills Australia and industry member associations to improve access to and awareness of workforce development tools and increase participation in workforce planning and human resource management training.

#### **4. Improving data on the supply and demand of labour and skills in agriculture:**

Findings: That the on-going efforts to improve labour and skills data for the agriculture industry need to be monitored, with a view to identifying gaps in labour and skills data and options for addressing the gaps in 2010.

##### **Recommendation 4**

That Ministerial Council request PIEF to monitor efforts in labour and skills data improvement with a view to identifying gaps in labour and skills data and options for addressing the gaps in 2010

Findings: That the stocktake of workforce, skills and training initiatives could be an effective tool to reduce duplication and concentrate efforts across jurisdictions, training, education and career services, and industry sectors, if it was maintained and made more widely available.

##### **Recommendation 5**

That Ministerial Council request Agrifood Skills Australia to publish the stocktake of workforce, skills and training initiatives on their website, to monitor the use of the stocktake by recording the number of downloads and to report at least annually to the IDC Working Group on the apparent use of the stocktake. To maintain the list of initiatives, the Working Group also recommendation that Ministerial Council request jurisdictions to update the stocktake on a six monthly basis.

##### **Recommendation 6**

That Agrifood Skills Australia, in consultation with peak industry bodies and PIEF, to report back to the Primary Industries Ministerial Council in late 2010 on the industry's progress in implementing these recommendations.

##### **Recommendation 7**

That Ministerial Council forward a copy of the Industries Development Committee Workforce, Skills and Training Group's final report to the Ministerial Council of Tertiary Education and Employment for their information and appropriate response.

These extracts from the Final Report have been included to:

- Demonstrate in part the inappropriateness of a working group comprised solely of bureaucrats from federal and state agriculture departments seeking to determine industry's requirements and responsibilities in matters outside their respective portfolio areas.
- Highlight a typical outcome of Inquiries into rural industry skills, labour and education requirements – invariably a series of findings, (more often than not very similar to earlier ones and broadly accurate); with recommendations made that are rarely followed through on.

- The tendency of well-meaning groups to arbitrarily assign duties, functions and responsibilities, often with resource implications, to entities and industries bodies and associations, that may or may not be relevant or appropriate to the fields in which they operate.

***Concluding comment***

On-going government funding assistance may be required to allow a rural industry working party established under a coordinated whole of government response to industry skill and labour shortages, to continue to influence policy and programme development in this area.

As a general rule the majority of peak rural industry bodies, commodity councils, sector organisations and unions lack the necessary financial resources to engage personnel to focus specifically on the development and implementation of appropriate strategies to resolve or ameliorate skills and labour shortage and related issues.

However, many have demonstrated a willingness to actively participate in appropriate government initiated and funded activities, looking to address these issues. The active involvement of senior industry representatives on the Rural Industry Working Group established under the last Government's National Industry Skills Initiative, clearly demonstrates their interest and commitment to pursuing these important matters.