

Tocal College Advisory Council

Submission into Senate Inquiry Higher Education and Skills Training to Support Future Demand in Agriculture and Agribusiness in Australia

The Tocal College Advisory Council (Council) is made up of farmers and personnel involved in agricultural businesses and organisations including ex-students of Tocal College. The Council provides advice and support to the College on its overall operation and delivery of programs.

Tocal College courses have remained fully subscribed during recent years when many other agricultural courses have declined and in some cases disappeared. The Council provides advice and support for the College to remain in close contact with rural industry and the Council believes this is one of the keys to the success of Tocal College. The Terms of Reference raise many pertinent issues which lie at the heart of the future of agricultural education from institutions like Tocal College. The Council is, therefore, pleased to have the opportunity to be able to put forward a submission to the enquiry.

The Adequacy of Funding and Priority Given by Governments at the Federal, State and Territory Level to Agriculture and Agribusiness Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training

A number of very important issues affecting the future of agricultural education lie in the funding options available for the Australian Government. These include:

- The move to full demand based funding for Vocational Education and Training presents many problems for a stable and effective agricultural training system. It has been shown in other states that demand based funding favours low cost and profitable courses for delivery and these will be cherry picked by low cost providers. High cost disciplines such as practical agricultural education and training will miss out on funding.
- The current focus primarily on state based funding makes it difficult for agricultural training markets to be properly serviced. The markets are thin and dispersed and as a result no one state can offer a critical mass of individuals to undertake training. An RTO finds it extremely difficult to run the one course funded across a range of state authorities. Therefore, thin markets are difficult to address and are often missing out. This particularly applies to agriculture which has not only thin markets by nature, but also highly dispersed.
- The National Workforce Development Program in its most recent form presents many barriers for small businesses and agricultural training. The upfront costs to business for training has made it very difficult for agricultural enterprises to avail themselves of the program. The earlier version of the Enterprise Based Productivity Places Program was most successful and ought to be reintroduced for agricultural training.
- Tocal College has benefited greatly from the Education Investment Fund which has enabled many facilities to be upgraded and brought to a level suitable for the future. This includes residential facilities on both of its Campuses, particularly on the CB Alexander Campus at Paterson. The Education Investment Fund has been a very successful venture.
- In 2004 the College's access to Commonwealth recurrent funding was denied by the then NSW Government. As a result there has not been recurrent capital flowing to this public RTO within NSW. Council has made various representations for this to be reversed and would like this to be considered once again.

The Reasons and Impact of the Decline in Agricultural and Related Educational Facilities

The decline in the availability of education and related courses is of great concern to the Council. It is pleased that this has not occurred at Tocal College. A few issues are important:

- The success of Tocal College demonstrates the value of specialist and well regarded institution to be able to survive the vagaries of agricultural industries. The College as stated earlier has been able to maintain its enrolments despite difficult seasonal conditions in NSW for much of the most recent decade. Council has, however, observed there has been a decline in the number of specialist agricultural institutions. Many of these have now been morphed into comprehensive universities or other institutions where the profile of agriculture has been diminished. This causes a reduction in industry contact and industry ownership of the courses and a decline in support.
- Agricultural education has received very little support from rural industry and at times this support has been unfocussed. The need for strong ongoing partnerships between industry and the vocational sector is particularly important. Tocal, through a range of scholarships has been able to harness this industry support on an ongoing basis. There is a need to encourage industry to provide generic support to agricultural education and training.

Solutions to Address the Widening Gap Between Skilled Agricultural Labour Supply and the Demand

There are a number of ways the above problems can be addressed. These include:

- Stable funding support for specialist institutions who provide ongoing training for agriculture and related industries despite droughts and other challenges which face rural industry. In other words, the funding model has to be robust and resilient enough to survive the ups and downs of rural industry.
- The establishment of the Primary Industries Education Foundation as an important step to promote and encourage learning about agriculture in schools from Kindergarten to Year 12. The Primary Industries Education Foundation deserves strong support from government.
- A National approach to funding agriculture and related training where there are thin and dispersed markets. National funding, such as the Enterprise Based Productivity Places Program, should be provided on an ongoing basis.
- A need for institutions to be encouraged to be engaged with their industries both at a local, state and national level.

The Economic Impact of Labour Shortages on Australia's Export Oriented Industries

It is clear that unless there is a stable and well trained workforce Australia's export oriented industries will suffer. There needs to be well trained people to provide high quality products that are competitive on the world market. This can not be just done with short term labour such as back packers and other labour hire arrangements. There needs to be a level of professional management and professionally trained people entering the industry all the time. This can only be undertaken through well funded specialist institutions.

The Incorporation of Animal Welfare Principles in Agricultural Education

Animal welfare education, in the past, because it is a generic topic, has received little support from government or industry. This needs to change into the future. Unless there is specialised support for animal welfare education it will not receive the attention it deserves.

Concluding Comments

Tocal Advisory Council believes that a one size fits all approach to funding Vocational Education is not effective. The requirements and demands of an effective education system to meet the future needs of agriculture and related industries are complex and necessitate a national approach which focuses on the real industry needs.