

RURAL FUTURES PROJECT

FINAL REPORT

JUNE 2001

OVERVIEW

The primary objective of the Rural Futures Project was to enhance the school to work transition for senior secondary students contemplating a career in the rural industry and related industries by improving the awareness of and the provision of quality Structured Workplacements (W/P) and school based New Apprenticeships (SB NAs). The Project targeted rural communities that supported a growing level of local agricultural and/or horticulture production including a number of communities with a high indigenous populations and 'at risk of leaving school' year 9 and 10 indigenous students.

This objective was to be achieved by increasing the number of participating employers utilising existing networks of Rural Skills Australia, National Farmers' Federation, Rural Training Council of Australia and the ECEF. The Project has fulfilled this primary objective amply as demonstrated by the results detailed below.

The project employed 10 part-time Project Officers (of which two were indigenous) with industry credibility across 6 mainstream and 4 indigenous projects to promote employer participation and leadership in school based rural industry programs. Most Project Officers were involved from 1 July 2000 to 30 April 2001 with the exception of the 2 Victorian Project Officers that began their campaigns on 1 November 2000. Project Officers worked a combined total of 1180 days on the Rural Futures Project.

RESULTS

The overall result of **271** Workplacements (well in excess of the targeted **175**) and **12** school-based New Apprenticeships was a remarkable achievement for the Rural Futures Project and testament to both the Project Officers enthusiasm and innovation and the Projects' appeal in enabling rural communities to foster their youth into worthwhile careers, while at the same time working towards addressing rural skill shortage needs in the future.

Other noteworthy and groundbreaking results directly attributable to the Rural Futures Project include:

- Sign up of the first ever Western Australian School Based New Apprenticeship in the Production Horticulture sector;
- Sign up of the first ever Veterinary Nursing School Based New Apprenticeship in north west Queensland; and
- Active involvement of 78 indigenous students in Workplacements and 2 students with disabilities.

Whilst the School Based New Apprenticeship figures did not reach target, it is apparent that the influences of difficult seasonal and commodity price fluctuations are having an adverse impact on farmer preparedness to commit to the duration of SB NAs. This is despite the financial incentives available.

There is also reluctance in some education systems to promote the School Based New Apprenticeships to their full potential. This can be the result of industrial relations issues in State/Territory awards not containing the correct provisions as much as the education system not adequately catering for SB NAs.

The Rural Futures Project has been an outstanding success in terms of creating new and increasing existing awareness in rural communities of school to work programs and rural careers to both senior secondary school students and to the rural industries surrounding/forming part of these communities. While the Project was successful in raising awareness, the uptake may have been adversely affected by poor seasonal conditions in some rural areas (floods in NSW and QLD; drought in WA).

This condensed report is an amalgam of the final reports delivered by the 10 regional Project Officers. Their individual reports are attached and detail their activities undertaken, results and issues and impediments confronted in each specific location. These reports should be read in conjunction with this overarching report.

Project region and result summary:

Queensland – Charleville region

Project Officer: Mrs Sue Stirton

- Region consists of a mixture of agriculture and horticulture activity. Schools in the area have good communication and support network arrangements, and also have significant numbers of indigenous students. Historically, this is a region that has been neglected in the VET in schools funding because of its isolation, but the Rural Futures project has provided a sustainable impetus for the rural industry.
- Very positive response from schools, students and industry to the Rural Futures Project resulting in **24 Workplacements (9 of which were indigenous students) and 2 SB NAs**. Project Officer notes that 2 Rural Merchandising workplacements may be converted to SB NAs in 2002 if the students prove suitable and remain interested.
- Additional highlight of the Project included the sign up of the first ever Veterinary Nursing School Based New Apprenticeship in north west Queensland.
- Flow on from the Rural Futures Project includes funding of the Charleville Wool Shed Project to provide students in Sth West QLD with the opportunity to gain training and accredited workplace skills in the wool industry whilst still continuing on at school.
- Major impediments reported included 'distance' issues and great disparity between the number of employers offering WPs and the limited number of students available.

New South Wales – Lismore-Project Officer: M/s Leanne O'Grady

- This area continues to record increasing levels of production horticulture, dairy, and sugar cane plus other niche market activity (eg herbs, tea tree oil, tropical fruits and nuts). There are a large number of high schools in the region. This region has recorded consistently high levels of youth unemployment.
- The response to the Project by students, employers, educators and the general community has been very positive resulting in **41 Workplacements and 1 SB NA**. Unfortunately the Primary Industry course is not offered by all schools in the region. To allow more students access to schools that offer the course, considerable timetable flexibility between neighbouring schools is required. Possible solutions to this impediment are currently being considered by the schools in question.

Victoria – MilduraProject Officer: Mr Brian Evans

- The principal agricultural activities in the region include grapes (dried, table & wine), broad-acre grain production, large-scale vegetable production, citrus production, and almond production.
- Overall industry response to the Project was positive with **19 Workplacements (2 indigenous) and 1 SB NA** recorded over the Project timeframe. Unfortunately the citrus and dried fruit sectors of the industry are experiencing a significant downturn, due to cheaper imports of citrus and dried fruits flooding the market. These sectors were less receptive to participation.
- Perceptions from schools and students are that careers in the rural industry are limited unless individual students have the opportunity to own their own properties. There is however a growing acceptance that larger investment properties may provide viable careers without the need to own land.
- It is imperative that employer associations such as the Australian Dried Fruit Association (ADFA) recognise that the long term-viability of their industry rests with them continuing to promote and encourage young people into their industry and not rely on Government or the education system to sell agriculture and horticulture careers to the community.

Tasmania – North East regionProject Officer: Ms Beris Hansberry

- Predominantly dairying, production horticulture and some herb and organic farming interest.
- The Project achieved the outcomes of raising industry and student awareness of school to work programs and increasing senior school students knowledge of available rural career options and opportunities. 2 Workplacements were arranged with an additional 20 rural employers expressing interest in taking on students if they could have been located. It should also be noted that the original target number of 33 students may have been overly ambitious as the combined total of Year 11&12 students across the 4 targeted schools numbered less than 33 in total.
- VET in agriculture and horticulture is still in development stage in the north east of Tasmania. The provision and distribution of Rural Futures information and promotional material and the creation of relevant networks has paved the way for the ongoing implementation and commitment to future school to work programs.

- The Project Officer advises that additional opportunities for indigenous students to participate in school to work programs on Flinders Island will manifest themselves once development programs currently underway are put in place.

South Australia – Yorke Peninsula

Project Officer: Mr Ron Pike

- Prominent grain growing area, with other mixed farming activities.
- Response from industry was generally positive with **24 Workplacements and 4 SB NAs (including 1 student with disabilities)** committed. The Project was the first introduction to the concepts of both structured Workplacements and SB NAs for rural industry in the Yorke Peninsula region. Many farmers expressed some concerns about their 'duty of care' in having a young and comparatively inexperienced person on their property.
- Students (particularly those from a rural background) are actively sought and encouraged by the local TAFE institute to enrol in their block release New Apprenticeship program. This resulted in very few students being available to participate as SB NAs in this Project.

Western Australia – Albany

Project Officer: Ms Nicky Byrne

- Albany is the commercial centre for the great southern agricultural region with industries including sheep/wool production, crops, aquaculture, viticulture, fruit and vegetable production.
- Highlight of the project was the commencement of the first two SB NAs in Agriculture and Production Horticulture in Western Australia.
- Despite unfavourable seasonal conditions response to the project by industry and schools was positive, resulting in **25 Workplacements (2 indigenous students and 1 student with an intellectual disability) and 3 SB NAs** for the Project period.
- The economic difficulties faced by farmers and the rural sector in combination with the industry's portrayal as mundane, poorly paid and low status work is an active and effective discouragement to students from a pursuit of a career in the rural sector.
- There also seems to be a conflict between schools hoping to place students who are not suited to mainstream academic learning style, the duty of care required in the placement of a student in a potentially dangerous workplace and the promotion to employers to take on an employee who is a school student. In this region some of the students who were available for Workplacement in the agriculture and horticulture sectors were those least attractive to an employer.

Northern Territory – The Project Officer for the Northern Territory delivered both the mainstream and indigenous projects.

- The mainstream project covered the five major towns in the Territory – Darwin and its hinterland, Katherine, Tennant Creek, Alice Springs and Nhulumbuy. The main agricultural activity in the Northern Territory is beef cattle, however there is an increasing amount of production horticultural activity, particularly in tropical fruits.

Indigenous Projects

Northern Territory – Alice Springs

Project Officer: Ms Lee Monaghan

- The main agricultural activity in the region is beef cattle, with some minor activity in production horticulture (vegetable growing).
- There was enthusiastic participation from employers with 2 to 3 employers for every Workplacement student. Overall results for the Project totalled **104 Workplacements (39 Indigenous students)**.
- Transportation and distance difficulties encountered for students to attend Workplacement opportunities. The NT Rural ITAB assisted where possible however this was not financially viable for the extended period of the project.
- The Project timeframe encountered the Northern Australian wet season (November to April) resulting in severe flooding and loss of telecommunications for extended periods of time. Property visits were reduced to highway access only and even the highway was closed on several occasions from November to March.

Queensland – Townsville/Charters Towers

Project Officer: Mr Robert Cole

- The Charters Towers/Townsville area has a relatively large indigenous population with a high level of young unemployed youth. Principal industries include beef cattle industry and production horticulture.
- The Project was successful in raising industry and indigenous school student awareness of school to work programs, and increasing Year 9-12 indigenous students knowledge of available rural career options and opportunities. The Project recorded **9 indigenous Workplacements**.
- Distance impediments and LL&N issues were encountered during the Project, with suggestions by the Project Officer that 'indigenous specific' information and handout material would be the most appropriate mechanism for conveying messages to indigenous communities.

NSW – Warren

Project Officer: Mr Ron Plunkett

- This area has a significant indigenous youth population and access to an agriculture and production horticulture industry as a result of the increased irrigation activity. Cotton is increasingly becoming a predominant crop in the region.
- The Project has been successful in terms of awareness outcomes and employer participation with **18 Workplacements (12 indigenous students)** undertaken during the period.
- There are very low numbers of indigenous students undertaking the HSC. It is suggested that long term success could be achieved by implementing mentor initiatives and ongoing support mechanisms starting as early as Year 9 to encourage more indigenous students into workplace programs and to progress and further their studies.
- Student and employer expectations of the Project varied from poor self esteem on one side to inexperience of the employers in the supervision of unskilled and sometimes unmotivated junior staff.

- The greatest challenge to the project was the prevailing culture of assimilation: this manifested itself in low esteem of both students and their parents in their perceived vision of their future.

Victoria – Warrnambool region

Project Officer: Ms Tanya Jones

- The Project has prompted much interest and increased awareness of school to work programs from both employer groups and students in the region. There were **5 Workplacements and 1 SB NA (6 indigenous students)** directly attributable to the Project. Flow ons from the Project include opportunity for 'at risk of leaving school' students to experience work in non-traditional industry and also inducement to stay on at school. 2 of the workplacement students have been offered SB NAs by their current workplacement provider when they turn 15 years of age.
- Project Officer identified a need for production of materials which highlight the Commonwealth financial incentives available for employment of indigenous people.

AWARENESS

OUTPUT	MEASURE	Outcomes	Total Target
Employer visits	Number of employer visits	1802	1650
School and ASTF program visits	Number of school and ASTF program visits	440	220
Representations and presentations to rural industry associations	Number and type conducted and number of attendees • Seminars	76 with 742 attending	44
Other promotional activity	Number and type of other promotional activities (eg agriculture field day stall, career days)	Report	Report

PARTICIPATION

OUTPUT	MEASURE	Outcomes	Total Target
Employer engagement	Number of new participants, including: • Workplacements • School based NA	283 271 12	225 175 50
Employer involvement	Report on issues and impediments, eg inflexible time tables, seasonal issues	Report	Report

QUALITY

OUTPUT	MEASURE	Outcomes	Total Target
Improvements of a systemic nature	Identify and highlight issues with appropriate organisations and forums in an attempt to bring to resolution	Report	Report
Priority areas	Number of participating indigenous Y9-10 students	67	60

COMMENTS

The successful outcome of the project in achieving well in excess of the majority of its targets indicates that the awareness raising activities of the Project Officers were very effective.

Although there was a shortfall on the School-Based New Apprenticeships target, it should be noted that it was an ambitious target and it is anticipated that SBNA participation levels will increase over the next few years as a result of these projects.

Awareness

Awareness outputs significantly exceeded their original target numbers:

- Employer visits - 109% of target (1802 achieved against 1650 target)
- School visits - 200% of target (440 achieved against 220 target)
- Industry presentations/representations - 173% of target (76 achieved against 44 target)

During the course of the Project, a number of the Project Officers forged linkages with key stakeholders and have reported a commitment to continue to maintain contact with many schools, primary producers and industry associations that will further enhance and continue the work started with the Rural Futures Project.

Promotion*Highlights*

- Promotional brochures were produced for national distribution – 1 specifically targeting industry, the 2nd targeting school students. Anecdotal evidence suggests the brochures were readily accepted by their target audiences with favourable feedback and enquiry received post their distribution.
- Press articles published in regional newspapers (sample attached) with Project Officers reporting uptake in enquiry post publishing.
- Radio interviews and broadcasts (predominantly regional ABC and Community News Radio) were undertaken.

- Project Officers attended various community venues and gatherings and manned Rural Futures stands at local agricultural shows, career information days and field days to distribute information on the Rural Futures Project.
- Meetings were held with peak industry bodies, local politicians, affiliated industry leaders, local Councils, Chamber of Commerce and Business, Enterprise Centres and Rural Youth Groups to promote awareness of the project. Indigenous communities were engaged primarily through the 'elders'.
- Innovative promotion methods adopted by Project Officers included a vocational study tour undertaken by the Warren Project to Moree to study the successful Indigenous Employment Program in the cotton industry in that district. Seven of the 'most at risk' students participated. The students were billeted with Moree Indigenous residents to help widen their cultural experience.

Launches

Official Project Launches were held where feasible including Charleville QLD, Nth Western Tasmania, Yorke Peninsula SA, Albany WA, Warren and Lismore NSW. Each launch was well attended by local Commonwealth MPs (some are Ministers- Bruce Scott, Larry Anthony), rural industry representatives, school students, teachers and Education Department Staff and where appropriate, members of indigenous communities.

Participation

School Participation

Schools were generally supportive of the Project, but please refer to individual Project Officer reports which outline specific State/Territory school issues.

Employer involvement

Overall employer acceptance of structured workplace learning and their involvement in providing workplace positions has been extremely positive throughout the project. This is illustrated by the beyond-target results of 271 Workplacements (equating to 55% above target).

In most areas, employers willing to take students for Workplacements positions outnumbered interested students to fill the positions.

It is, unfortunately, the case that for many students, the rural industry has a poor image, with the perception of hard and long working hours and poor pay rates. These student perceptions were largely overcome in the locations where the projects operated, but generally still represent a major impediment to an increased uptake of Workplacements and School Based New Apprenticeships.

Throughout the indigenous communities of Townsville and Warrnambool there appears to be an attitude that government agencies are the only avenue for suitable employment and training.

The 'tyranny of distance' continued to emerge as the major recurring challenge throughout each project region and the difficulties with transport between schools and properties (whether it be 50km or 500km) posed substantial but not unsurmountable challenges to all areas throughout the life of the project.

Other general issues impeding employer involvement included:

- Remoteness of student residences from the location of the offered rural positions and scarcity of structured transport systems;
- Inflexibility of school timetables to enable more students to undertake Workplacements and School-based New Apprenticeships including the options of allowing students week-long blocks of training. In the Charleville Project area, the Project Officer was able to negotiate a more flexible timetable approach, resulting in an increased uptake of Workplacements that would not have been possible without a change in school policy towards timetable flexibility;
- Reservations by employers on workplace issues; insurance, safety, workers compensation, public risk, and recompense for machinery and plant damage (who pays); and
- Seasonal issues impacted on the involvement of local rural industries in the project; most rural operations are clearly defined by seasonal demands and set seasonal programs.

Quality

Improvements of a systemic nature

Region specific issues are detailed in the individual reports of Project Officers. All Project Officers confronted the difficulties of stereotyping the industry by students, parents and career advisors of rural industries as being 'last choice' career and employment. There continues to be a general view from students that there are limited opportunities and prospects for many agricultural industries into the future. These perceptions were best addressed by providing suitable information to enable students to make better-informed judgments.

There is a continuing need to promote indigenous employment in rural areas, with materials specifically highlighting indigenous employment subsidies and support mechanisms that are available being critical. There appears to be a lack of knowledge by some New Apprenticeship Centres on the range of Commonwealth and State subsidies that could be accessed when employers take on an indigenous New Apprentice.

Indigenous students generally require strong support networks and many employers could benefit from education about some of the cultural nuances they may expect to encounter when working with an indigenous student or employee.

The development of materials specifically written for indigenous audiences may well address many of the issues and impediments encountered by Project Officers in promoting and encouraging indigenous employment.