

8 November 2011

Mr Tim Watling
Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

by email to: ewer.sen@aph.gov.au

Re: Inquiry into Higher education and skills training to support future demand in agriculture and agribusiness in Australia

The Primary Industries Training Advisory Council (PITAC) of the NT welcomes the opportunity to comment on the education and skills requirements for the agricultural sector in Australia and the Northern Territory. PITAC acts as liaison point and advises on training issues in the Primary Industries in the NT. Its stakeholders include:

- Industry – cattle, horticulture and agriculture , seafood and forestry
- Government – DEERW, Northern Territory Departments of Education and Training; Business and Employment; and Resources
- Training Organisations both public and private
- Industry Skills Councils – Agrifood Skills Australia and Forestworks

PITAC offers comment based on its own experience including that of individual Board members as well as its corporate experiences and those comments are framed by the terms of reference as set out by the inquiry.

Points for consideration regarding the education and skills requirements for the agricultural sector in Australia and the Northern Territory:

1. Adequacy of funding and priority given by Governments at Federal and State and Territory level.

- Although there are funding arrangements in place for our industries and there is an ability for workers and owners to take up funding for training , the main blockage for these people is remoteness and mobility between regions which have the ability to employ them.
- The general industry workforce will be trained in skill sets first to cover licensing and legal issues. The funding models don't tend to cater for this very well as the focus is on formal qualifications. This part of the workforce can have high levels of LLN issues and so do not tend to pursue formal education.

2. The reasons for impacts of the decline in agriculture and related educational facilities.

The need for institutions which deliver in this field of study has waned. The reasons for this are attributable to:

- The profitability of agricultural business has suffered over the last 30-40 years as the cost price squeeze has taken its toll. Affordability of education has become an issue for people involved in this sector.
- Partly as a flow-on effect from the above, a negative image of career opportunities in these industries is portrayed and therefore there will be less enrolments which in turn effects the sustainability of an educational entity.
- Improved production efficiencies has also had an effect on numbers of workers required by the industry. This also affects requirement for training.
- Agricultural education has tended to have two systems – one being through higher education (sciences and agribusiness) and the other through a VET-styled system. The approach of these two systems is quite different.
 - Higher education tends to be housed at existing universities which have a broad range of course delivery and therefore better economies of scale.
 - The VET approach tends to be specialised institutions which cater to the individual who will end up working in their preferred farming business and sector. The skills taught at these institutions will equip individuals with a very broad set of skills ranging from technical/scientific detail to business management. The delivery of this broad range is required due to the nature of agricultural business but expensive. When higher education was given the task of managing these institutions the problem of economic viability became the driving issue and hence the net effect was that many institutions close down or retract on delivery.

3. The impacts of any shortage on agricultural research.

Australia has a free market economy. We have unique farming systems adapted to our markets and our land management issues. Without proper and focused funding for research, we will find it more difficult to compete in the world markets. A lack of skilled contributors to this research, whether at the grass roots farm/production level or the higher educated researchers will naturally contribute to reduced capacity in the long-term.

4. The economic impact of labour shortages on Australia's export oriented agricultural industries.

The opportunities to develop and grow the current sectors as well as develop new ones will be restricted by a shortage in the labour market. As they are, the sectors will make their own adjustments but growth will be restricted. There will be continuing pressure on local and regional areas to maintain a viable foothold depending on local economic growth.

5. The incorporation of animal welfare principles in Agricultural education.

Animal welfare principles are an implicit part of agricultural livestock production education. There is a need to make it more explicit so that it is at the forefront of industry and the public thinking. It should become the primary driver of all animal production principles as this will only result in a more profitable sector.

6. Solutions to address the widening gap between skilled agricultural labour supply and demand.

- The level of training funding will always be a market issue. Funding to allow for the costs of delivery of training to designated remote regions which can show a suitable outcome for work would be useful.
- Value has been only applied to the educational institutions as a cost centre, not as a means of adding value to the agricultural sectors as well as the beneficial flow on effect to other sectors. There needs to be some reflection of this in educational funding to this sector.
- Attainment of Skill set training encourages workers to pursue other education as they build a greater confidence in their ability.
- We need to address migration policies and procedures to ensure efficiency and effectiveness for sponsoring employers.
- Improved policy regarding equity groups to encourage better work access for these people.
 - Women – focusing on pay gaps , affordable childcare, making education accessible online , workplace health and safety , education of employers , parental leave issues.
 - Indigenous people – building sustainable relationships and partnerships to support enterprise development. This would include support in the area of small businesses. These will attract a range of service providers – themselves being small businesses.
- Good agricultural research gives Australia a leading edge to support our free market stance. Well-funded and focused research in technical, operational, ecological and market fields with alignment to good extension will yield a stronger agricultural sector.
- Good policy and planning is needed to help support the local and regional communities. This might include business development support which is focused on real local businesses – not just the larger service providers such as shires and councils.
- Give firm direction in education policy regarding animal welfare in consultation with industry to ensure that the principles are in line with the industry ability to deliver.

I trust that these comments are of use to the Senate Standing committee regarding the agricultural workforce and its issues .

Yours sincerely

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