

Submission to the Senate Enquiry:
For
Education, employment and Workplace Relations committee of
inquiry.
(Higher Education and the VET Sector)

From: Derek GARNHAM

Introduction:

Opportunity exists to improve the VET Training package as it relates to Production Horticulture and Agriculture – Currently the AHC Package.

The opinions and thoughts expressed here are my own. They have been developed over twelve years of observation, discussion with employers and application whilst working in the VET sector. (Production Horticulture) They do not reflect the thoughts or opinions of any agency.

This submission addresses two key areas that are fundamental to the operation of the National Training Package:

Body:

- Delivery Structure
- Training package content
- Audit and Compliance.

Delivery Structure

- As far as the Horticultural Crop production sector is concerned, they are not getting what they want or need.
- What Production Horticulture wants is a flexible delivery program.
- What they need is relevant training content.
- Flexible delivery requires that the Instructor travels to the Farm or District.

Currently, a 'One Size fits all' approach is being applied to the National Training Package and the industries covered by the package. Historically, this approach was devised to satisfy training delivery for trades such as Motor Mechanic, Hair Dresser, Cook/Chef, Office worker. That strategy works for such professions as they are primarily 'inside' operations.

Production horticulture has quite different needs, in that it has had to attempt to conform with an education delivery strategy that does not suit farm operations or other significant variables such as weather:- i.e. Flood, Drought, pest, cyclone, soil condition etc. A trainee might be programmed for specific training delivery based on seasonality of subject matter but, a major deviation from the scheduled crop production program may occur, then, in principal both theory and practical demonstration must wait for a further twelve months before the timing is right for the delivery of that subject matter. E.g. Pruning or Post-Harvest handling. It is important to delivery theory and practical application of that theory as close together as possible. The National Training Program does not recognise or acknowledge the primary fact that plants 'Do Not' take the week-end off. If plants are not tended, maintained and managed seven days a week, they will not develop as required, thus providing an inferior quality product at harvest. Additionally, among other things, the National Training Package needs to acknowledge and address the uniqueness of the student's situation within the horticultural industry.

Today's horticultural student is one who wants to complete their qualification in an apprentice-type fashion. This situation suits the farmer, who needs workers who are keen and willing to learn, and the student, who is learning through verbal instruction and physical interaction with the various 'hands-on' stimuli that will secure their job today and their career in the future. Although a farmer may not be a qualified trainer, their experience and knowledge and guidance through supervision imparted to the student is invaluable to the industry, which needs knowledgeable and young farmers for the future. Currently, the National Training Program's Block-Release strategy does not satisfy this important relationship between farmers and their working students. The result of taking a student away from their work place for five or more weeks at a time for theoretical education, classroom training or examinations is that a farmer loses a valuable worker for that period. In many cases, the student is the only full-time worker employed by the producer and is wholly responsible for specific tasks and activities. In essence, once employed, they are intergral to the production process and must be on site. The 'Block release' strategy that works well for other trades and professions is, in this case, untenable. A flexible mode of delivery has previously been trialled with success and been employed it successfully circumvented the resistance to the system that currently exists.

Training Package content

Presently, there is a strong emphasis on increasing a students awareness on what their rights and entitlements are and for improved education in areas such as Interpersonal communications, Quality Assurance and Environmental initiatives. In some cases, this subject matter is designated as core or compulsory. At the same time, fundamental and foundational knowledge that is essential in the formulation of sound business and operational decision making is not included in the Unit of Competency offerings of the training package. Units of Competency to cover such subject areas as Plant Structure, Plant function, Soil properties and dynamics are fundamental considerations whenever a decision is to be made concerning the operations related to a crop production business. As a consequence of this oversight the industry does not see the National Training Package as having much relevance or credibility. This situation maintains the ignorance of the past and sets up the prospect of compounding further ignorance in the future due to the lack of understanding based on 'known and existing' science.

A suggestion that will improve the Training package content and still satisfy the Federal governments obligations to the various international bodies to which it is a signatory is:

- Integrate the content of the existing subjects on OH&S, Workplace Communications, Quality Assurance, Environment Work practices etc. into every Unit of Competency where such knowledge and awareness is necessary from Level I through to Level III. By this time, each student will have a comprehension of the principals of the various subject matter and appreciation of their structure and benefits. Levels IV through to VI will offer dedicated Units of Competency on the various subjects to allow specialisation at the higher levels. People choosing a particular specialisation will have a solid foundation in concept, principals and application by having undertaken training in the lower level Units of Competency. Therefore it would be reasonable to expect that more appropriate application of the globalisation subjects would result in a more consistent and sustainable outcome, thus meeting the governments obligations to those organisations. E.g. ISO
- Introduce dedicated Unit of Competencies for fundamental and essential subjects in Plant science. Make these Units mandatory selections in any level of qualification.
- At the moment there are no prerequisites imposed on training levels. This further undermines the credibility of any qualification that a person might achieve at Level III and above. It is impossible for a person with no previous exposure to the Crop production sector to gain a Level III – IV qualification and expect to operate an efficient operation unless they are one of the exceptional few. Prerequisites must be imposed on individuals who intend to undertake training in the Horticultural crop production sector. Presently, a Certificate Level IV on its own, without underpinning knowledge and skills development at the lower qualifications is perceived to be meaningless and have no credence at all.

If the suggestions presented here are implemented it can be anticipated that there would be far more use of the training package which would result in the Federal government beginning to realise its goals of 75% of the workforce having some form or recognised qualification within the Horticultural crop production sector, the establishment of a career pathway, more efficient crop production systems and enhanced environmental performance across the country resulting in more effective and efficient use of renewable and non-renewable resources. This orientates the Training package, delivery and outcomes to be in line with current stated government policy.

Audit and Compliance

Presently, training delivery audits appraise the transparency and accountability of a training delivery program and that programs compliance with the guidelines as set under AQTF.

Under that regime Trainers, Instructors and Assessors are required to hold relevant qualifications for the content that they are working with. In addition, those same people are required to have currency in the subject material that they are delivering or, assessing.

The delivery programs and auditing activities are structured and ostensibly comply with the precepts and principals of ISO 9000 standards. (Quality Assurance) One of the processes of a Quality Assurance program for any business is the production of both Standard Operating Procedures (SOP's) and Standard Operating Instructions (SOI's). a part of both SOP's and SOI's is an adequate Induction and Orientation. This familiarises the person with task, responsibilities and the quality standard to be either achieved or, maintained.

It appears at this time, that people conducting Audit on the training and assessment of individuals are not undertaking this same process. In essence, they appear to be non-compliant in the very process that they are supposedly reviewing. It is a well known strategy - that to keep an Auditor happy, one will intentionally produce errors so that the Auditor has something to write in their assessment report and thereby feel as though they have accomplished something with the time spent at an RTO (Registered Training Organisation).

The paperwork and record-keeping of some Auditors is so onerous that it is not uncommon for an Instructor to spend more time completing the necessary evidence collection documentation they have very little time to actually deliver quality training. This negates the very purpose of Audits. Many instructional staff feel that their profession and personal qualities have effectively been nullified in that they no longer have the opportunity to exercise Professional judgement. This impacts on diligence, application and the desire to maintain currency with various discipline developments. The effect is that information that could and should be introduced into curriculum, is now passed over due to the time commitments to compliance exercises.

A measure of effective knowledge and skill delivery is not a piece of paper in the right place within a student file. It is the efficient production of quality crops utilizing effective production strategy, executed by trained and disciplined staff who apply a professional attitude to those processes.

Further enhancement of Training package credibility can be realised if:

- Any Auditor undertaking an audit is either a Qualified Horticultural practitioner or, as a minimum, has been inducted and orientated into this field – thus complying with the first principals of Quality Assurance and the system that they are assessing. In many cases, subsequent Auditor will advise an RTO that the processes that they have presented are not required in such detail. When advised, that the previous Auditor required change, many subsequent Auditors – suggest that the demands were beyond that which was required..

This inconsistency (contrary to Quality Assurance systems intent) is time consuming, costly and extremely frustrating for all who bear the burden of this current system.

- Constant Improvement is the underlying intent of a Quality Assurance program for any organisation or, activity. Constant improvement does not occur when change for the sake of change is forced on a system or process when it is not a genuine improvement requirement. Quite often, loss of productivity and or quality will occur when ill disciplined, ill informed or just plain ignorance are imposed.

In Conclusion

An increase in the take-up rate for Crop Production horticulture will occur if the needs of that Industry sector are recognised, accepted and strategy developed to meet those particular needs.

Credibility for the current training package and improved relevance to the sector can be achieved that will result in solid foundational knowledge and understanding being established in the sector upon which improved decision making – based on known and existing science – will result.

Change to Audit and compliance exercises – as suggested – will provide opportunity for genuine Constant Improvement within the training package program and crop production quality outputs.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit these observations and concepts.

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