

17 May 2005

National Agriculture Training Provider Network  
C/o Primary Industries Curriculum Maintenance Manager  
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Committee Secretary  
House of Representatives  
Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir or Madam

**Re: Inquiry into Rural Skills Training and Research**

The National Agriculture Training Provider Network has membership from all states and is the peak representative body for vocational trainers, educators and assessors servicing the agriculture industry in all Australian states. In the past we have had close relationships not only with industry in our own states, but with the Rural Training Council of Australia, with Rural Skills Australia, and now with the Agrifood Skills Council. We welcome the Standing Committee's inquiry into Rural Skills Training and Research and wish to provide input into your considerations regarding training for the agriculture industries in Australia.

The network expects that individual states and individual RTOs will provide data on their training activities. This response therefore will limit itself to a consideration of what is common to all providers in all states: a consideration of training packages and how well they meet the needs of industry.

However, by way of introduction, a number of issues to do with training delivery are not related to training packages. The agriculture industry is highly segmented and geographically diverse, factors which make it a thin training market, especially at high levels<sup>1</sup>. Factors of diversity and geographical spread as well as the need for access to real life resources also contribute to making it a costly training market. While distance delivery (in itself costly) can be applicable it is not the preferred learning mode for farmers, who prefer face to face learning situations with ample opportunity for hands- on learning. Opportunities for hands- on learning require access to a wide diversity of resources, which as noted also add to the costly nature of training for agriculture.

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<sup>1</sup> However, while markets are generally thin, the Agricultural Colleges in WA, which indicate their delivery model to be very similar to that proposed by the proposed national technical colleges, report a 25% increase in enrolments and report also that graduates have no difficulty in obtaining employment on graduation

Additionally, it is widely recognised that management training is a priority for agriculture. For management training, it is critical to create pathways from VET levels 5 and 6 into higher education. This has provided a challenge for a number of RTOs in the past as it has been historically difficult to achieve acceptance from institutions offering degree programs to accept VET qualifications.

The industry itself is also having difficulty in employing skilled people in the agricultural industries. Career prospects and opportunities are perceived as being negative

As you will be aware, national training packages have been developed and designated as providing national specifications for training and assessment for Australian industries. RTE03 Rural Production is the current training package applicable to agriculture in Australia.

The National Agriculture Training Provider Network is strongly committed to national training packages and to the notion of nationally developed industry specifications for training and assessment. Training packages provide national consistency. They are also the most cost effective way of developing national specifications with the potential for these to be high quality. We would not wish to discontinue the benefits that can result from the national approach but we would wish to improve it.

It is vital that training packages provide current, detailed and clear specifications to RTOs for training and assessment. If they cease to do this, they fail in their primary objective in our view. RTOs rely on the national specifications for the purposes of training and assessment. If such specifications cease to be current, or do not provide sufficient detail as to the intended benchmark, industry sees the fault lying with RTOs and not with ANTA or with the relevant Industry Skills Council. They may not be able to identify either organisation. The reputation of RTOs in part rests on the quality of the national specifications. RTOs do not have the role within the national training framework to further flesh out the actual needs of industry where the national specifications provide limited detail and where the gap in required information may be quite substantial. There is a real danger in ANTA's current view that the number of training packages and the number of competencies should be rationalised through the greater use of imported units and especially in the view that more generic units should be used to reduce the number of competencies. While the development of more generic units may reduce costs at the national level, they run the risk of becoming "content free" and have the clear capacity to result in poorer quality training at the RTO level where the training is judged by industry as being "too general" and "not relevant to my needs". A balance needs to be found.

While ANTA has in place some measurements for improvement in regard to processes for development and maintenance of training packages not all of these processes appear to be effective and some appear to carry with them the likelihood of negative rather than positive outcomes as planned as for example the intention to produce generic units which are likely to be unable to provide detailed specifications required by both industry and by RTOs.

In addition to the concern regarding the reduction in quality of national specifications through the adoption of more generic units, other issues in the training package with which members of the network have concerns are as follows

- Industry clients are sometimes frustrated with the packaging rules in the training package, for example within Rural Business where there is great difficulty in packaging together an award at any level that reflects the needs of

the client. More flexibility in the packaging rules would better support the thin training market

- It appears the newly formed national Industry Skills Councils are not sufficiently funded to enable them to properly maintain the currency of training packages or to recognise the variety of stakeholders. The Agrifood Industry Skills Council is currently conducting a scoping report prior to the stage 2 redevelopment of RTD02 Conservation and Land Management. A number of units designated as being common units, servicing Conservation and Land Management, Rural Production and Amenity Horticulture were developed as part of RTD02. There appears to be no intention to include Rural Production or Amenity Horticulture in the review of the common units. This is, in our view, a remarkable oversight
- RTD02 Conservation and Land Management and RTE03 Rural Production were endorsed in 2002 and 2003 respectively. In that time, *no* new versions (designated by ANTA as either Category 1 or Category 2 changes) have appeared. This is notwithstanding the fact that despite the critical nature of the issues currently seen to be facing rural production in Australia – salinity, land and soil degradation and extreme drought and water shortages, it has apparently been deemed that these issues do not warrant any updates in the training package. The ANTA processes for continuous improvement clearly do not appear to be working. Equally importantly, the absence of these issues in RTE03 Rural Production suggest that training packages are better able to reflect the status quo or the recent past rather than having the ability to take a forward view. This is clearly a major concern.
- ANTA has not worked as cooperatively as they might with the states in terms of addressing the difficulty of maintaining the currency of training packages. States may develop state accredited curriculum only in response to gaps in the training package. The expectation is that states forward such curriculum to the relevant national industry training advisory body to be considered for inclusion in the training package, a process which requires validation in other states. Allowing for the cumbersome nature of the ANTA continuous improvement process, the inclusion of new units (Category 2 changes) may take up to 3 years before they are included. Three years is too long for RTOs to respond to industry needs and too long for industry to wait. VET has prided itself in the past on its responsiveness to industry. Nor do the packaging rules allow the importation of any other units from any other source other than other nationally endorsed training packages. Hence states are able to respond quickly to changes in industry needs but the national level appears unable to do so.

Please contact me to discuss any of the matters raised, or where further detail is needed. The National Agriculture Training Provider Network will be very happy to have further discussions with you and to provide further detail that may be of assistance to you in the Inquiry.

Yours sincerely

Gay Gallagher  
Acting Chairperson, National Agriculture Training Provider Network