

Submission to The House of Representatives Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Committee

Subject: Inquiry into Rural Skills Training and Research

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Submission Summary

The Central Queensland Region sugar industry has been actively involved in the delivery of industry-based vocational education and training for the past decade.

The industry has been regularly frustrated in its attempts to develop and deliver relevant training programs and to establish and maintain delivery models that meet industry training needs.

The authors of this submission appreciate most of the issues outlined in the submission are State Government controlled and the Federal Government has limited jurisdiction in these areas.

However, the authors trust the Federal Government has the capacity to influence State Governments in the hope that a more efficient and cost effective rural training and education system can be established and maintained.

The key issues outlined in the submission include:

- Ensuring the vocational education and training (VET) sector and the tertiary education sector become more closely aligned and allow a seamless transfer from the VET sector to tertiary education.
- De-institutionalisation of the Vet sector and adopt a stronger industry work-based training and education system and engage rural enterprise employers to provide much of the training and assessment services, particularly at the lower Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) levels.
- Provide rural industries with increased levels of participation in determining where VET sector training funding is directed and how training and assessment is delivered.
- Develop and foster more flexible school-based accredited training work placement programs to stimulate greater school student interest in agriculture. This system should ideally remunerate employers for their training and assessment services.
- Stronger school-based programs need to be underpinned by post-school rural traineeships that also allow employers to be remunerated for their training and assessment services, making it more attractive to employers to consider offering rural traineeships.

- Significant shortages of well-trained agronomists are and will continue to be experienced unless more urban-background students are encouraged to consider an agricultural science study stream. Stronger school-based programs and greater incentives for rural employers to consider rural trainees could address this shortage.
- The VET sector funding distribution system needs to be overhauled to provide industry with a greater input in to where training funding is directed and how training is delivered.

Background to Submission

The Central Qld region sugar industry has been very active in the design, development, delivery and assessment of rural training and education for the past 10 years.

The region initially entered into the training and education arena via the local CANEGROWERS District Office with the support of the federally funded National Landcare Program (NLP) by delivering a property management planning (PMP) project.

The adoption of the program was limited as it was perceived by industry participants to be a “top-down” approach and farm managers did not readily accept the holistic business-planning model underpinning PMP.

The CANEGROWERS organisation moved to a customer-needs approach, whereby industry participants nominated their own training needs. This change signified a shift in focus from higher-level rural business management to lower-level skills development, generally in computer operation and financial record keeping. Demand was largely driven by the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST). This change in focus has led to client-driven approach.

The organisation first became aware of Australian National Training Packages in late 1999 and began delivering competency-based training under auspice arrangements with State Government sponsored registered training organisations, such as TAFE and Agricultural Colleges in early 2000. Most of the initial delivery utilised the Business Services Training Package (BSB98).

By 2002, the local industry had developed accredited training delivery capacity, via a Department of Employment and Training (DET) Community Training Partnership (CTP) program grant to deliver level II competency-based cane harvester and haulout operator courses in partnership with a small private registered training organisation (RTO).

This unique approach saw a small group of practicing cane growers and harvesting contractors develop nationally accredited vocational training and assessment skills and knowledge. These trainer/assessors were instrumental in the design, development and delivery of a range of on-farm training initiatives such as cane haulout operator training.

In essence, this means the Central Qld Region sugar industry is in control of its own training requirements. This approach has and continues to be strongly supported by sugar industry employers who face difficulty in recruiting skilled seasonal cane harvest and haulout employees each year.

In subsequent years, it has been extremely difficult to maintain this approach. Some Queensland Agricultural Colleges in particular have shown little interest in supporting this industry-led model.

The TAFE system has been accommodating, but the local industry has found it difficult to deliver quality industry training programs that meet industry expectations and requirements on the limited funding provided by TAFE. The authors are aware that only 50% of the funds awarded to TAFE by the State Government actually goes towards the delivery of training. The remaining 50% is allocated to administration costs.

This is a highly inefficient training system and a higher percentage of government funds directed towards the VET sector should be either channelled through the private training sector and be used to implement changes which would dramatically improve the efficiency and accountability of the TAFE and Queensland Agricultural College system.

1. The availability and adequacy of education and research services in the agriculture sector

1.a VET Sector Tertiary Institution Divide

A seamless transfer is required between the rural production vocational education and training (VET) sector and the rural business management tertiary education institutions.

There are concerns that there still remains a major divide between the two sectors and a candidate who gains a Diploma or Advanced Diploma may only secure a limited amount of advanced credit when advancing to an undergraduate course within a tertiary institution.

Recommendation: Establish a reference group involving the VET sector, tertiary institutions and rural industry representatives to ensure the needs of the tertiary sector institutions are being met by the VET sector, particularly at higher levels (Diploma and Advanced Diploma). Additionally, it is critical that the tertiary sector remains current with industry requirements and offers learning programs that ensure graduates are “industry ready” and have the ability to respond to the rapidly changing rural trading and technological conditions.

1.b Stronger Work-base Training Focus

Agricultural Colleges were established to provide students with a working rural enterprise model in an attempt to furnish learners with the practical skills required to function in the rural workplace upon graduation.

This model has emerged as being expensive and not effective in providing learners with the practical skills required by employers when graduates join the rural workforce.

Anecdotal research into Agricultural Colleges reveals that one of the major contributing factors to this situation has been the change in the profile of the Agricultural College residential student.

The bulk of students in the past have been drawn from rural backgrounds that have come to the Colleges with a well-developed set of practical farming skills. However, the reduction in the rural population and the increase in the percentage of urbanised Australians has meant that

there is an increased percentage of Agricultural College students with little or no rural background.

Rural industry needs to be engaged to provide this workplace component by replacing the working rural enterprise model with on-farm work placements thus providing contemporary Agricultural College students with the opportunity to develop practical rural skills they require to operate in a dynamic rural workplace.

The Australian National Training Packages present an excellent opportunity for rural training to be de-institutionalised by increasing the attractiveness of rural traineeships for employers and providing support to participating employers to develop their training and assessing skills.

The traditional training/education institutions role should be changed to one of moderation and support for industry-based workplace trainer/assessors.

The benefits of this approach are significant and include.

- A percentage of training funding currently directed to education institutions being redirected to industry workplace trainer/assessors. This will encourage a greater number of rural enterprises to consider employing rural trainees.
- Increase in the number of rural trainees to compensate for the loss of rural workers.
- Participating rural enterprises (training and assessing) are likely to critically appraise their operations and make enterprise operational and management improvements.
- Encourage an increase in the education levels of rural enterprise managers/supervisors operating as rural workplace trainer/assessors, which will lead to superior self-empowerment, improved sense of self-worth and enhanced enterprise viability.
- Better equipped rural trainee graduates with a stronger practical skill-set and a genuine feel for rural life combined with a positive learning experience.
- Suited to candidates who require a tactile learning approach.
- Effective outcomes for government funded education.
- Create genuine employment opportunities from the training investment.

Recommendation: Establish and foster a network of rural industry employer trainer/assessors and fund these workplace trainer/assessors (in addition to the current employer rural trainee incentives) to deliver the bulk of level I, II and III competencies contained within the rural based Australian National Training Packages. The role of the RTO will be one of support, mentoring, moderation, compliance and currency of participating trainer/assessors and negotiation between employer and trainee.

2 The skills needs of agricultural industries, including the expertise and ability of industries to specify skills sets.

Rural industries need to be provided with a mechanism to have greater involvement in the determination of training and assessment needs and ensuring this training and assessment is delivered in the most appropriate manner.

The Queensland sugar industry is currently unable to influence or have any input into the delivery and assessment of rural training offered through the Queensland Agricultural Colleges.

Subsequently, some of the State Government funded rural industry profile hours have been directed towards skill development for rural and urban workers to gain employment in other non-rural related industries, while the sugar industry suffers critical practical skills shortages in its seasonal cane harvesting and haulage workforce.

The loss of skilled rural employees has resulted in the sugar industry being forced to recruit seasonal employees with little or no machinery operation background. A major source of these employees has been through Job Network Members.

Current VET funding arrangements, whereby all profile hours are directed through TAFE or Agricultural Colleges make it extremely difficult for the sugar industry to deliver a training and assessment program that adequately prepares harvesting and haulage employees for infield duties. Subsequently, employers are forced to engage unskilled employees and attempt to train them in a stressful, time-constrained commercial harvesting situation. This approach leads to:

- Trainees potentially having an initial unfavourable experience and electing to leave the industry prematurely;
- Reduced harvesting efficiency as a result of less experienced personnel, leading to higher harvesting costs;
- Increased stress levels for trainees and employers; and
- Increased accidents leading to employee safety issues and costly machinery repairs.

A similar situation, albeit less critical, is being experienced by employers seeking general rural labourers and rural enterprise managers.

In summary, a critical skills shortage currently exists for sugar industry workers and other rural-based industries with skills at levels II to IV. This is a direct result of a training system that is unable to cater adequately for seasonal skills development of candidates, nor is there a training system that provides school students with the capacity to develop practical workplace skills while attending school.

The Central Region sugar industry has been actively involved in promoting rural school-based traineeships for the past five years, with limited success. The authors are unable to categorically state why this is the case but believes the barriers may include:

- Both employers and students consider the current school-based traineeship system to be onerous and a major time commitment;
- The rural workplace is hazardous and many employers are reluctant to take responsibility for a school student on the farm, particularly in a volunteer trainer role;
- Most rural enterprises are now a “one-person” operation and there is a reluctance to schedule daily tasks that cater for a trainee; and
- Reduced rural enterprise profit margins make it difficult for rural enterprise managers to provide this service as a volunteer as a school-based trainee is likely to result in reduced work efficiencies.

A trial project involving the local sugar industry and a local rural school has resulted in positive outcomes. The primary aim of the project is to re-engage students in formal education by placing these students on cane farming enterprises for one day a week for six weeks to develop practical workplace skills. The students selected for this experiment were students displaying literacy and numeracy issues and some had demonstrated some disruptive behavioural patterns.

School management and participating grower feedback indicated that the project was a resounding success and the school is eager to expand the project as there are numerous other students keen to participate in the program. However, lack of willing volunteer growers to host the students places the program's future in jeopardy.

Measures should be explored that remunerate participating cane growers by securing funded VET hours to deliver a small number of competencies drawn from Certificate I in Rural Operations while the school students are involved in the work placement program. Currently, the industry has been unable to secure a funding system that supports this approach.

This method has a number of advantages including:

- Provides structure for the participating grower with regard to what training to provide the student and how to assess performance;
- Remunerates the rural enterprise manager for lost efficiencies, encouraging ongoing participation in the scheme; and
- Awards the student nationally recognised competency-based qualifications that can be built at school or post-school through rural or other traineeships.

Recommendation: Establish a partnership between schools, RTOs and rural industry organisations to allow a more flexible rural enterprise work experience program to be provided, whereby participating students can be awarded qualifications from the Australian National Training Packages during their work experience. The participating employers will be remunerated for their training and assessment services by the RTO.

3. The provision of extension and advisory services to agricultural industries

Deficiencies in the current training and education system are leading to a significant shortage of appropriately skilled agricultural agronomists to adequately service the industry. This is also a product of the declining rural population.

The concern is that with the decrease in the potential number of under-graduate students with rural backgrounds, the potential rural science student pool will consist of predominantly urban background students resulting in a decline in popularity in the agronomic science study stream in favour of environmental management related study streams.

This shift in student profile will result in agricultural organisations that focus on rural production finding it difficult to secure graduates/candidates with a sound working knowledge and appreciation for the socio-economic issues being faced by the farming community.

The VET sector compliments a learning environment in which to foster and mentor urban-based students to develop the interest and inherent understanding required firstly to consider the agronomic study stream and secondly, the attitude and empathy to be respected by rural enterprise managers.

This approach ideally needs to start in the schools by offering flexible work-placement programs based on the Australian National Training Packages to stimulate urban students interest in rural employment pathways.

This may provide a pool of potential rural trainees, who will develop practical rural skills through Certificate II and III traineeships. These candidates will be encouraged to secure higher-level qualifications via distance or online learning programs by working through the remainder of the VET sector levels before moving onto agronomic based tertiary education.

This education pathway has the capacity to alleviate some of the skill shortages currently facing Australian agriculture.

Appendix 1 illustrates the issues currently facing Australian Agriculture with regard to the shortage of “industry-ready” agronomists. This shortage presents significant future challenges with respect to the lack of a well-trained pool of rural science graduates who will underpin future agricultural research and extension efforts.

4 The role of the Australian Government in supporting education, research and advisory programs to support the viability and sustainability of Australian agriculture.

Recommendation: The current VET sector funding distribution system requires overhauling.

Suggested changes include the introduction of an independent third party to administer the distribution of government funded training hours. This organisation will be heavily influenced by industry to determine how and where training funds should be targeted.

The fund will be open to both private training providers and government sponsored training providers to apply for training funding, generally with industry endorsement or in partnership with industry where appropriate.

The Australian Government should be actively involved in and establish programs to promote agriculture as a career option in schools. This would be largely targeted at regional and rural schools.

Appendix 1: Comparing Rural Career Paths for Rural and Urban Background Students

