

National Association of Agricultural Educators:  
c/o 59 Panorama Road, Tamworth, NSW 2340.

Submission to the **INQUIRY INTO RURAL SKILLS TRAINING AND RESEARCH**

**The National Association of Agricultural Educators is the peak body representing state associations throughout Australia. It has a biennial conference and hosts regular teleconferences between the executive of the member associations. The members of these associations are primarily Agriculture and or Vocational Education Teachers working in State and Non-Government High Schools and Colleges throughout Australia.**

In brief it is the view of the NAAE that whilst high quality skills based training in Agriculture in Australia occurs in secondary schools and colleges throughout Australia, serious problems exist in the planning and delivery of some rural skills based training, however there are exciting alternative models that are flexible, progressive and responsive to the needs of industry, the community and young people of Australia.

Although the delivery of vocational training at the secondary level varies from state to state, there exists a pool of committed teachers in secondary schools and colleges that are providing training at AQTF II levels via the attainment of competencies drawn from the National Training Packages in Rural Production, and Conservation and Land Management.

Programs such as the NSW Primary Industries Curriculum framework permit a wide range of choices and allow schools and teachers to determine student and community needs and develop patterns of study resulting in certificates based upon attainment of competencies.

A variety of rural VET courses are delivered at approximately 70 schools in Queensland, under a range of delivery models. Some schools have stand-alone RTO status, while others are linked with TAFE or agricultural colleges. A significant number of schools also facilitate school-based traineeships for their students in rural industries.

Changes in curricula in Victoria and Tasmania have resulted in horticultural skill development and less involvement in other agricultural skills.

Western Australia is about to undergo considerable change with the role of the agricultural colleges being modified extensively as the changes in the curriculum demanded by the Post Compulsory Review of Education come into effect. Of principal concern to teachers and the Colleges of Agriculture is reduction of four wholly school assessed subjects related to agriculture into a single subject. Moreover, to achieve at the highest levels students will have to spend most of their time 'in the classroom' and not 'in the field' as is presently the case. In the last couple of months serious reservations about the outcomes based style of education and assessment have been raised by teachers, some academics and the press. However, the Minister and the Universities have strongly supported the changes.

South Australia has a strong association with vocational training however this has been at the cost of enrolment in agricultural science courses.

The role of secondary schools and colleges in providing sound, competency based training to young people throughout the nation to students often in rural, regional and remote areas must be acknowledged by any inquiry into Rural Skills Training.

The development of industry developed “branded” training courses such as the “Cotton Basics” and “ChemCert” models sit very well with the ability of many schools provide quality training that is recognised by industry and which is understood by parents, employers and the community. The further development of such branded or packaged courses to suit individual industry sectors is to be applauded. These programs are usually well resourced and up to date information is provided to trainers to ensure quality programs and concepts are taught and that quality outcomes result. These should be the model for other sectors of agriculture to emulate.

As stated previously some serious problems appear to be manifested: these include

1. A very high level of administrative overhead to ensure compliance with various QA bodies which are more to do with policies and procedures rather than the achievement of quality outcomes. The need to comply with a plethora of often repetitive or at times conflicting requirements from RTO's , Syllabus Boards, Educational Authorities, etc often mean that quality teaching and learning programs flounder under a sea of paperwork that is suited to a large public service rather than an educational provider at the workplace/training interface.
2. Repetitive assessment of student competency is often at the expense of student instruction and learning.
3. Many students already have the requisite skills to attain AQTF II units and are prevented from undertaking certificate III units because of the administrative overheads in RTO scope of registration and recognition of trainer qualification. For example a teacher with a degree in Agriculture, operating their own farm, and controlling the operation of a commercial operation on a school farm will have to undertake the Recognition of Prior Learning process through another already accredited body at certificate II and III level for each unit they wish to teach and for which student needs exist.
4. Availability to access funds for teacher training and development in states varies depending upon the State and National priorities, for example Australian Government Quality Teaching Program Funding was accessed in NSW for a period of time but was not a priority in other states. This needs to be ongoing and national if the skill void in rural skills is to be met in the near future.
5. The training of Agricultural Teachers in some states has ceased and in others is in jeopardy, whilst the State Agricultural Teacher Associations are very concerned about the rapidly aging population of Agriculture and VET teachers in all states. It is such a concern that discussions have taken place between the NAAE and Professor Rod Francis from Charles Sturt University regarding a census of agricultural trainers) throughout Australia (through the member Associations to ascertain future training needs. Unfortunately this Association is unable to fund such as study. This may be part of the research that could be undertaken as part of the Inquiry.
6. It would appear that the highly casualised nature of the TAFE model in many states has led to a piecemeal approach to vocational training and the belief

that if it was taught it was learnt, rather than the demonstration and development of competencies followed by assessment of those competencies by teachers who have an ongoing involvement with their students and an interest in their well being. It is the belief that the “contracted hours” approach does not lead to quality educational outcomes.

7. The concentration of training in a few large TAFEs where students have to travel long distances, stay in short term accommodation, and study in unfamiliar environments is a disincentive to many rural and remote people to undertake skills training. Thus a distributed model where these competencies are developed in their local high schools (an educational setting with which they are familiar) may enhance retention rates and lead to a better trained and higher quality rural workforce.

The development and maintenance of a strong Vocational Training sector within Secondary Schools and Colleges will lead to a trained workforce, with competencies that are relevant, up to date and can be provided in a cost effective manner. This lays down the stepping stones for life long learning and movement into and out of education as the need arises and at a time that suits the industry and the person.

**This submission is endorsed by the member associations:**

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Should the committee wish to discuss this further with the NAAE, Mr Graeme Harris is available to represent the Association. If the committee wishes to discuss these matters with individual state Associations please contact Mr Harris in the first instance

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