

Rural Skills Education and Training

- 2.1 Education and training in rural skills is available through a range of educational pathways, ranging from school based training, through TAFE courses and other skills training, to university degrees. Some of the training remains unstructured and informal, in the time-honoured tradition of rural communities, but increasingly the emphasis is on formal training opportunities and the delivery of qualifications.
- 2.2 The principal education streams are:
- Vocational Education and Training (VET);
 - University.
- 2.3 This chapter will examine both these educational streams and the linkages between the two. The following chapter will look at the regulatory framework underpinning VET.

Vocational Education and Training

- 2.4 VET in rural skills takes on a number of forms articulated through a variety of programs and institutions:
- Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), including TAFE;
 - Secondary Schools;
 - Agricultural Colleges; and
 - Australian Apprenticeships, usually in conjunction with schools or TAFE.

- 2.5 There are also structured formal and informal training opportunities for those already within industry, the principal federally-funded program for VET being FarmBis.
- 2.6 In addition, rural industries are increasingly taking the initiative in formulating training programs to meet their own needs, and to overcome perceived shortcomings within existing programs and institutions.

RTOS/TAFE

- 2.7 TAFE and private RTOs are the main providers of education and training in rural skills outside the university sector. They operate in conjunction with schools, industry organisations, the Australian Apprenticeship scheme and FarmBis in the delivery of VET. Their role and operation is governed by the regulatory framework, and most of the problems that arise are due to the operation of the framework in conjunction with funding. The result, according to much of the evidence presented to the committee, is that RTOs, including TAFE, are failing to deliver what rural industries need – work ready employees with relevant skills.
- 2.8 The issues relating to RTOs and TAFE will be dealt with in the following chapter, as they relate directly to the operation of the regulatory framework surrounding VET.

The Role of Schools

- 2.9 Vocational education and training undertaken at and through secondary schools is of growing importance in the delivery of rural skills. The main avenues to gaining rural skills in school include:
- work experience programs (mainly Year 10);
 - structured work placements (mainly Years 11 & 12);
 - VET in schools (VETiS) programs (Years 10, 11 & 12); and
 - school-based part-time Australian Apprenticeships (Years 11 & 12).¹
- 2.10 In several states, dedicated agricultural high schools, such as Farrer (NSW) and Urrbrae (South Australia), also provide access to rural skills training.
- 2.11 The important role schools play, or should play, in developing rural skills was highlighted in the evidence presented to the committee. In its submission, the South Australian Farmers Federation stated:

1 Rural Skills Australia, Submission no. 71, p. 4.

School-based traineeships must be encouraged to give young people a head start and the chance to taste the opportunities within the industry. VET in schools along with SBNAs [School-Based New Apprenticeships] are vital to build a young skilled workforce.²

2.12 Likewise, in its submission, the National Association of Agricultural Educators expressed the view that:

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.³

2.13 However, the evidence presented to the committee also indicated a number of significant barriers and problems associated with school-based rural skills training. In its submission, Primary Skills Victoria listed a range of concerns raised by secondary school teachers, including:

- The programs tend to be driven by individual teachers who have a passion for agriculture.
- There is no succession planning at the school level. Well run VETiS programs with high local credibility are often left high and dry when a teacher transfers, is promoted, or retires.
- Schools have often set up their own facilities for VETiS programs. This is particularly so for production horticulture. This situation does not encourage the involvement of industry or TAFE. Involving relevant TAFE institutes with VETiS where possible is generally seen as a positive. Students gain knowledge of the different pathways available to them and TAFE teachers usually have good local knowledge of career opportunities.
- School facilities are rarely of a commercial/industry standard.
- The links with industry vary considerably between schools.
- Funding, as with many VETiS programs, can be an issue and it is felt that the cost to students impacts on student participation.

2 South Australian Farmers Federation, Submission no. 87, p. 6.

3 National Association of Agricultural Educators, Submission no. 44, p. 3.

- Schools that pool resources to run programs to achieve efficient class sizes are usually presented with transport issues.
- There is a perceived lack of appreciation in secondary schools of the philosophies behind the concept of competency based training and workplace training and assessment.
- There is a strong view that the SBNA market is being distorted by funding subsidies and the priority governments have placed on this program. The SBNA system has been introduced more to assist schools with their retention rates, rather than as a workforce program designed to meet industry needs.
- VETiS and SBNA present schools with many organisational problems that cannot be solved to their satisfaction. Problems such as understanding the training system, timetabling, disruption of school programs and funding.⁴

2.14 The need to meet the bureaucratic requirements of the training framework was seen as a significant problem. In its submission, the Western Australian Farmers Federation observed:

Of increasing concern to WAFarmers is the inflexibility of training packages in VET for schools. The bureaucracy of the formal education sector emphasises conformance to bureaucratic process rather than the required industry outcomes of trained, work-ready people. This has been to the detriment of pastoral care and upskilling that used to be provided. There has been much comment from educators in WA (and echoed around Australia) that quality teaching and learning programs are getting harder to deliver due to the flood of paperwork that has more to do with policy and procedure than achieving quality outcomes.⁵

2.15 In his submission, Mr Graeme Harris, teacher and VET coordinator at Farrer Memorial Agricultural High School and Secretary of the National Association of Agricultural Educators, noted the disparity between the VET and Higher School Certificate requirements of school-based training:

The requirement (at least in NSW) [is] that competency based vocational courses also have a HSC component to allow assessment in an optional external examination. This has resulted in the situation where the competencies being assessed are at AQTF II level and the HSC requirements are at a level equivalent

4 Primary Skills Victoria, Submission no. 101, p. 5.

5 Western Australian Farmers Federation, Submission no. 92, p. 3.

of Cert IV! Thus classes have to have a much greater theoretical base than should be required for a Certificate II.⁶

- 2.16 He also identified some of the issues facing schools in the development and accreditation of courses:

An enormous disincentive to development of courses at a higher level such as AQTF III exists at present. Where schools have facilities, staff have the requisite industry experience, students already possess skills of at least a Certificate II level and rural employers need such students, barriers seem to be created in the bureaucracy and it would appear that some sectors such as TAFE view them as trying to take over “their patch”. As VET Coordinator at Farrer MAHS I can describe some of these barriers to two courses we have developed and have been approved by the Tamworth RTO, NSW Department of Education and Training, NSW Board of Studies, are still awaiting approval from VETAB.⁷

- 2.17 Nonetheless, Mr Harris believed that freed from red tape and adequately supported, ‘schools can be very responsive to the needs of their local students, and industry with which they often have close links’.⁸ He stated:

The possibilities are exciting, the opportunities great and the likely outcomes substantial. This could be achieved by targeted special purpose funding for staff training, resources, release to permit assessment whilst students are on structured work placement, and some relief from the overzealous nature of some of the quality assurance mechanisms which appear to be paper based audits rather than industry assessment of the competency of the students completing the program.⁹

- 2.18 Another impediment to rural skills training in schools is the shortage of qualified teachers. In its submission, the National Association of Agricultural Educators stated that 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 ageing population of Agriculture and VET teachers in all states’.¹⁰ Upgrading the knowledge and skills of teachers was also highlighted as an issue:

6 Mr Graeme Harris, Submission no. 32, p. 2.

7 Mr Graeme Harris, Submission no. 32, p. 2.

8 Mr Graeme Harris, Submission no. 32, p. 3.

9 Mr Graeme Harris, Submission no. 32, p. 4.

10 National Association of Agricultural Educators, Submission no. 44, p. 2.

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.¹¹

- 2.19 In its submission, Australian Wool Innovation Ltd (AWI) stated that in many cases 'the standard of teaching and learning is the result of inadequate skill levels amongst teachers and trainers who are often unaware of current industry practices and technologies'. AWI highlighted its own efforts to correct this problem with its WoolPro in Schools Project. It also highlighted the need for government support of industry if such initiatives were to succeed:

WoolPro in Schools is a partnership between AWI and the WA Department of Agriculture that has provided in-service training to teachers and delivered industry information and management tools to improve the quality of agricultural education. In conjunction with the Australian Sheep Industry Cooperative Research Centre, AWI has recently completed a study into the feasibility of establishing the program nationally. Whilst the study found that a national program was feasible, it identified the need for support from a wider coalition of industry and government partners. AWI believes that DAFF should take a leadership role in establishing this program nationally.¹²

- 2.20 AWI argued that 'DAFF & DEST should be directed to work with state departments of primary industries to implement a national program based on the current AWI funded WoolPro in Schools Project'.¹³
- 2.21 In its submission, the Rural Training Council of Australia NSW observed that the success of VET in School programs relied 'heavily on industry support through the provision of work experience job placement and resources'.¹⁴ The South Australian Farmers Federation also noted the importance of industry support, stating in its submission that 'industry needs to be encouraged to build partnerships with their local schools to assist in supporting education in agriculture'.¹⁵

11 National Association of Agricultural Educators, Submission no. 44, p. 2.

12 Australian Wool Innovation Ltd, Submission no. 73, p. 3.

13 Australian Wool Innovation Ltd, Submission no. 73, p. 3.

14 Rural Training Council of Australia NSW, Submission no. 62, p. 6.

15 South Australian Farmers Federation, Submission no. 87, p. 6.

2.22 The difficulties associated with this, however, were highlighted by the experience of the central Queensland region sugar industry. In their submission, Messrs Jim Kirchner, Darrell McLennan and Michael Wood, explained:

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.¹⁶

2.23 The submission cited lack of willing volunteer growers to host students as the principal barrier to school-based work experience programs and suggested paying growers to deliver a small range of basic Certificate I competencies, thereby providing structure and recognised qualifications to students without undue burden to growers. The submission recommended establishing:

...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.¹⁷

2.24 There was also some concern expressed at the disparate outcomes between school-based and full time training. In its submission, the Winemakers’ Federation of Australia expressed concern that ‘VET in

16 Messrs Jim Kirchner, Darrell McLennan and Michael Wood, Submission no. 84, p. 5.

17 Messrs Jim Kirchner, Darrell McLennan and Michael Wood, Submission no. 84, p. 6.

schools programs are devaluing certificate outcomes and potentially placing a barrier to employment for school leavers':¹⁸

The nominal period for completion of Wine Sector Training Package Certificate 1 for entry level, full time industry employees is 12 months, and 18–24 months for Certificate 2. VET in schools programs are enabling students to gain the same Certificate 1 and 2 qualifications while working in simulated or real environments for a maximum of 2 days per week in Years 11 and 12. This means the VET in schools students have at best worked half the time of full time employees (24 months x 2 days/week vs 18 months x 5 days/week), and yet they are awarded certificates claiming equal competence. Industrial arrangements of the large industry employers in particular link rates of pay to qualifications, obligating the employers to pay all people with certificate outcomes the relevant rate. The VET in schools students have only half the experience, which places a barrier to employment for them as employers are reluctant to pay equal amounts to less experienced employees.¹⁹

Committee Conclusions

- 2.25 The committee is of the view that school-based rural skills training is vital to the future of Australian agriculture. School based training gives students with an interest in rural employment access to relevant industry experience while at school, to the benefit of both students and potential employers. It provides a meaningful first step upon a career and learning pathway.
- 2.26 Given this, it is essential that governments and industry cooperate to promote effective school-based skills training strategies, to ensure that training is effective, relevant, and properly funded. It is also vital that resources be put towards ensuring the ongoing availability of suitably trained and experienced teachers of agricultural science in the schools system.

18 Winemakers' Federation of Australia, Submission no. 37, p. 8.

19 Winemakers' Federation of Australia, Submission no. 37, p. 9.

Recommendation 7

- 2.27 **The committee recommends that the Australian Government, in cooperation with State and Territory Governments, develop a national program for rural skills training in schools, with a view to ensuring:**
- **Stable and sustained funding of schools-based rural skills programs;**
 - **Funding and incentives for the training and upgrading of agriculture teachers; and**
 - **The creation of effective mechanisms for industry and community involvement in school-based rural skills training.**

Agricultural Colleges

- 2.28 Agricultural colleges have been the traditional pathway for training in rural skills in most parts of Australia. In its submission, the Rural Training Council of Australia NSW described agricultural colleges as 'generally the most effective pathways for students moving from school to work or further study'.²⁰ Despite this, the success and survival of agricultural colleges across Australia has been a story of mixed fortunes.
- 2.29 In Western Australia, the focal point of agricultural education is the Western Australian College of Agriculture, which has five residential schools plus one other full-time program in campuses across the state. All sites have commercial size farms and extensive training and education facilities. Mr Garry Fischer, Manager, Agricultural Education, for the Western Australian Department of Education and Training, noted in evidence before the committee the increasing enrolments and high success rate of graduates as a measure of the popularity and success of the college. He told the committee:

The courses are unique. They bear a close relationship with the agriculture industry and the local community through long-established farm advisory councils. Every site has its own advisory council, which has industry representatives advising the school on the programs and the latest in best farming practice, so the students get exposed to those sorts of activities.²¹

20 Rural Training Council of Australia NSW, Submission no. 62, p. 2.

21 Mr Garry Fischer, *Transcript of Evidence*, 20 July 2005, p. 26.

- 2.30 However, several submissions questioned the impact upon the WA College of Agriculture of the outcome of a review of post compulsory education, of principal concern being the reduction of four wholly school assessed subjects related to agriculture into a single subject.²² In evidence before the committee, Mr De Landgraftt (WAFarmers) expressed concern that this decision could undermine Western Australia's otherwise exemplary model of agricultural education:

Within our agricultural colleges, there is a fear that, whilst they are rolling several subjects into one, the student is actually going to have to spend more time in a classroom to get an outcome. That is disturbing because the ag college is probably the shining light in the training system in Western Australia, whereby they get a good mix of secondary schooling and actual hands-on training.

The guys who come through the ag colleges and pick up certificates I and II in agriculture, and probably certificate I or II in perhaps engineering or electrical work, are very good people to go into the trades. Some of the bigger institutions looking for tradesmen in Western Australia go to our ag colleges to pick up those young guys. So the practically minded students are very valuable, and we would hate to see any change in the system end up putting too much focus on academia.²³

- 2.31 Queensland also had a system of residential agricultural colleges, with four major campuses. There, however, agricultural colleges struggled to retain their reputation and relevance, resulting in a substantial renovation of the entire system under the auspices of the newly formed Australian Agricultural College Corporation. In its submission, the Queensland Government noted:

An examination of colleges in 2004 revealed that they had changed little over time despite the enormous change to industry, the economy and society generally. Colleges, for example, still expended almost their entire government grant funding on a traditional two year, entry-level program for school leavers. As a result, colleges had little capacity to respond to the other training demands of rural industries and local communities...

In July 2004, the Minister for Employment, Training and Industrial Relations announced a review of agricultural colleges in response to a growing number of corporate governance, financial

22 National Association of Agricultural Educators, Submission no. 44, p. 1; Western Australian Farmers Federation, Submission no. 92, p. 3.

23 Mr Trevor De Landgraftt, *Transcript of Evidence*, 20 July 2005, p. 4.

management and training delivery problems. The extent of these problems was so great that the viability of two colleges was at considerable risk. Rural industries are worth over \$9 billion dollars to the Queensland economy and the Minister was not prepared to risk a decrease in the provision of training to the rural sector by the failure of one or more colleges.

The major findings of the review provide an overview of the problems confronting the colleges:

- delivery of training far in excess of requirements to entry-level students – over 50 per cent of students across the four colleges received two-and-a-half times the amount of training recommended under the national training package for the qualification in which they were enrolled
- a reluctance or inability to use funding to meet priority rural training needs within the regions in which individual colleges are located
- significant amounts of state public funding being used to train interstate students
- failure to meet commitments in relation to the delivery of training to apprentices and trainees through the User Choice Program
- inability to determine the true costs of fee-for-service training or farm production activity
- difficulties in complying with the requirements of the training regulatory environment

Subsequent to this review, serious financial concerns about the viability of the Dalby Agricultural College resulted in the Minister dismissing the College Board and appointing an administrator in its place.²⁴

2.32 The result of the overhaul, from the perspective of the Queensland Government, has been the creation of new, forward looking, industry focused organisation that has the potential to service the needs of other states, not just Queensland.²⁵ In evidence to the committee, Mr Rod Camm, Executive Director of the Industry Development Division, Queensland Department of Employment and Training, stated:

In terms of the future, we envisage that the Australian agricultural college will lead our industry partnerships in this sector. There are two important strands. One is entry-level training for youth and the other is to improve the skills productivity and qualifications

24 Queensland Government, Submission no. 51, pp. 3–4.

25 Queensland Government, Submission no. 51, p. 12.

profile for existing workers. We still consider entry level training in a residential setting a priority, but it is expensive and very few options exist around the country. It gives practical skills in realistic farm rural settings – many of the colleges certainly still have farms – and it helps avoid sending youth to cities. It establishes a very good peer network. The Australian Agricultural College Corporation is changing to better understand those needs and the broader needs of the rural sector.

With limited choices available regarding rural training, it is Queensland's position that other states and territories should consider outsourcing some of their rural training obligations to the Australian Agricultural College Corporation.²⁶

- 2.33 Mr Ross Murray, Director, Education and Training, for the Australian Agricultural College Corporation, believed his organisation was well equipped to take VET in rural skills to a new level, combining competency-based training within coherent educational programs better designed to meet industry needs.²⁷
- 2.34 In New South Wales, the system of agricultural colleges has also undergone significant change. Until recently New South Wales had two residential agricultural colleges, C B Alexander Agricultural College at Tocal in the Hunter Valley and the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture at Yanco in the Riverina, operated by the NSW Department of Primary Industries (DPI). In December 2003, the Yanco campus ceased residential courses and now focuses on short courses. In 2006, Yanco became the Murrumbidgee Rural Studies Centre under the auspices of Tocal College.
- 2.35 The decision to cease residential courses at Yanco has been subject to criticism. In its submission, the NSW Farmers Association argued that the changes at Yanco 'removed options for future students in the southern and much of the western regions of the state to undertake agriculture related courses'. It also reduced the range of conditions that students could potentially be exposed to and the types of courses they could undertake:

While most of the courses previously available at the Murrumbidgee Agricultural College were offered through Tocal in 2004, there are factors that inhibit this learning. The differences in geographic conditions mean that practical learning is done in an environment that is substantially different from the farming

26 Mr Rod Camm, *Transcript of Evidence*, 10 April 2006, p. 53.

27 Mr Ross Murray, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 April 2006, p. 60.

conditions faced in the south and west of the State. While some practical work in these areas is possible, this is not a substitute for daily exposure to particular geographic conditions. It has also meant that the specialisation in relation to irrigation/rangeland environments can not be adequately addressed.²⁸

- 2.36 In its submission, the Isolated Children's Parents' Association of NSW also questioned the closure of residential courses at the Yanco campus, urging reconsideration of the decision and a firm commitment by the NSW Government to full-time residential training.²⁹
- 2.37 Mrs Margo Duncan, Chair of the Advisory Council, Tocal Agricultural College, emphasised NSW DPI's strong commitment to agricultural education, and the work of the agricultural colleges in providing full-time, part-time and short course education and training.³⁰
- 2.38 In Victoria, there has been a dramatic move away from the agricultural college model of rural education. In the mid 1990s, the Victorian College of Agriculture and Horticulture (VCAH), which had six campuses state-wide, was transferred from the state Department of Agriculture to the University of Melbourne.³¹ A recent review of the VCAH by the University of Melbourne resulted in the decision, taken in consultation with the state government, to disband VCAH and incorporate its functions into the TAFE sector. Professor Francis Larkins, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research) and Dean of the Faculty of Land and Food Resources at the University of Melbourne, explained the decision in this way:

When colleges like Dookie, Longerenong, Glenormiston and McMillan were established, by and large they were the sole providers in Victoria of agriculture related education. They have found themselves subject to very significant competition from other TAFE providers which...have the capacity to offer a broader curriculum than, for example, Glenormiston or Longerenong...Longerenong offers agriculture related education but it cannot also offer to students courses in computer science, management and so on; whereas other TAFE institutes can offer a distribution of subjects. We have found that students – and this is

28 NSW Farmers' Association, Submission no. 93, pp. 6–7.

29 Isolated Children's Parents' Association of NSW, Submission no. 18.

30 Mrs Margo Duncan, *Transcript of Evidence*, 21 October 2005, pp. 22–5.

31 Faculty of Land and Food Resources, University of Melbourne, Submission no. 68, p. 1.

true in higher education – like combined degrees and they are looking for a broader educational experience.³²

- 2.39 The decision to disband VCAH has caused some consternation. In its submission, Primary Skills Victoria stated:

While campuses managed by the University of Melbourne provided relatively few programs at pre-vocational, operational level (Levels II and III), with the imminent closure of even these, it is hard to see alternative sites being provided and this will only further exacerbate the problem of young people obtaining training opportunities.³³

- 2.40 Primary Skills Victoria foreshadowed a significant loss of facilities and training opportunities:

The recent decision of the University of Melbourne to withdraw from the delivery of TAFE programs was of concern in itself. Subsequent decisions to reallocate hours to a number of providers within a region have heightened concerns even more. Training markets are already thin, splitting delivery could lead to regional delivery becoming unsustainable in the foreseeable future and as has been pointed out earlier, the loss of associated facilities will deal a heavy blow to the ability of the state and industry to provide training to those wishing to enter the industry in the future.³⁴

- 2.41 On the other hand, Mr Wayne Pappin, Head of the Department of Agriculture and Animal Science at the Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE (NMIT), highlighted the success of his institution in delivering agricultural education:

It is important that we recognise that the Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE is a major provider of agriculture training in Victoria, and probably one of the major providers of agriculture training in Australia. It provides training for a huge number of areas, not only aquaculture and a full suite of agriculture programs but also viticulture, wine making, animal studies, civil construction, transport distribution and warehousing – a whole gamut of areas in which we conduct training. As I said, it is a major provider of VET and rural studies training in Victoria.

32 Professor Francis Larkins, *Transcript of Evidence*, 14 November 2005, p. 62.

33 Primary Skills Victoria, Submission no. 101, p. 3.

34 Primary Skills Victoria, Submission no. 101, p. 7.

Importantly, though, it is strategically located in the northern area of Melbourne to pick up the whole gamut of mixed farming activities as they operate around that part of Victoria and for the ease and convenience with which students can attend the campus and/or our thousand-acre broadacre farm that we operate near Whittlesea. It has extensive links with industry, training boards, networks and organisations that are all involved in agriculture of some sort or another. I believe that we have exceptional resources for the delivery of a whole range of training, in particular agriculture and aquaculture, and that includes the soon to be completed meat-processing and packaging plant at our Epping campus. As I mentioned, we have the thousand-acre broadacre farm near Whittlesea and a thousand-acre thoroughbred stud and vineyard at our Eden Park facilities. We have nurseries, wineries, vineyards, a herb farm, an aquaculture research facility and a fish farm. The training that we can offer is broad, particularly in the rural and agricultural areas.³⁵

2.42 While acknowledging the success of NMIT in the delivery of agricultural training in Victoria, the committee also notes the evidence of several witnesses who highlighted the importance of agricultural colleges as a model for rural skills education. The South Australian Farmers Federation observed that the 'lack of specific post-secondary Agricultural Colleges' in South Australia 'limits the opportunities for rural training. Many students move interstate for this training'.³⁶

2.43 Mr Colin Cook, South Australian Representative for the Australian Agriculture Training Providers Network, extolled the virtues of the Western Australian and New South Wales colleges:

We visited the Western Australian agricultural colleges environment because of the extremely good news coming out of WA with regard to their participation rates and the outcomes. I would have to say that the five agricultural colleges in WA, together with Tocal in New South Wales, are excellent models of how secondary age students are immersed in a training program that is totally about agriculture. It leaves the majority of the school based curriculum typical of most secondary schools alone and focuses on agriculture. The kids work, breathe and live a farming environment with exposure to many enterprises and they come away from those organisations really capable and enthused about

35 Mr Wayne Pappin, *Transcript of Evidence*, 14 November 2005, p. 24.

36 South Australian Farmers Federation, Submission no. 87, p. 3.

agriculture as a career. I do not see that happening in lots of other states where agriculture is taught as a component of the normal curriculum, and it is almost like an add-on.³⁷

2.44 He stated further that in South Australia:

We only have schools that teach the normal school curricula. We have schools like Urrbrae, Cleve and Lucindale which have a strong agricultural focus. They are our best exemplars, but they do not come near, from resource, staffing or outcomes implications, to the examples I gave with regard to Tocal and WA.³⁸

2.45 Mr Gregory Hallihan, Executive Officer of Primary Skills Victoria, also praised the examples provided by Western Australia and New South Wales:

Western Australia is a good, solid example that has been there for a long time, particularly in respect of the changing weighting between urban versus rural participation and the fact that it is actually aggregating people together at years 11 and 12 into an agricultural career. When I say agriculture, it is a rural context, so you may not be on farm but you might be a service provider – you could be a welder, a fencer, a mechanic or any number of those. That is a good example to look at. Certainly in Victoria we do not have that capacity. Other states do, to varying degrees. New South Wales is a good example, where the ag colleges are still attached to the Department of Primary Industries or the ag department. Although it is not core business, I think out of this inquiry there needs to be a clear message that the two need to work more closely together, as in the silo of the ag departments and the silo of the education departments.³⁹

2.46 In evidence before the committee, Mr Arthur Blewitt, CEO of AFISC, also praised the work of the agricultural colleges.⁴⁰

2.47 Two important aspects of agricultural colleges were emphasised in the evidence. The first was the need for government support in the form of consistent funding regardless of fluctuations in student numbers. Mrs Duncan described the experience of Tocal College:

37 Mr Colin Cook, *Transcript of Evidence*, 14 November 2006, p. 85.

38 Mr Colin Cook, *Transcript of Evidence*, 14 November 2006, p. 85.

39 Mr Gregory Hallihan, *Transcript of Evidence*, 14 November 2006, p. 15.

40 Mr Arthur Blewitt, *Transcript of Evidence*, 29 March 2006, p. 3.

At present the full-time courses are fully subscribed and applications are very strong for 2006. This has not always been the case. The numbers have fluctuated from time to time. We are not sure why these numbers fluctuate, but they do. Fortunately, New South Wales Agriculture, now the New South Wales Department of Primary Industries, have seen fit to support the college even when numbers have been down a little. This is particularly important. One of the problems that we are aware of occurs when agriculture is in a large comprehensive TAFE college. If the numbers go down, the agricultural student places are taken by other disciplines and never returned to agriculture. This continues to occur, so it is our understanding that the amount of full-time training delivered by TAFE in New South Wales is very much lower than it was 10 years ago.⁴¹

- 2.48 The other consideration was the need to support students in full-time residential courses. Mr Fischer (Western Australian Department of Education and Training) highlighted the withdrawal of funding for full time agricultural college students under the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme in 1994, stating that this 'has prevented and continues to prevent many students from urban areas and rural towns from attending the WA College of Agriculture residential campuses because the families, many on low income, cannot afford the residential boarding fees'.⁴² He urged the reintroduction of allowances:

We are contending that the courses offered at residential agricultural schools and colleges are unique; you cannot get that full-time agricultural education anywhere else. Reinstatement of the allowances for students attending the residential agricultural colleges that provide courses that are not available elsewhere in Western Australia would encourage more young people into the agricultural industry. Providing allowances for students to attend would not only benefit many rural students who cannot attend at the moment – they might be sons and daughters of low-income people – and keep them in the area, but it would also attract urban students to country areas, and hopefully they will stay in the country locations.⁴³

41 Mrs Margo Duncan, *Transcript of Evidence*, 21 October 2005, p. 23.

42 Mr Garry Fischer, *Transcript of Evidence*, 20 July 2005, p. 27.

43 Mr Garry Fischer, *Transcript of Evidence*, 20 July 2005, p. 28.

Committee Conclusions

2.49 The Committee firmly believes that agricultural colleges provide an essential service in rural skills training and education, providing comprehensive and detailed training in a manner that other institutions cannot. Agricultural colleges have been the traditional grounding for industry leadership and further education in agriculture. Despite the problems faced by agricultural colleges in maintaining their relevance and sustaining their existence, the committee regards the success of the model in Western Australia and its reinvigoration in Queensland as testament to the relevance and value of agricultural colleges. The committee believes it is incumbent upon state and federal governments to ensure the survival and rebirth of Australia's agricultural colleges, with adequate funding and facilities.

Recommendation 8

- 2.50 **The committee recommends that the Australian Government, in conjunction with State and Territory Governments, develop a national framework for the reinvigoration of Australia's agricultural colleges, including:**
- **Stable and sustained funding for agricultural colleges in each state;**
 - **Funding and incentives for national coordination of programs between colleges; and**
 - **The creation of effective mechanisms for industry and community involvement in the development of curricula.**

Australian Apprenticeships

- 2.51 Australian Apprenticeships is the name given to a range of apprenticeships and traineeships providing a mixture of on-the-job and formal training to new starters and existing employees in industry. These include school based traineeships and apprenticeships in which students from year 10 upwards commence training while completing school.
- 2.52 Training and assessment occurs within the formal structure of industry training packages and the qualifications conform to the Australian Qualifications Framework. The formal training and assessment

component is provided by RTOs (including TAFE) in conjunction with employers.

- 2.53 A range of incentive payments are available to employers taking on trainees and apprentices. Australian Apprenticeships Centres (formerly New Apprenticeship Centres) are contracted by the Australian Government to provide administrative support for the Australian Apprenticeships programs, including administration of all Australian government incentive payments, and help match employers and apprentices.
- 2.54 The degree of distinction between traineeships and apprenticeships varies from state to state, but broadly speaking apprenticeships are structured programs of 3–4 years duration in traditional trades and traineeships are targeted programs of 1–2 years duration in non-trade occupations. While a Rural Operations New Apprenticeship covering a range of Certificate II and III qualifications has been developed,⁴⁴ most Australian Apprentices undergoing rural skills training are trainees.⁴⁵
- 2.55 The success or otherwise of the Australian Apprenticeship system in rural skills training was a matter of some conjecture in the evidence put before the committee. Mr Alan Brown, Chair of the Rural Affairs Committee and Board Director, NSW Farmers' Association, believed traineeships were an important first step to training in rural skills, a critical entry point on a career pathway.⁴⁶ On the other hand, Mr Peter Berrisford, a former Assistant Director of the Wimmera Institute of TAFE and General Manager of TAFE, argued in his submission that 'workplace training in VET (apprenticeships and traineeships) is used as a cost saver and its quality is very problematic, especially in agriculture'.⁴⁷ Mr Keith Mutton, a TAFE teacher from NSW, was more forthright:

To summarise, competency based training is only as good as the person giving the training, and much of the competency based training is being given by people on the job, on the site, who are interested in cheap labour and getting the job done. They do not care whether or not the person is trained; all they want to do is get someone in and get the dollars. There are businesses around Tamworth that turn trainees over and over like sausages, and a lot of times they are not even interested in meeting their commitments when they are supposed to be off the job.

44 DEST, Submission no. 94, p. 57.

45 Mrs Yvon Wigley, *Transcript of Evidence*, 10 April 2006, p. 19.

46 Mr Alan Brown, *Transcript of Evidence*, 20 October 2005, p. 75.

47 Mr Peter Berrisford, Submission no. 54, p. 3.

Competency based training is excellent if you have someone who is really committed to doing the job but it is very poor if you have not.⁴⁸

- 2.56 Ms Condell (Conservation Farmers Inc.) strongly supported 'school based traineeships and traineeships in the agriculture sector generally':

I think it is a fantastic framework. It is a brilliant way to support young students before they leave school to go back to their properties, and if they want to go on to other tertiary education they receive credits – higher OPs and things like that – by doing their school based traineeships. It really is not a waste of time for anybody.⁴⁹

- 2.57 However, she also acknowledged that traineeships in her region had been less than an unqualified success:

Unfortunately, in this region the system has been fairly poor. There has not been a seamless process. The agricultural colleges have been in disarray, so when farmers have decided to put a toe in the water they have received poor service. They have said: 'We've had a go at that. It doesn't work; let's not go there; it's too complex.' To get it going again in this region will be quite difficult, unfortunately.

Another thing we mentioned was the dissemination of information around traineeships, particularly agricultural traineeships. Traditionally, schools have not had a good base of people who understand what is required, so the guidance officers in schools lack professional development in this area. Another issue they have is that, when they do organise it, they are often very badly let down by the training providers.

I think we have seen a peak in this region – we got up to 60 students, I believe, and it is back down to about 16 or 17 at the moment. That is right across all training organisations, so it has not been wonderfully successful, which is a real pity because there is a fantastic framework there that could be great if it was well supported and well promoted. Farmers generally do not know about traineeships. Of those 40 women we surveyed, none of them knew that a \$4,000 incentive payment was available if they put on a trainee.⁵⁰

48 Mr Keith Mutton, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 March 2006, p. 35.

49 Ms Jillian Condell, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 April 2006, p. 39.

50 Ms Jillian Condell, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 April 2006, pp. 39–40.

- 2.58 The importance of the incentive payments was emphasised by Mr De Landgraftt (WAFarmers), who stated that ‘without that subsidy very few traineeships would be delivered in rural areas, into the agricultural areas’.⁵¹
- 2.59 However, there was some concern expressed that the incentive payments stopped too early within the qualifications framework. In its submission, the NSW Department of Primary Industries noted that ‘incentives for youth training, particularly traineeships, are often difficult to apply and interpret for training organisations’:
- For example the current incentives for training are mainly for Certificate III, even though the needs in the industry extend beyond this level of qualification. It is difficult for a trainee to undertake the extra training desired, due to lack of incentives.⁵²
- 2.60 The same point was made by the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture Advisory Council and the C B Alexander Agricultural College, Tocal Advisory Council in their submission:
- The qualifications available and funded through the VET system are not necessarily in line with industry needs. For example traineeship incentives in NSW are currently for Certificate III only. This means that the higher order and more long-term natured training is not undertaken. Employers will not support their trainees to undertake Certificate IV training even though it’s in this area that the trainee should move for future employment.⁵³
- 2.61 In evidence before the committee, Mrs Duncan (Tocal Agricultural College) explained:
- Traineeships usually run from certificate II to certificate IV. The provisions at the moment only allow funding support to occur for a student to be trained between two levels. Most newcomers therefore start at certificate II and receive it at certificate III after one or two years. There is no incentive for an employer or an employee for that trainee to continue their training to certificate IV. We have a system that is more intent on getting numbers through than on having high-level training. This is a real problem for our dairy apprenticeship program and, given the pressure that the dairy industry is under, this could, if we are not careful, see the

51 Mr Trevor De Landgraftt, *Transcript of Evidence*, 20 July 2005, p. 5.

52 Department of Primary Industries NSW, Submission no. 91, p. 3.

53 Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture Advisory Council and CB Alexander Agricultural College, Tocal Advisory Council, Submission no. 22, p. 7.

numbers decline much further. Members should be aware of this issue and make amends so that traineeships can go through more than two levels. There is no reason why they should not go through to level V diploma.⁵⁴

- 2.62 There was also a perception that incentive payments were simply being siphoned off by training providers. Ms Jann O'Connor, Training Development Manager for the Irrigation Association of Australia, stated:

The criteria for state government payments to an RTO to go towards the training become very problematic and, while I do not have evidence, I have heard stories that if you enrol in a course and you are not a trainee it is one price and if you are a trainee the price goes up. The payment which is given by the federal government as an incentive to the employer to put on a trainee is not being seen that way. It is seen as being the money that is there to actually train the person. While in some states there is some money which goes to the RTO to train them, generally that incentive payment gets sucked up. The reality is that the only incentive there for somebody to put on a trainee in irrigation is simply the fact that at the end of it they have somebody who is qualified – and who may then go off and work for somebody else. So it is a very difficult situation. I am sure that was never the intention of the incentive payment scheme, but that is how it is working out.⁵⁵

- 2.63 A third problem was the perception that Australian Apprenticeship Centres were working to meet contractual objectives rather than meeting the needs of rural industries, targeting soft options to fill quotas. Mr Geoffrey Bloom, Executive Director of Rural Skills Australia, told the committee:

Part of the problem is that the Northern Territory NAC [New Apprenticeship Centre], for example, might have a target of 40 apprentices, and I think it will be under ANZSIC codes, so it is mining, agriculture and fishing. They can probably get those 40 apprentices in two or three big mining companies. Once they have achieved their target, they do not have to travel to VRD or one of the big stations to sign them up. They can post the stuff out. The second thing is that NACs only market their name; they only say they are a particular NAC. They do not market agricultural, dairy or specific apprenticeships. Some of them are doing a very good

54 Mrs Margo Duncan, *Transcript of Evidence*, 21 October 2005, p. 23.

55 Ms Jann O'Connor, *Transcript of Evidence*, 20 October 2005, p. 20.

job, I might add, but others just market their name. I think the departmental statistics are that something like 85 per cent of employers come with a trainee under their arm to be signed up. So there is really only matching for about 15 per cent.⁵⁶

- 2.64 A similar issue was raised by Mr Hallinan (Primary Skills Victoria), who argued that the driver for school based apprenticeships was the need to meet targets and quotas rather than meet training needs:

In some sense, if we had a really high participation in agriculture you would say that that was a benefit, even though the system is not working very well, in that at least they are engaged in agriculture and getting some taste for it. The fact is that they are not; they are tending to go to the softer, easier ones where they can gain experience. I would be surprised if this has not come out in some of the submissions, but the distortion is where subsidies are paid for school based new apprentices. That is seen as the driver for both the employer, and in this case very opportunistic new apprenticeship centres – it means they get their numbers ticked off. There has been a high intensity of activity pushing school based new apprentices within schools, which looks good on the government's numbers as far as, 'We have this many new apprentices engaged'. Many of them do not complete the apprenticeship because there is no way they can get through the apprenticeship in the period of time they are at school. Often it is really a way of gaining funding and satisfying other vocational outcomes within those secondary schools.⁵⁷

- 2.65 Another problem identified with rural traineeships was the issue of supporting trainees spread over a wide geographical area employed in a diverse range of workplaces. Mr Malcolm McKay, College Director, Australian Agricultural College Corporation, observed:

I think one of the big problems is being able to service traineeships successfully in what is a very diverse workplace. It is quite different from servicing welding traineeships et cetera where they might be large organisations in metropolitan areas. These are dotted all over the countryside, there is generally only one trainee in an organisation and they are very diverse, so the actual physical difficulty of servicing them is quite a significant hold-back in being able to have a successful outcome. If you cannot service the students well, then the whole scheme gets a bad reputation.

56 Mr Geoffrey Bloom, *Transcript of Evidence*, 10 August 2005, p. 12.

57 Mr Gregory Hallinan, *Transcript of Evidence*, 14 November 2005, p. 17.

Our philosophy is to try in the first instance to work with larger employers who do have a number of trainees, and we have been working with, for example, the Australian Agricultural Company and the Northern Australian Pastoral Company where they do take quite large numbers of new workers into their program and you can get some sort of concentration to be able to provide appropriate services to those students and those trainees while they are in employment. If you can then demonstrate a successful outcome, it is a much easier sell, if you like, to other farmers. If we can develop a model, we can service them reasonably.⁵⁸

Committee Conclusions

- 2.66 The committee is of the view that Australian Apprenticeships provide a valuable mechanism for structuring and funding training in rural skills. It is evident, however, that the scheme is not operating as effectively as it should in providing training to rural trainees and apprentices. The system of administration needs to be overhauled to ensure that funds and places are directed to where they are needed, and that training is conducted in an appropriate manner. The committee believes that a proportion of funding and places should be specifically dedicated to rural skills training.
- 2.67 Moreover, the committee agrees that the scope and duration of traineeships/apprenticeships should be extended to ensure that those who enter the pathway with a view to obtaining more advanced qualifications may do so, to their own benefit and to the benefit of industry more broadly. Furthermore, the system of funding needs to be overhauled to reflect the diverse and difficult circumstances under which rural training takes place.

Recommendation 9

- 2.68 **The committee recommends that the Australian Government undertake a review of the Australian Apprenticeship scheme with a view to:**
- **Specifically allocating training funds and places to New Apprenticeships in rural skills;**
 - **Altering funding arrangements to properly reflect the cost of providing training and supervision in rural skills;**

- **Extending funding and incentive payments to cover a broader range of qualifications; and**
- **Ensuring that there is rigorous quality control over training outcomes.**

Australian Technical Colleges

- 2.69 In September 2004, the Australian Government announced its decision to establish twenty-four Australian Technical Colleges (ATCs) as part of its broader strategy to address skills needs in the trades. The ATCs will operate as specialist senior secondary schools, providing education and technical training relevant to the trades, raising the profile of school based vocational training and strengthening the national training system. They are part of the Government's strategy to address industry skill needs and to ensure that high quality VET is valued as a career pathway. A majority of the campuses will be located in regional centres.⁵⁹ As at September 2006, five ATCs had commenced operations.⁶⁰
- 2.70 The committee notes, however, that while this initiative will direct resources towards improving skills in regional areas, ATCs are directed at trade skills such as metalworking and engineering, automotive trades, building and construction, electrotechnology and commercial cookery, rather than rural skills per se. While some of these skills are used in rural industries, they do not go to the core skills and knowledge requirements of agriculture. In its submission, the NSW Farmers' Association questioned 'whether these new colleges will address skills shortages in rural and related industries'.⁶¹ In its submission, Primary Skills Victoria expressed 'disappointment ... that agriculture was not listed as one of the sectors whose training needs were to be addressed through this initiative'.⁶²
- 2.71 In evidence to the committee, Mr Cook (Australian Agriculture Training Providers Network) recommended that the Australian Government consider 'extrapolating the Australian technical colleges concept to incorporate Australian technical agricultural colleges in those states where effective agricultural training for secondary age students does not exist'.⁶³ Mr Hallihan (Primary Skills Victoria), suggested 'the establishment of year

59 DEST, Submission no. 94, p. 49.

60 DEST, Submission no. 117, p. 4.

61 NSW Farmers' Association, Submission no. 93, p. 7.

62 Primary Skills Victoria, Submission no. 41, p. 1.

63 Mr Colin Cook, *Transcript of Evidence*, 14 November 2005, p. 80.

11 technical colleges consistent with the current policy direction of the federal government, which has left agriculture off as a high demand area':

It is suggested that these schools would have an integrated curriculum where agriculture is used as a driving force for delivery of core subjects – in other words, it is integrated, not just an add-on and a dag at the end of the sheep, excuse the pun – and will provide a pathway for students in urban and large city centres to aggregate together in what would otherwise be thin markets. This would provide a strategic link between programs now offered within secondary schools and the VET sector, namely the school-based new apprenticeships, Ag in High, years 11 and 12, and VET in schools, and successful students would then enter directly into apprenticeships or universities providing agriculture degrees.⁶⁴

Committee Conclusions

- 2.72 The committee welcomes the increase in training opportunities in traditional trade skills provided to regional areas through the ATCs, but believes that an opportunity is being lost to target shortages in rural skills. The establishment of ATCs has given the Australian Government an opportunity to provide an integrated framework for agricultural education in rural and regional Australia, to make the ATCs an example for how training in rural skills can be provided. The committee believes that the Australian Government should give urgent consideration to establishing agriculture courses at those ATCs with the closest links to rural areas, and give consideration to expanding the number of campuses to cover those regions, such as the Riverina, primarily concerned with agriculture.

Recommendation 10

- 2.73 **The committee recommends that the Australian Government give urgent consideration to establishing agriculture courses at Australian Technical Colleges, and expanding the number of Colleges to cover regions principally associated with primary production.**

64 Mr Gregory Hallihan, *Transcript of Evidence*, 14 November 2005, p. 12.

FarmBis

- 2.74 The Australian Government's most important direct contribution to VET in rural industries is the Agriculture – Advancing Australia FarmBis program, which is jointly funded on a matching basis by the Commonwealth and the States. FarmBis is designed to:
- provide financial assistance (via subsidies) to primary producers to undertake business and natural resource management training and education activities;
 - forge collaborative partnerships between industry groups and other key stakeholders in the design and delivery of learning activities through seed funding of targeted industry education and training initiatives; and
 - encourage the development of a quality, competitive and diverse rural industry training sector.⁶⁵
- 2.75 FarmBis aims to foster a culture of 'continuous learning' amongst primary producers, encouraging them to plan for their future training needs as part of their overall business planning. Education and training activities funded by FarmBis are directed at farm management related activities and include:
- general business management (including strategic planning);
 - financial management;
 - marketing;
 - human resource management (including leadership);
 - natural resource management; and
 - production management.
- 2.76 The first FarmBis program (1998–2001) was regarded as highly successful, with around 82 000 primary producers attending over 115 000 training activities. The second program (2001–04) had 72 000 new participants and 22 000 repeat participants attending some 145 000 activities. FarmBis III will run from July 2004 to June 2008. FarmBis surveys indicate that 92% of participants 'were able to incorporate their learning into the operation of their business enterprise'.⁶⁶
- 2.77 In its submission, the Commonwealth Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry noted:

65 DAFF, Submission no. 66, p. 8.

66 DAFF, Submission no. 66, p. 9.

A significant achievement of the program has been its impact on the way education and training is provided to primary producers. The rural training market has progressively responded to the demand driven FarmBis model by delivering activities that better suit the needs of producers both in terms of content and availability. The program's emphasis on short to medium courses delivered on a group training basis has proven to be very successful, with a growing number of producers participating in repeat learning activities after their initial experience.

The high recognition and wide support of the FarmBis program by primary producers across rural and regional Australia suggests that the Australian Government's investment in this program has been justified.⁶⁷

- 2.78 The general view of FarmBis put to the committee was that it was a very useful and highly successful program. Rural Skills Australia urged that funding from all sources for FarmBis be maintained at current levels 'to ensure the continued participation of this important client group in further education and training, and to complement other training delivery activities involving current and future members of the rural workforce'.⁶⁸
- 2.79 FarmBis was praised by both the Western Australian⁶⁹ and Queensland Governments in their submissions, with the Queensland Government stating:

Initiatives such as the DPI&F-managed FarmBis, which provides accredited and non-accredited training, allow primary producers to access information and training that meets their immediate needs and also provide an opportunity to identify the type of training sought by the agribusiness sector. FarmBis enables access to timely, flexible and customised responses to issues impacting on enterprise profitability and therefore provides an important aspect to overall training delivery.⁷⁰

- 2.80 In his submission, Mr Peter Berrisford, stated that:

The structure of the FarmBis program has taken into account the two important issues associated with farmers and farm workers. These being, their lower than average education level and the fact

67 DAFF, Submission no. 66, p. 9.

68 Rural Skills Australia, Submission no. 71, p. 2.

69 Government of Western Australia, Submission no. 19, p. 1; see also Mrs Kay Bodman, *Transcript of Evidence*, 20 July 2005, p. 30.

70 Queensland Government, Submission no. 51, p. 10.

that the average age of farmers and farm workers is in the high 50's...

FarmBis as a source of funding has become increasingly popular and is a well recognised badge for agricultural professional development and training. In recent years the FarmBis program has done a lot to encourage farmers and farm workers to undertake structured training.⁷¹

2.81 He also observed, however, that much of the training undertaken through FarmBis was not VET accredited and did 'not lead participants down the qualifications path except when they actually undertake a VET accredited course'.⁷²

2.82 On the other hand, Mr Neale Price, National President of the Australasia-Pacific Extension Network (APEN), expressed the personal view that FarmBis had 'achieved next to nothing', largely producing training for training's sake:

From my point of view, the fact that there was a particular course that got between a 25 per cent and 90 per cent subsidy across the board was absolutely ludicrous. People did training for the sake of doing training, because they thought they would get something for nothing. There was little or no follow-up because, with the ability to get FarmBis, a lot of consultants jumped into areas and left. The glory of having people on the ground is that you have follow-up, that there is a relationship created between the person wanting to learn and the instructor. For my personal perspective, I believe that offering taxation incentives for farming and going back to the training guarantee levy or something like that would be a far better way of spending money than necessarily providing that level of support through FarmBis.⁷³

2.83 Most of the criticism directed at FarmBis, however, came from those who supported the program, but wished to see it applied more broadly and/or more consistently across jurisdictions. In its submission, Rural Skills Australia advocated extending FarmBis to farm employees as well as farm managers as a way of addressing current and future skill shortages.⁷⁴

2.84 Rural Industries Skill Training (RIST) argued for the extension of FarmBis to Certificate III training, in order to connect with the older age groups

71 Mr Peter Berrisford, Submission no. 54, pp. 6-7.

72 Mr Peter Berrisford, Submission no. 54, p. 6.

73 Mr Neale Price, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 April 2006, p. 33.

74 Rural Skills Australia, Submission no. 71, p. 5

and those lacking formal education, a call echoed by the NSW Department of Primary Industries in its submission.⁷⁵ In its submission, RIST stated:

Production type training is an area that attracts this group of farmers. They tend to feel more comfortable in the very basic type training particularly in growing pastures which equates to Certificate 3 which are lower level competencies than are currently supported by FarmBis and therefore they do not qualify for financial subsidy. Once they have participated in one activity they are more likely to become more involved in more advanced skill development programs.⁷⁶

2.85 The Cattle Council of Australia also argued for extending FarmBis to Certificate III courses, and other training relevant to industry, such as ChemCert courses and training by Animal Health Australia.⁷⁷

2.86 The removal of FarmBis funding for ChemCert courses was also highlighted in the submission of ChemCert Australia, which argued that the withdrawal of funding had had a significant effect on the uptake of ChemCert training. The submission called for the reintroduction of FarmBis funding for ChemCert training.⁷⁸ In her evidence before the committee, Dr Margaret Clarke, Executive Manager of ChemCert Australia, stated:

ChemCert training is the training for agriculture and veterinary chemical use on-farm. Until around 2001, ChemCert training was eligible for FarmBis funding. The situation varied somewhat between states, as you might expect, as to the exact year when it was dropped off. But across all states where it had been eligible for FarmBis funding, we had a massive reduction in training numbers, in the order of 30 to 40 per cent across states, the minute that funding was no longer available. What that meant in reality for the farmer was that the cost of their training went from around \$50 for a two-day course – which is what it was when FarmBis was there – to full cost recovery for them. It varies across states, but we say on average it is around \$300 for a two-day course, which for full cost recovery is very cheap, when you consider two-day training in remote areas. So we work very hard to keep costs down, but the impact of training costs changing from \$50 to \$300

75 Department of Primary Industries NSW, Submission no. 91, p. 2.

76 Rural Industries Skill Training, Submission no. 29, p. 6.

77 Cattle Council of Australia, Submission no. 75, pp. 8–10.

78 ChemCert Australia, Submission no. 23, p. 5.

on average was very significant and had a very serious effect on the numbers of those who came through for training.⁷⁹

- 2.87 In evidence before the committee, however, DAFF emphasised that the focus of FarmBis was deliberately placed upon management level training, with production related activities being left to other providers:

Our programs focus on management and some production skills. Other training providers focus on different points along the skills continuum. For example, state extension services are most strongly operational at the operational level and the production level; agricultural high schools are very strong at the operational level; and agribusiness operates across the whole spectrum but is perhaps fairly light-on at the management end of the spectrum. Increasingly, segments within this continuum of training have matured, particularly at the production level. We have deliberately enhanced our focus on providing training and skills development at the management level. This is demonstrated in the progressive shift in the focus of the FarmBis program, which provides assistance for training towards management level programs. I have seen, from looking at some of the submissions made to this inquiry, that there is a substantial body of commentators also saying that this is a gap in the farm sector. It is a gap that FarmBis is attempting to fill.⁸⁰

- 2.88 Another criticism of FarmBis was the inconsistent approach to funding across the various States. Mr Bill Hamill, CEO of Rural Industries Skill Training, noted that 'a farmer gets a better subsidy in South Australia than in Victoria. They get none in New South Wales'.⁸¹ As Mr David Galvin, General Manager of the Indigenous Land Corporation, explained to the committee, this could make utilising FarmBis across jurisdictions difficult and frustrating:

As we have just said, we have not been able to tap into FarmBis nationally. While the grant funding is being provided to state and territory governments, each state and territory government has its own way of doing things. I have previously taken these issues up with the secretary of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and I have been told it is quite difficult once the money has been provided. From our perspective, because the program has been so successful and is based on the rural skills and

79 Dr Margaret Clarke, *Transcript of Evidence*, 7 September 2005, p. 15.

80 Mr Ian Thompson, DAFF, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 August 2006, p. 2.

81 Mr Bill Hamill, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 February 2006, p. 10.

industry...we would like to see it being rolled out nationally and in a consistent fashion.⁸²

- 2.89 Mr Samuel Inglis, Director of Corporate Training, Marcus Oldham College, also highlighted the limitations of FarmBis, urging a single national system for registration:

Taking FarmBis as an example, we run a national leadership program here every year and attract 35 to 40 people from all around Australia. In order to run that program we have to register it across six different states. The registration process is different for each state, so we have virtually said, 'If you want to come down and do the course, you apply for the funds.' It tends to get unwieldily. The other thing is that we are missing out on the transferability of a lot of these programs. If we develop an initiative here, why can't we transfer it to Queensland and deliver it? Why can't we take it to Western Australia and deliver it? FarmBis is limiting that to a certain degree, it tends to become far more localised. The local governments manage it and run it.⁸³

- 2.90 The apiary industry had a particular issue with the lack of national consistency – that they were not necessarily recognised as primary producers for the purposes of FarmBis funding. In its submission, the Australian Honey Bee Industry Council noted:

Many of the existing State FarmBis forms ask respondents to indicate whether they operate a commercial farm or fishing venture. Apiarists are primary producers without actually owning or managing a farm property. This has led to some confusion with FarmBis personnel refusing funding to beekeepers who can not indicate that they operate a commercial farm.⁸⁴

- 2.91 In evidence before the committee, Mr Stephen Ware, Executive Director of the Australian Honey Bee Industry Council, stated:

The other issue we have raised is FarmBis funding. We are an industry that in the past has been heavily reliant on FarmBis funding to provide training. The reason for that is that there has been a lack of RTOs and resources in the education area. Some of that is being addressed by the fact that the industry, at long last, has developed its own competency standards. But we have had all sorts of problems with FarmBis as far as its administration goes

82 Mr David Galvin, *Transcript of Evidence*, 7 December 2005, p. 5.

83 Mr Samuel Inglis, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2005, p. 7.

84 Australian Honey Bee Industry Council, Submission no. 79, p. 5.

and the differences in administration between the states and even the recognition of the apiary industry as an industry. One of the states did not even recognise apiarists as primary producers. The other aspect of having part-time beekeepers who go on to become full-time commercial beekeepers is an issue when some states do not even recognise them. We believe that, if nothing else, this inquiry should recognise that there is a real need for the FarmBis system to be overhauled and developed along the lines of supporting and identifying the needs of particular industries and using the funding to the best effect for both the industry and communities' resources.⁸⁵

2.92 In their submissions, both the Cattle Council of Australia and Australian Wool Innovation Ltd urged a nationally consistent approach to FarmBis funding.⁸⁶

2.93 A particular grievance was the withdrawal of New South Wales from the FarmBis program, and the substitution of FarmBis with Pro-Farm, an initiative of the NSW Government.⁸⁷ The NSW Farmers' Association regarded the ending of FarmBis funding and the initiation of Pro-Farm as a disaster:

There was no reference to the future of FarmBis in the NSW Budget handed down 24 May 2005. The NSW Government announced two days later that FarmBis III would not be implemented in NSW, meaning that NSW farmers would be the only farmers in the country not to have access to this very popular program.

The NSW Government has since announced that it will introduce an alternate 'agricultural education strategy' with a \$5.8m budget allocation, which will include:

- Residential courses and distance education for students, leading to Certificate and Diploma qualifications;
- A pilot program to provide specialized short courses for part-time farmers; and
- The creation of 'Pro-Farm', a series of short courses for farmers and agribusiness professionals.

The Association was not at any stage consulted by the NSW Government prior to the announcement of this alternate

85 Mr Stephen Ware, *Transcript of Evidence*, 20 October 2005, p. 25.

86 Cattle Council of Australia, Submission no. 75, p. 6; Australian Wool Innovation Ltd, Submission no. 73, p. 3.

87 Department of Primary Industries NSW, Submission no. 91, pp. 1, 5.

'agricultural education strategy'. In fact, despite the new program being scheduled to commence 1 July 2005, as at late June 2005, the Association had still not seen any detail on the new approach, other than a basic overview listed in a media release from the Minister for Primary Industries.

The Association has grave concerns about this new strategy. It should be noted that the \$5.8m allocation covers all three aspects of the package. It would therefore appear that only a small portion of these funds will go towards those courses that will be subsidised, as the Department of Primary Industries has since advised that not all courses will attract a subsidy. The \$15 million previously allocated by the Federal Government for FarmBis III in NSW is now lost for the training agenda. Moreover, industry was not consulted at any stage about this proposal, which could effectively lead to a monopoly in the training field in NSW.⁸⁸

- 2.94 The Cattle Council of Australia also questioned the wisdom of the NSW Government's decision to withdraw from FarmBis, stating in its submission:

It is therefore most distressing for CCA to note the apparent withdrawal from Farmbis by the NSW government, and would caution that this decision will have adverse impacts on the NSW economy. The timing of such a decision is also deleterious, given at a time when producers are struggling with drought management, and without strong incentives may lack the resources to participate in training.⁸⁹

- 2.95 Mrs Margaret Brown, representing the Country Women's Association of NSW, stated in evidence:

Our members think that the wiping away of FarmBis to put in Profarm is a disaster because Profarm offers courses that whoever the providers are think farmers should want to do. FarmBis asked farmers what sorts of courses they wanted.⁹⁰

Committee Conclusions

- 2.96 The committee is of the opinion that FarmBis has been a valuable conduit for training funding for rural industries, and believes the Australian Government should make a long term commitment to the program to give
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88 NSW Farmers' Association, Submission no. 93, p. 10.

89 Cattle Council of Australia, Submission no. 75, p. 6.

90 Mrs Margaret Brown, *Transcript of Evidence*, 10 March 2006, p. 24.

certainty to industry. The committee advocates extending FarmBis funding to a greater range of courses, such as those at a Certificate III level, and to cover farm employees as well as managers. This will allow FarmBis to provide incentives and opportunities for a greater number of people to undergo formal training. The committee also supports resuming FarmBis funding of ChemCert courses.

- 2.97 The need for national consistency in FarmBis funding is obvious. The different criteria and levels of funding for training between States is an obstacle to cross border and national initiatives. Added to that is the decision of the New South Wales Government to withdraw from FarmBis, leaving that State's producers without access to that funding at all. Either a nationally consistent approach must be achieved, or the administration of FarmBis funds should be undertaken directly by the Commonwealth.

Recommendation 11

- 2.98 **The committee recommends that the Australian Government give an immediate undertaking to continue FarmBis beyond its current expiry date in 2008.**

Recommendation 12

- 2.99 **The committee recommends that the Australian Government, in conjunction with State and Territory Governments, achieve a nationally consistent approach to FarmBis funding, including:**
- **Extending FarmBis funding to rural employees;**
 - **Extending FarmBis funding to Certificate III level courses; and**
 - **Resuming FarmBis funding of ChemCert training.**

Industry Initiatives

- 2.100 Frustration with VET and RTOs not meeting industry requirements has led several industry groups to develop training courses and packages on their own initiative. The best known of these is Cotton Basics, the packaging and branding of a set of basic competencies directly relevant to the cotton industry. In its submission, Cotton Australia stated:

Cotton Australia in an attempt to overcome this dis-enfranchising of the employer took a decision some two years ago to adjust the agenda and have the VET system work for the industry. Therefore to attract the attention of the employer, the concept of talking in terms of using the jargon: e.g.

Certificate II in Agricultural Production

With Modules RTCA2705A Work effectively in the industry and RTC2801A Participate in workplace communications,

has been dropped in favour of having a simply branded position called –

“Cotton Basics”.

As with an industry recognised *ChemCert Certificate*, the employer will recognise immediately that a young person who presents themselves with a *Cotton Basics Certificate* can do just that – undertake basic operations on a cotton farm – e.g. start a tractor, start a siphon, knows some first aid, etc. There also exist the opportunity to have on the reverse side of the *Cotton Basics Certificate* the particular “jargon” description as currently utilised; but in small print and of use only to the bureaucratic process – not to the employer.⁹¹

- 2.101 Cotton Australia is already looking at more advanced training packages – cotton intermediate and cotton advanced – to further develop the industry’s training structure.⁹² It has also developed Cotton Plus, essentially Cotton Basics but with additional competencies relating to other industries. As Mr Ralph Leutton, Program Manager, Policy and Legislation for Cotton Australia, explained, it was a jargon free passport for farmers to recognise skills and workers moving within and between industries:

...as an offshoot of Cotton Basics we have a derivative called Cotton Plus. It is cotton plus cropping, horticulture or cattle. He can have his Cotton Basics training and some added training if he wishes. He might say: ‘I’m going to travel. I’m heading south and I’ll end up in the horticulture area. I might do a couple of modules and get those competencies added to my cotton basic.’ So he will end up with a Cotton Plus. It is another piece of paper that says ‘Cotton Plus’. When he turns up at the farm in your area, he has his Cotton Basics and his Cotton Plus and that is all he has to say.

91 Cotton Australia Ltd, Submission no. 59, pp. 2–3.

92 Mr Ralph Leutton, *Transcript of Evidence*, 20 October 2005, pp. 86, 87.

The farmer will recognise it and say, 'This guy's Cotton Plus has orcharding in it. Let's get to work. He knows how to start a tractor. He knows how to use a fogger. He can do some spraying for us.'⁹³

- 2.102 The Cotton Basics formula is seen as a model for other industries. Mr Graeme Harris, Secretary of the National Association of Agricultural Educators, regarded such branded packages as a way forward

It allows industry to recognise and be confident of the training that is provided because they see it is relevant and it is directly for their particular course. For the trainers it means that they also see relevance because they have links directly into particular industry rather than talking in generic terms.⁹⁴

- 2.103 Mr Niel Jacobsen, Project Manager for the NSW Rural and Related Industries Skill Advisory Committee, agreed, recommending that:

...industry itself...develop programs based around the units of competency, possibly around industry accreditation programs, as, for instance, the cotton industry has done with Cotton Basics. It seemed to capture the imagination of the New South Wales Department of Education and Training, which funded some resources for the development of that. I think if we could link the formal training structures to industry accreditation rather than qualifications that might be a way to go as well.⁹⁵

- 2.104 Other examples of industry bodies developing training packages themselves include AgForce in Queensland,⁹⁶ and the Australian Dairy Industry.⁹⁷ Indeed, as Mr Robert Poole, Deputy Chief Executive Officer and Policy Director, Australian Dairy Farmers Ltd, told the committee, the dairy industry in Victoria has taken substantial steps towards controlling its own training needs:

Since forwarding the submission, two profound things have happened to us in the dairy industry. We have completed a priority setting process which has reconfirmed skills development as the absolute fundamental of our success. I cannot stress it any more strongly in terms of the direction and the energies that we plan to put into skill development. It is the absolute foundation we believe of the future success of dairying. That is not just on farm; it

93 Mr Ralph Leutton, *Transcript of Evidence*, 20 October 2005, p. 90.

94 Mr Graeme Harris, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 March 2006, p. 42.

95 Mr Niel Jacobsen, *Transcript of Evidence*, 21 October 2005, p. 2.

96 Mrs Wendy Allen, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 April 2006, p. 11.

97 Australian Dairy Farmers Ltd, Submission no. 72, p. 7.

is at the service provision level and also at the research level. The next most or equally profound thing that has happened is the fact that, with the withdrawal of the University of Melbourne from vocational education training here in Victoria, through the review that I described earlier, we made a decision as an industry to bid for those dairy hours. That constitutes 80 per cent of the hours in the state of Victoria, which is the main dairy state. We did that in a consortium through our service provider, Dairy Australia, and in a joint venture with GOTAFE – Goulburn Ovens TAFE. We were successful in that bid, and as a result, through GOTAFE and Dairy Australia, the dairy industry successfully now controls 80 per cent of the vocational hours in Victoria. It is something we are very happy about and it describes the lengths to which we are prepared to go to influence education and training directly in the dairy industry.⁹⁸

2.105 Mr Poole explained:

We were not prepared to let dairy training disappear into the TAFE sector where we feel the outcomes of that were too funding driven, too input driven, not outcomes driven. We felt that the learning packages in the TAFE system were becoming less attractive to the dairy industry day by day. The decision of the University of Melbourne to withdraw was a once in a lifetime opportunity for us, and we went to great lengths to grab control of those hours.⁹⁹

2.106 Another example of industry taking control of training is the Grains Industry Training Network (GITN) in Victoria, which acts as a broker, identifying training needs and those best able to fulfil them, and bringing them together. In its submission, GITN noted that it 'has worked tirelessly to gain cooperation between the service providers to ensure what is needed is provided. The outcomes from this are that the most appropriate trainers are accessed, programs are delivered that meet identified needs'.¹⁰⁰ GITN claimed a number of successes through this approach:

For example GITN introduced Farmer Updates into Victoria and developed a range of Workshops such as Financial Analysis, Succession Planning, Snail Management, Share Farming and Leasing. GITN was responsible for the first Company Directors Course to be delivered outside the metropolitan area. It initiated

98 Mr Robert Poole, *Transcript of Evidence*, 14 November 2005, p. 69.

99 Mr Robert Poole, *Transcript of Evidence*, 14 November 2005, p. 69.

100 Grains Industry Training Network, Submission no. 42, p. 2.

and delivered the very successful Women in Grains project, which encouraged women to be involved in skill development at a level which addressed their needs. The success of this program was such [that] Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC) initiated a national program Partners in Grain based on the principles of Women in Grains.¹⁰¹

2.107 GITN also developed and delivered a Course in Header Operations, 'using VET Competencies, accessing state of the art equipment through an agreement with CASE IH and employing a person with considerable expertise to deliver the industry training'. The course was delivered under the auspices of a TAFE provider to ensure that students received a Statement of Attainment.¹⁰² GITN attributed the success of the program to the following attributes:

- its development was driven by industry
- it was developed in response to an identified industry skill shortage
- it was put in place within six months
- it was a short course 240 hours in total covering on the job and off the job training
- it was aligned with the National Competencies
- it gave people an employable skill
- it used state of the art equipment and a person with industry expertise
- it was delivered at a time and in a method that suited the students and the trainer.¹⁰³

2.108 In 2005, GITN also developed a Spray Management Program, to be delivered in various locations throughout Victoria.¹⁰⁴

2.109 In her evidence before the committee, Ms Nickie Berrisford, Executive Officer of GITN, emphasised that the work of organising the training and funding for the training was undertaken by a committee consisting of growers working on a voluntary basis. The task of putting together a program such as the grain headers course was difficult and time consuming. Nonetheless, the results were worthwhile:

It was a huge amount of effort and I think if our producers had not been passionate about it we would have said, 'Let it go.' We got funding and last year we put 24 young people through that

101 Grains Industry Training Network, Submission no. 42, pp. 1-2.

102 Grains Industry Training Network, Submission no. 42, p. 2.

103 Grains Industry Training Network, Submission no. 42, p. 3.

104 Grains Industry Training Network, Submission no. 42, p. 3.

program. Every one of them got employment. Yes, there are jobs and that was really positive. We have been through the same process this year, spending hours writing applications for funding, which we successfully got. We have put another 24 young people through, all of whom have been offered work. We have also broken the back; we have made a deal now for CASE IH to support that by allowing access into their facilities and access to their technical people. We have the combination of top quality machinery – they are using the latest machinery – the technical expertise and the expertise from the contractor, who can tell you all the stories about canola when it is a few inches high and how to set up the machine for that.

We had a member of CASE IH at our last meeting and he said, 'We can see you are not fly-by-nighters; what else can we do to help you?' We have also introduced a one-day program for experienced operators, farmers who are saying, 'Why are all these young people getting this wonderful knowledge? We want it as well.' We have just had three different workshops with 60 people.¹⁰⁵

- 2.110 The really important thing, Ms Berrisford told the committee, is that this training is driven by the industry.¹⁰⁶

Committee Conclusions

- 2.111 The way several industry and producer groups have taken the initiative to develop and package courses directly relevant to their needs has impressed the committee. There is no doubt that such initiatives have real potential to address many of the perceived shortcomings in the current training framework. Cotton Basics is a model for what can be done when industry puts time and resources into identifying and addressing its own training requirements. The work of GITN also shows what can be achieved on a more local scale with limited resources. Both are an example of what industry *should* be doing.
- 2.112 Nonetheless, there is clearly a role for government in facilitating the work of industry to provide for its own training needs, by minimising the amount of bureaucracy surrounding rural skills training and providing funding assistance for industry initiatives. This would be particularly beneficial for smaller industries, such as the honeybee industry, where wide dispersion leads to a lack of critical mass of funds and personnel.

105 Ms Nickie Berrisford, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2005, pp. 16–17.

106 Ms Nickie Berrisford, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2005, p. 18.

Government could also play a coordinating role to prevent different industry groups from 'reinventing the wheel' through lack of communication and coordination.

Recommendation 13

- 2.113 **The committee recommends that the Australian Government develop a national strategy for facilitating industry initiatives in rural skills training, including a coordinating body and funding mechanism for industry initiatives, and the removal of bureaucratic impediments.**

Universities

- 2.114 The importance of university level education to the future of the agricultural sector was emphasised in the submission of the Faculty of Natural Resources, Agriculture and Veterinary Science at the University of Queensland. It noted both the decline in the number of students enrolling in agriculture courses, the long-term impact of this trend, and the key role of the Australian Government in addressing this trend. The submission stated:

An ongoing supply of graduates in agriculture is vital to the long term viability, international competitiveness and sustainability of agriculture in production, environmental and socio-economic terms. The prolonged decline in undergraduate enrolments means that skills shortages and knowledge deficits will emerge as significant constraints to agricultural productivity in the very near future. It must be remembered that lead times to overcome such constraints will be lengthy.

Strong and active Agricultural Faculties that are well-equipped, well-resourced and able to respond to changing employment needs are essential to provide suitably skilled graduates from undergraduate and postgraduate programs. As the single largest source of funds that support University education in agriculture,

the Australian Government has a key role in optimising delivery of education programs.¹⁰⁷

- 2.115 In its submission, the Department of Agricultural Sciences at La Trobe University identified both the decline in demand for agricultural courses and the impact of lower entrance scores on the quality of the student cohort. Paradoxically, this was occurring at a time of high demand for graduates in agricultural science.¹⁰⁸
- 2.116 Factors identified as contributing to the decline in student numbers included:
- comparatively poor image of agriculture, and related industries such as forestry;
 - comparatively low starting and ongoing remuneration for graduates;
 - unwillingness to work in rural or remote locations and other factors relating to lifestyle; and
 - the belief that agriculture was a declining industry with poor career prospects.¹⁰⁹
- 2.117 Declining enrolments were placing rural science faculties at universities under considerable stress, as lower student numbers contributed to lower funding, leading to loss of critical mass of staff and reduced curriculum options, placing the very existence of agriculture and forestry schools at risk. Dr Peter Sale, Associate Professor, Agricultural Science, La Trobe University, put the matter succinctly:

In our department or school, we were savagely cut in 1997 after a year of low intake. Really, it was touch and go whether we would survive. That year the music department was wiped out; we survived, and now we are slowly recovering. However, at La Trobe, the earth sciences department got the chop. Their numbers went down and they no longer exist. If this continues at La Trobe or wherever and the numbers go down, eventually we will get the chop.¹¹⁰

107 Faculty of Natural Resources, Agriculture and Veterinary Science, University of Queensland, Submission no. 77, p. 12.

108 Department of Agricultural Sciences, La Trobe University, Submission no. 60, p. 2.

109 Faculty of Natural Resources, Agriculture and Veterinary Science, University of Queensland, Submission no. 77, p. 3; Department of Agricultural Sciences, La Trobe University, Submission no. 60, p. 2.

110 Dr Peter Sale, *Transcript of Evidence*, 14 November 2005, p. 50.

- 2.118 The need to address the problem of declining enrolments was forcefully presented to the committee by Mr Poole (Australian Dairy Farmers Ltd). He told the committee:

...one area of great concern for us is the degree level training in agriculture. We have a strong sense that it is drying up to a trickle. Those people who are developing those skills through degree level agricultural courses are going into higher paid areas like banking and management, and we feel there is a potential crisis coming – and I will use those words, because we have discussed this a lot at ADF – in terms of this next generation of service providers in areas like agronomy and business management and specialist agricultural service providers.¹¹¹

- 2.119 Part of the solution to this problem lies in improving the image of agriculture generally, and in highlighting to potential students their career prospects as graduates (see Chapter 1). One way of doing this specific to the higher education sector is the provision of scholarships. In its submission, the Department of Agricultural Sciences at La Trobe University suggested:

Provision of attractive scholarships to assist students to undertake tertiary studies in areas of graduate demand would add significantly to the promotion strategy. Perhaps there might be a special allocation of scholarships to students from regional areas to enable them to attend university. Such strategies have been successful overseas and can compensate for the additional costs of supporting rural students in either regional or city based campuses.¹¹²

- 2.120 Dr John Taylor, Director of Rangelands Australia, concurred, arguing that ‘even partial scholarships would make a significant difference’, and that we should not underestimate the importance of financial assistance in attracting students from rural and regional areas.¹¹³

- 2.121 There is, however, another aspect to this equation, the oversupply of courses by institutions competing for a strictly limited student market. Professor Margaret Sedgley, Executive Dean, Faculty of the Sciences, University of New England, told the committee:

A review came out about 12 years ago which suggested that Australia needed to rationalise the number of agriculture faculties

111 Mr Robert Poole, *Transcript of Evidence*, 14 November 2005, p. 72.

112 Department of Agricultural Sciences, La Trobe University, Submission no. 60, p. 7.

113 Dr John Taylor, *Transcript of Evidence*, 10 April 2006, p. 2.

across the country. That was based on the numbers required by the industry and, of course, the relationship between critical mass of teaching facilities, academic staff and so on in relation to the numbers of students required by the industry. I think there is no doubt that that finding was correct in view of the situation that pertained then. In fact, what happened, as you are probably aware, was that there was a proliferation of agriculture courses across the country. What is happening now is very interesting in that there is, as you pointed out, a decline in the number. To put it quite bluntly, this is economic reality. Because of the nature of our funding, we need to have a critical mass of students to support our academic staff. Frankly, in the area of agriculture, that is not possible across the spectrum of tertiary institutions that we have in Australia.¹¹⁴

2.122 According to Professor Sedgley:

I think we have to face up to the fact that we are going to have to specialise. We will have to have a few sites which are particularly strong. This of course means a mind shift with regard to our student body. Australian students traditionally tend not to move for their tertiary education. I think this is something which will have to change. Increasingly, it is having to change because of the shortage of faculties across the country.¹¹⁵

2.123 In evidence before the committee, Professor Roger Swift, Executive Dean, Faculty of Natural Resources, Agriculture and Veterinary Science, University of Queensland, argued for strong action from the Australian Government to concentrate the agricultural resources of the university sector into a few key institutions:

We understand there are lots of problems here, and you will get down to issues about Central Queensland University or Southern Cross University and, 'We're an independent organisation; we can do what we want.' I would start from the point that there is a certain number of students doing agriculture. That brings with them a certain amount of money. What is the best way to use that, if you look at the model in that way? The best way is to get really good, well-resources faculties, with a breadth of disciplines and several people in those disciplines. It does a disservice to those students to teach 10 or 20 with two people who know a little bit about something and not much about all the rest. I think that is not

114 Prof. Margaret Sedgley, *Transcript of Evidence*, 10 March 2006, p. 3.

115 Prof. Margaret Sedgley, *Transcript of Evidence*, 10 March 2006, pp. 3-4.

the way to go. It would mean actively saying, 'We will not be funding you to do agriculture in this institution.' Whether an institution then wishes to continue with its own money, that is up to them. They would be foolish, but they might. That is typically the way that the UK operated: 'You can do as much geology as you want; you won't get any money from the university funding council.' It would have to be quite brutal in some areas –¹¹⁶

- 2.124 Professor Richard Williams, Professor in Horticulture, School of Agronomy and Horticulture, University of Queensland, emphasised that this would not necessarily mean concentrating all the facilities involved in agriculture at the tertiary level into a few select campuses. Rather he noted that there would be increased specialisation and interconnectivity between campuses and institutions:

We are not really going back to what we had a decade to 20 years ago; there are two important differences in what we see. Twenty years ago you had a smaller number of institutions each doing their own thing and trying to do everything. We would not see that in this model. First, they would be a network working together in terms of teaching and using the technology et cetera. Secondly, there would be a fair degree of specialisation. Specialisation in terms of teaching becomes possible now because of the technology.¹¹⁷

- 2.125 Professor Sedgley also promoted the concepts of partnerships between universities in the teaching of courses, highlighting the University of New England's close association with the University of Newcastle. She also described the development of curriculum material in conjunction with the Australian Sheep Industry Cooperative Research Centre, potentially providing course materials to any other agriculture faculty in Australia.¹¹⁸

- 2.126 Nonetheless, Professor Swift emphasised that the selection of the hub and spokes of this decentralised model needed to be determined by government and a fairly ruthless process followed if it was to succeed:

You take out certain groups of them, people who are not performing or are not worth funding. You are simply brutal and say, 'You stop, you are the centre, and you and you can be spokes

116 Prof. Roger Swift, *Transcript of Evidence*, 24 May 2006, p. 5.

117 Prof. Richard Williams, *Transcript of Evidence*, 24 May 2006, p. 7.

118 Prof. Margaret Sedgley, *Transcript of Evidence*, 10 March 2006, pp. 4-5.

of the centre.' That will cause a lot of upset, but if we are not prepared to take it on, we will not go forward.¹¹⁹

- 2.127 Likewise, Mr Geoffrey Thomas, President, South Australian Division, Australian Institute of Agricultural Science and Technology, urged that the rationalisation of agricultural education take place at government direction:

Politically, there are a lot more brownie points, I can tell you, in taking a proactive stance on this one and providing some direction than there are in saying, 'Let nature take its course.' I believe that letting nature take its course will be a disaster. Many of the faculties will disappear. They will disappear for all the wrong reasons and we will slowly end up with major gaps in the service provision.¹²⁰

Committee Conclusions

- 2.128 It is evident to the committee that there needs to be a reinvigoration of forestry and agricultural science in Australian universities. Firstly, a strategy needs to be put in place to encourage undergraduate and post graduate study in agriculture and forestry. One mechanism could be to introduce a range of scholarships for students undertaking agriculture and forestry courses. Another mechanism is simply to exempt such courses from the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS), in recognition of the important contribution of agriculture and forestry to the national economy.
- 2.129 Secondly, there needs to be a concentration of resources in a few select institutions. The Government must in effect 'pick winners' and then resource them to provide a high standard of education in agriculture and forestry. The funding must be provided regardless of fluctuations in student numbers, and resources must be maintained to ensure quality of outcomes. This will no doubt cause substantial pain during the period of adjustment, as institutions lose funding and courses are closed. The result will be a small number of highly effective institutions, capable of attracting students from around the world.

119 Prof. Roger Swift, *Transcript of Evidence*, 24 May 2006, p. 7.

120 Mr Geoffrey Thomas, *Transcript of Evidence*, 31 May 2006, pp. 5-6.

Recommendation 14

- 2.130 **The committee recommends that the Australian Government review higher education in agriculture and forestry, with a view to:**
- **Increasing student numbers through scholarships and/or HECS exemptions;**
 - **Rationalising the number of institutions providing courses in agriculture and forestry, and facilitating inter-campus cooperation and coordination; and**
 - **Increasing the overall level of funding for courses in agriculture and forestry, and placing it on a sustained basis.**

Articulation from VET to University

- 2.131 A significant issue identified in the evidence presented to the committee was the problematic pathway between VET and university. In its submission, the Rural Training Council of Australia NSW noted the erosion of access between the two levels of education:

It is widely acknowledged that where pathways from vocational education to university do exist, these are being significantly eroded. It appears that the primary driver for reducing the number of course exemptions in degree programs is the reduction in funding that the university receives for that student.¹²¹

- 2.132 In its submission, the Tasmanian Government identified the need for 'greater flexibility within Universities towards the recognition of VET qualifications and other relevant experience'.¹²² The DEST submission noted that much of the articulation between VET and universities is based on agreements made between institutions at a local level, and that currently 'many such agreements exist between institutions and there is evidence of increasing formal articulation from VET to higher

121 Rural Training Council of Australia NSW, Submission no. 62, p. 2.

122 Government of Tasmania, Submission no. 96, p. 2.

education'.¹²³ However, the University of Queensland identified some significant barriers to defining pathways between VET and university:

There needs to be more interaction between the VET and University sectors to improve the opportunity for articulation from VET to University programs while maintaining the quality and academic integrity of University programs. There is a significant problem of mapping VET sector courses and competencies onto University requirements to show equivalence of learning outcomes leading to credit for University courses. The profusion of skills modules, units of competencies and the like with multiple combinations that can be taken in the VET sector mean that establishment of credit arrangements for articulation to University programs is difficult. The University of Queensland had formal arrangements with the Agricultural Colleges of Queensland. Changes in the Agricultural Colleges curricula mean that these arrangements are no longer tenable.¹²⁴

2.133 As a response, the University of Queensland suggested:

A comprehensive National data base of academic and skills outcomes from the VET sector may help Universities assess articulation credit. An option could include an annual review, and in Queensland could be achieved by an annual meeting of the University, TAFE and AACC to review arrangements.¹²⁵

2.134 Addressing the same issue from the perspective of the VET sector, Mr Ross Murray (Australian Agricultural College Corporation) acknowledged the problems associated with the incompatibility of VET assessment and university entry requirements, and the need to establish effective mechanisms through which articulation between education sectors could be achieved.¹²⁶ The problem is, however, that education at school, VET and university levels are aimed at fundamentally different outcomes assessed according to fundamentally different criteria. As Mr McKay (Australian Agricultural College Corporation) told the committee:

If you look at a high school certificate, it basically says that it ought to be the entry level to an undergraduate degree, a bachelor's degree. It is the entry level to a diploma degree in the

123 DEST, Submission no. 94, p. 28.

124 Faculty of Natural Resources, Agriculture and Veterinary Science, University of Queensland, Submission no. 77, p. 9.

125 Faculty of Natural Resources, Agriculture and Veterinary Science, University of Queensland, Submission no. 77, p. 9.

126 Mr Ross Murray, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 April 2006, pp. 50-1.

higher education sector. It is the entry level to a diploma in the vocational education sector, and because a diploma in the educational sector sits above a certificate IV there is a reverse assumption that somehow or other a high school certificate should therefore be equivalent to a certificate IV. When you are looking at those very practical skill based levels of the certificate III, which is supposedly equivalent to an apprenticeship, you have a situation where you are saying that a high school person who has done no skills training in this area somehow has equivalent qualifications to an apprentice who has done four years of skills training in their particular area. You are not comparing apples with apples.

If you try to put VET sector training back into schools and then do this reverse assessment, you will come up with the wrong answer. We have this difficulty all the time within the agriculture sector, which is very much manual skills based. To get even a certificate III level being completed in high school is very difficult to achieve because they just cannot get the practical experience to give them the skills that are necessary for that certificate III qualification. So it really highlights the fact that it is not comparing apples with apples and that there is a need to identify what it is we are achieving in each of those areas, what the skill sets are, what the knowledge bases are and then how you build that bridge across to this other system which is trying to create some other type of outcome.¹²⁷

- 2.135 Both Mr McKay and Mr Murray were confident that the capacity was there to build bridges between the sectors. Indeed, Mr Murray emphasised that the Australian Agricultural College Corporation was already working to achieve that outcome.¹²⁸

Committee Conclusions

- 2.136 In the committee's view, it is essential that mechanisms exist to allow for easy and effective articulation of students from VET to university. This is particularly important in rural industries where inevitably a significant proportion of university students will be drawn from the VET sector. While acknowledging the existence of effective local arrangements, it is

127 Mr Malcolm McKay, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 April 2006, p. 57.

128 Messrs Ross Murray & Malcolm McKay, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 April 2006, p. 57.

clear that the process of articulation needs to be more widespread and consistent, capable of being conducted on a national basis.

Recommendation 15

- 2.137 **The committee recommends that the Australian Government, in conjunction with State and Territory Governments, universities and the VET sector, develop consistent and comprehensive pathways for the articulation of VET to university in rural skills training and education.**

