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# HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND  
FORESTRY

(Subcommittee)

**Reference: Rural skills training and research**

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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FORESTRY**

**Friday, 21 October 2005**

**Members:** Mr Schultz (*Chair*), Mr Adams (*Deputy Chair*), Mr Martin Ferguson, Mr Michael Ferguson, Mr Forrest, Mr Lindsay, Mr Gavan O'Connor, Mr Secker, Mr Tuckey and Mr Windsor

**Members in attendance:** Mr Adams, Mr Schultz and Mr Windsor

**Terms of reference for the inquiry:**

To inquire into and report on:

- The availability and adequacy of education and research services in the agriculture sector, including access to vocational training and pathways from vocational education and training to tertiary education and work.
- The skills needs of agricultural industries in Australia, including the expertise and capacity of industries to specify the skills-sets required for training, and the extent to which vocational training meets the needs of rural industries.
- The provision of extension and advisory services to agricultural industries, including links and coordination between education, research and extension.
- The role of the Australian government in supporting education, research and advisory programs to support the viability and sustainability of Australian agriculture.

**WITNESSES**

**ARCHER, Mr Cameron, Member, Advisory Council, and Principal, Tocal Agricultural College ..... 22**

**BAYLEY, Mr Darren Paul, Chair, National Conservation and Land Management Training  
Providers Network ..... 12**

**CHAFFEY, Mr Richard Gordon, Deputy Chair, Advisory Council, Tocal Agricultural College ..... 22**

**DUNCAN, Mrs Margo Anne, Chair, Advisory Council, Tocal Agricultural College..... 22**

**JACOBSEN, Mr Niel Richard, Project Manager, New South Wales Rural and Related  
Industries Skill Advisory Committee ..... 1**

**SEYMOUR, Mr Gregory Kenneth, General Manager, Australian Mushroom Growers  
Association Ltd ..... 34**



**Subcommittee met at 10.58 am****JACOBSEN, Mr Niel Richard, Project Manager, New South Wales Rural and Related Industries Skill Advisory Committee**

**CHAIR (Mr Schultz)**—I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry for its inquiry into rural skills training and research. This is the sixth public hearing for this inquiry and is part of an extensive program of public hearings and visits designed to gather information from the people directly involved with the main issues of the inquiry. Today the committee will be hearing from a number of invited witnesses representing a broad range of people and organisations interested in the area of rural skills training and research. I welcome our witness Mr Jacobsen. Do you have any comments to make on the capacity in which you appear?

**Mr Jacobsen**—On your program we are called the Rural Training Council. However, our name has changed.

**CHAIR**—Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament. Consequently, they warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. It is customary to remind witnesses that giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. Do you wish to make a brief statement in relation to your submission or would you care to make some introductory remarks?

**Mr Jacobsen**—Along with our change of focus to broader representation for rural and related industries in New South Wales, we provide advisory arrangements to the New South Wales Department of Education and Training through the Agrifood Industry Skills Council. The training areas we look after are agriculture, horticulture, conservation, land management and animal management. That name change is essentially the only change from the original submission.

**CHAIR**—What do you believe are some of the reasons for the variability of availability and adequacy of educational services in Australia, particularly in Australian agriculture?

**Mr Jacobsen**—When you compare it to other industries, we are working with a very thin market. We do not have a system whereby we are in a factory with 20 trainees and producing widgets in one end and a product out the other end. We operate under quite a different system. The traineeships were not established as the old apprenticeships were under the old system. We do not have a really good handle on how to deliver training to rural and related industries. There does not seem to be an understanding of how to meet the training needs of the industry—that is, they would like their training delivered on site, preferably by somebody with local knowledge and credibility, and they also require a bit of ongoing support in some instances where there are literacy and numeracy difficulties.

**Mr WINDSOR**—Would you make one or two recommendations to the government on what would make significant differences out there? We have heard a lot of information about the problems that are there: the whole range of training providers and the lack of linkages between

different groups and organisations, particularly smaller groups. If you were to make two recommendations, what would they be?

**Mr Jacobsen**—With regard to funding for training, I think the most significant alteration I would make to the system would be to fund training for rural industries on the basis of units of competency, as opposed to whole qualifications, because rural industries seem to like to cherry-pick from the training package the training they need. They are not particularly interested in the full qualification. That is what the training is based on at the moment. It is focused on the old type of TAFE delivery where you turn up two days or two nights a week. That does not take into account production demands, work demands or seasonal variations. With regard to funding, that would be the big one.

The second recommendation would be for industry itself to 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.

**Mr WINDSOR**—One comment made yesterday by Cotton Australia was about the ‘supermarket of competencies’. Those who want to obtain various skills can enter the process and, without coming out with a major degree or qualification, gain skills and have the box ticked, in a sense, to say that those people are qualified in those particular competencies. Would you agree with that general thrust of Cotton Australia?

**Mr Jacobsen**—The philosophy of developing the Cotton Basics program has been that supermarket approach to picking out what you need and the industry ratifying it. The unfortunate side of training packages is that industry can specify what they need in terms of units of competency aligned to jobs, but the thing that loses them a bit is where we have to then align those units of competency to a whole qualification and provide a certificate I through to an advanced diploma. They get a little bit lost on that. It does not really mean a lot to industry. It is just for parity between training packages. But the real value for industry is being able to pick out those units of competency that they need and get training on those units of competency as and when required. I think the Cotton Basics approach is good, and we have seen a similar thing in the Sydney basin with the graduation this week of Chinese growers who did a certificate III in agriculture. That was very well linked to their needs, as opposed to being a broad qualification.

**Mr WINDSOR**—Could you elaborate on that example?

**Mr Jacobsen**—The Sydney basin one was very successful. As part of the Sydney basin strategic plan—and it was really looking at food safety issues and environmental management—that training program was run by Tocal agricultural college, in conjunction with their extension staff based in the Sydney basin and at the Narara agriculture research station. It was very much hands on, utilising trainers and extension people in the delivery of that training. There was a dedicated project officer involved who helped to arrange the training and coordinate things. There were interpreters involved to help deliver the training and provide support. It was very practical and hands on. Even though it was in Sydney, it was still based on their properties and in their sheds. They did chemicals on site and soil sampling on site. They actually sampled the soil



on the properties where these people were working on a daily basis. That approach to training is much more practical for the industry, as opposed to the theoretical stuff learned while sitting in a classroom. There are numerous reports sitting on shelves that recommend this. There is a real need to dust off those reports and take a look at those recommendations. It is a common thread.

**CHAIR**—Can I seek some input from you with regard to the registered training organisations—or RTOs, as we commonly refer to them. We have received evidence which varies to some degree, to the extent that some people are highly complimentary of the RTOs and others are critical of the RTOs because many of them see that the focus of the RTOs is more in the urban based areas than in the rural based areas, where they believe the skills need to go. They believe outreach programs are required to satisfy this need and, indeed, identify the shortage of rural skills in those areas. On page 2 of your submission you say:

The overarching bureaucracy established by the various State Training Authorities is extremely input oriented. The time spent by Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) meeting Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) requirements—

and we are very interested in this—

impacts on their ability to focus on developing and delivering effective, up-to-date training programs. System imposed difficulties include:

- The amount of paperwork required to change their scope of registration (add a new “course”)
- Quality assurance (paper trail) requirements
- Variable accreditation requirements e.g. NSW TAFE is self accrediting whereas private RTOs and even the state school system must apply for accreditation through the regulatory body
- The additional burden placed on the school system by the respective bureaucracies is significant (it is understood that there may be submissions from a range of school based training providers that should shed more light on these issues).

The overarching point that you are making there is that the bureaucratic paperwork is slowing down the process. It would appear also from reading that that not only is it slowing down the process but it is also contributing unnecessarily to the cost—in other words, you are not getting the bang for the buck that the organisation and, indeed, the people looking for the service expect from the system. Would you like to comment on that so that we can put it on record and have it there as an evidence base for our recommendations?

**Mr Jacobsen**—If we are talking about the AQTF as a quality based system and there is an audit process involved in that, if TAFE itself can be a self-accrediting body and just have the paperwork sitting there, there should be a level playing field. There I have in mind, in particular, the Farrer Memorial Agricultural High School, where they were trying to increase their scope to deliver—I think it was—grains and beef at certificate III level at school. In the process to have the teachers reaccredited, they had to have their qualifications recognised again at certificate III level, even though most of them have an agriculture degree, run their own businesses on the side or are still involved in the family farm. Quite clearly they are able to demonstrate to anyone who goes there that they are running a successful enterprise, in that they have a breeding program and they sell stock from there. Yet they had to go through this bureaucratic process to satisfy this certificate III requirement. To me, that was very costly for the school and very time consuming. And from all reports the regulatory body, VETAB, asked for some information and then kept coming back to them for more information, so it seems as though they did not really know what they needed either. It was a bit of a concern for us.

There are instances of small RTOs that I was dealing with just a couple of weeks back with a number of qualifications on their scope. The fees have been put up quite substantially in New South Wales, which is impacting on that. So, with the review of the training packages, I am starting to think that maybe we would wind everything back to just a certificate I, II and III in agriculture—as my suggestion—and then bracket the other qualification, bracket the specialisation area, so that will save some cost. But I think that is counterproductive, because you are trying to avoid a difficult system.

I think small RTOs are more flexible in their ability to deliver. There are some very good trainers getting around. I know trainers in western New South Wales and trainers from Queensland in particular who do some training and who are tied to, of all places, an RTO in South Australia. But they need to be tied somewhere, and these people have fantastic industry credibility. They get out there and do the job, then they have to leave it to the RTO to take care of the financial arrangements and the AQTF. But I know it is a burdensome process. Because my role with this is on a part-time basis, I have assisted some people to prepare their information for RTO registration processes.

**CHAIR**—I will just ask two more questions, and then I will pass over to the deputy chair to ask some questions. My first question is related to the training and resources. In your submission on page 7 you say:

All publicly funded training and resources should be made available on a cost recovery basis through a dedicated rural RTO clearinghouse—

and you give Rural Skills Australia as a possibility. Would you like to make some comment on that?

**Mr Jacobsen**—Yes. A lot of effort by industry, and volunteering time, is put in to develop these resources, so I know there is a cost to industry, or they have already borne the cost of developing the resources. It is publicly funded. We are working in a very thin market. We have developed a new pro forma whereby we produce the learning guides or the skills guides in Word format so that people can add to them, edit them and update them with their own local history quite easily—and, hopefully, refer to a few research documents in that. Given that we are in such a thin market and there is not much money to be made by charging \$400 or \$700 for resources, they would be better off just putting them on the open market and letting people download them and get the use out of them as they need them. I think that tying them up in these ridiculous copyright provisions is just counterproductive—and the cost associated with them, of course.

**CHAIR**—On the issue of the new technical colleges that the federal government has recently announced, yesterday we took some evidence from the New South Wales Farmers Association. Amongst other things, it was highly critical of the priority regions that have been identified as to where these colleges will go. I made the comment to them that I have a sympathy for the concerns they raised. They said:

Eight ‘priority regions’ in NSW were nominated for the new Technical Colleges, namely the Hunter, the Illawarra, Queanbeyan, Port Macquarie, Lismore/Ballina, Dubbo, Gosford, and Western Sydney. The Association is concerned that these ‘priority regions’ have exposed clear gaps in terms of rural and remote representation. Moreover, it would appear that the Australian Technical Colleges will be limited to ‘traditional trades’, rather than including training specific to the

rural sector. It is therefore questionable whether these new colleges will address skills shortages in rural and related industries.

I know you are from Gosford and Gosford is named there, but would you like to give us your view on that criticism by the New South Wales farmers organisation with regard to the placement of these new technical colleges?

**Mr Jacobsen**—I think there is an issue around placement. You cannot keep everybody happy. They were never going to include rural industries anyway. There was no scope for them in that initial expression of interest. So I think it is a tad academic to worry about where they are going to be located if they are not going to address your industry needs. My biggest concern is that I believe Gosford have lost our technical college to South Australia. That is probably a bit of a concern for the region where I am from.

**Mr ADAMS**—Can you just qualify that a bit.

**Mr Jacobsen**—I understand that the college and the funding that was going to be allocated to Gosford has actually now been allocated to Adelaide, so there has been a shift there. I had talked to quite a few people about a submission, and we had actually drafted a submission to DEST on the suggestion that technical colleges needed to include rural. We decided at the last minute not to make that submission because it seemed like it was already a done deal. But the real concern to me is the requirement that the students undertake the Higher School Certificate and a certificate III. I think that is almost impossible. That is a real big ask for a certificate III level qualification. You are talking in some sense of an old trade level qualification. A friend of the family is doing his electrical apprenticeship at the moment. He just finished high school last year. I said, 'How would you do managing this with your Higher School Certificate at the same time?' He said there was no way in the world he would be able to do it. He is a real smart kid.

**CHAIR**—On that point, a few years ago—in fact, when I was in the state parliament—the government of the day opened a number of technology high schools in the state of New South Wales. The reason for doing that was that they wanted to have a relationship between the high school and the TAFE courses for technical training. The objective was to allow young people in year 10 to undertake a course which would give them some technical training on an apprenticeship basis for a trade that they may have wanted to take up when they left school. That does two things, of course. It becomes part of their curriculum in the year 12 exams. More importantly in my view, it embarks them on a career path where they have accumulated two years of study at an apprenticeship level in the TAFE college adjacent to the high school, which then takes away the four-year time frame for some of those apprenticeships when they become fully qualified. One of the problems that you have is that a lot of young people, from my observation, opt out of the four-year TAFE training courses because of the low remuneration that is attached to them and the time it takes to get through, which is compounding the problem of the shortage of trained people in trades right throughout Australia. Would you like to make a comment on whether you think that is a good scheme that should be expanded and whether we should be looking at something like that on a national level?

**Mr Jacobsen**—I think the scheme is sound provided it is pitched at the right level and the expectation is not a certificate III but a certificate II. At present students undertaking VET programs can achieve a certificate II along with their Higher School Certificate. In the time that

you have got at school I think that is reasonable. I think the current approach with the ATCs—an expectation of being able to get a certificate III and still get your Higher School Certificate as well—is too high.

I appreciate what they are doing in Victoria. They have had a change. They now have a Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning, which is a technical based VET qualification. That is a very good model. The HSC system—with the UAI—in New South Wales is very much directed at university entrance. That is way over the top, because only 30 per cent of the kids who go through that go to university, and one in four of them drop out. If you operated an enterprise on the basis of attracting less than 30 per cent of the potential market, you would be out the door tomorrow.

**CHAIR**—Thank you for those comments. They are the sorts of comments that we need, because they are practical inputs on a serious problem.

**Mr ADAMS**—You talked in your submission about pathways and about how in a lot of universities some minor pathways have developed in recent years but that a lot of universities do not really want those TAFE kids coming in. In your submission you say that some of those pathways are falling away or being eroded—that was the term you used. Would you like to comment a bit further on that?

**Mr Jacobsen**—I took over as executive officer of the primary industries training board in New South Wales at a time when there had been a fair body of work done on developing pathways between university and TAFE courses. I have been talking informally to the University of Sydney about getting advanced standing in agricultural science for people who have done certificate II in agriculture at school. If you look at the UAI requirements, they are dropping all the time because they are finding it difficult to get people in there.

**Mr ADAMS**—In the sciences?

**Mr Jacobsen**—In the sciences, and particularly in the agricultural science area. There is an opportunity to revisit that now. You are putting people on a practical pathway. You are giving them practical hands-on skills at school and they are getting exposure to the industry and a bit of the industry's flavour. That would be a good feeder if you could formalise those links and pathways.

**Mr ADAMS**—They would not recognise my butchering days and my study of meat inspection when I wanted to become a doctor. I thought I had some prior learning but they did not want to recognise that.

**CHAIR**—We are in the same boat, Dick!

**Mr ADAMS**—I want to go back and explore something. You talked about the standards in the delivery of rural skills and information. How can we try and lift people's skills? It is getting harder. If you are going to farm in Australia, in the next few decades you are going to have a lot coming at you. To be profitable, you will really need to lift your game. You will have to deal with national resource management issues, water issues—you will have to use water more effectively—and sustainability issues. So you are going to have to have some qualifications, or

work towards those. I appreciate what you have said, but there has to be a way of lifting the skills of people out there or giving them the opportunity to do that. There must be some process that will give them a pathway they can move down if they want to.

**Mr Jacobsen**—A pathway for people who are already working in the industry is the skills recognition pathway. Examples could be where they attend field days or attend brief training courses. What we need to do is to set up a skills passport system, if you like, to start capturing this information whereby they, as they attend field days—even over periods of five or 10 years—can start building that. They can show how they have implemented that learning. It is a very informal learning structure, but it is still learning just the same.

That needs to be recognised by the RTO that is doing the skills recognition process. Quite often, people go to these things and do not keep any record of what they have done. A good model might be like what they do on the back of the New South Wales drivers licence logbook. With that, you log the miles you have done and the conditions you have driven in to get the 50 hours which you need. The same type of approach—the scout merit badge approach—could be used. We have thought about it. I implemented one in the water industry about eight years ago, so there is a way of doing it. It is just getting agreement around the table on how we should best do it.

**Mr ADAMS**—Do you feel that we are moving towards that? Is there a shift towards a looser process by which there is recognition that some people learn by informal ways?

**Mr Jacobsen**—I think you will hear from Tocal this afternoon. They are probably past masters of skills recognition. They still have a very rigorous process though. I have been through it myself. It is all there: the evidence you need to provide, the backup and the currency. I think it is a legitimate way for people to get qualifications. You have existing worker traineeships in industry. The transport industry has made a welter of it. When you are dealing with owner operators and family owned businesses, who are they out to impress? They do not need to impress the boss with a qualification. So we need to find out what those imperatives are. They are probably things like EurepGAP and Fresh Care—all of those types of accreditation-industry based programs whereby we can build the evidence to show that they are meeting those requirements.

**Mr ADAMS**—Sometimes they do because circumstances change. I have seen people who do not have qualifications but have a lot of skills. They just do not have anything on paper. Have you come across that?

**Mr Jacobsen**—My word, or these businesses would not be operating successfully. There are a lot of people out in agriculture without a bit of paper. They have a lot of skills and do what are deemed as professional development in other industries but they just do it a different way, and it is not recognised. They do not see the need to capture the activities that they have undertaken.

**CHAIR**—The problem is, of course, that not only do they have the skills, which are not recognised by people, but they are now being told that they have to apply for certification to be registered to use the skills that they have been using for, in many instances, 30 or 40 years. So there is a compounding problem there. We are saying that we need to train people in other areas and that there is nothing wrong with that—and Dick has raised a very good point—but we are

not recognising the skills that have been inherent in the industry through practical experience. Are we to create another organisation that costs the taxpayer money to say to these people, 'You've got to come in and get accredited for something you have been doing for 30 or 40 years very responsibly'? I am not talking about problems related to occupational health and safety; I am talking about experienced people doing experienced things—for example, knowing the dangers of some of the chemicals that they are using and using them very responsibly. That is a good point that Dick has raised. You can extrapolate it out to all of those areas where we have gone over the top in terms of making demands on people. At the same time as we have made the demands on people, we do not recognise the experience that is inherent and that they can pass on.

**Mr Jacobsen**—I think a formal skills recognition process, if it is linked to some imperative such as if you are a gaffer exporter or whatever, could well be a way of gathering that information. There is a process that Tocal use called ASSESS. It is a means of gathering your evidence over a period of time. It won an ANTA training award a couple of years ago. We could adopt that as a model for the agriculture and horticulture industries. We could have a consistent model that all the RTOs use, the industry becomes familiar with and endorses somewhere down the track. I think consistency is going to be the key to all of this. We already have a model that has won an award and been used successfully.

**Mr ADAMS**—We might have a look at that later. We have touched on the new technical skills. Are we going to downgrade some of the skills we have taught in the past at technical levels? Is this a process whereby we might lose skills and turn out people with fewer skills than the old trade skills? I know trades have changed. Whilst a joiner may do the same work, a carpenter today does a lot of different stuff to what they used to. There is a whole need for those things to be recognised. Maybe we need to move on a bit. Maybe we have not moved on with the terminology that we use in society. There is a fear that maybe these technical colleges are going to train the monkey and not give some depth of theory—why there is a process and what people have learnt in the past and some of that technical training we have had, which is very good. With the opposition of China and India in the future, maybe Australia needs to continue to have a very high level of technical skills.

**Mr Jacobsen**—I think the problem with the Australian technical colleges is around trying to be all things to all people and give them a higher school certificate and a trade qualification. When you have a trade qualification, why do you need a higher school certificate? That is what I would be asking. I think the depth of knowledge that people get in a trade, by working on site and going to an RTO to undertake the formal part of the training, is quite complementary—although I do suggest that a certificate III in plastering would not be equivalent to a certificate III in mechanics, because of the skills and knowledge requirements. There are some that you could fast-track and others that are going to be time honoured.

One example I was given by a person who did fitting and turning was that, for one turn at TAFE they had a rough block of metal and with hand tools only they had to get that down to a nice smooth, polished and shiny block by the end of it. I asked what the point of that was, thinking around this time based issue. He said that it taught you how to use the hand tools properly and the tenacity to stick at a job until you finish it. And those are good qualities. We do not want to undermine those qualities through the rush to get a nominal qualification—I think there is folly in that.

**Mr ADAMS**—I see that our technical schools have turned out enormous numbers of people in this country over many years. Many people who start small businesses in Australia are tradespeople—not so much even in the trades that they have gone through the universities or the TAFE colleges with. I would not like to see that sort of initiative lost. There is a lot that comes from our TAFE colleges in this country that I do not think is recognised, and which may not be recognised at the education level. There is a flow-on effect, because people who come through TAFE colleges are also in the learning mode and they understand learning in the sense of going on to study. Could you add anything in that regard?

**Mr Jacobsen**—I have a lot of friends who have done trades and they are doing something quite different now—they are, as you say, running their own businesses. But I think the foundation for them has been to establish that, get the confidence in their skills and abilities and be able to hone those and probably start off on their own or start in a different field. I have seen good examples of that.

It is not so much the TAFE system itself that does it but the whole apprenticeship basis that we have been operating under with the employers' involvement, helping train the apprentices in the field. It is all complementary. Some things still have to be time honoured in this fast-paced world of ours.

**Mr ADAMS**—It is a mentoring type process too, isn't it?

**Mr Jacobsen**—Yes, my word. I have seen instances where I have been working for local government where apprentices had a designated tradesman to work with, who was able to impart the knowledge quite successfully and take them on different jobs. You see them have a process. Because the supervisors and the tradesmen have been through the process themselves, they only want the best for the young ones coming through. It is an integrative learning education process that just rolls over, and it rolls over for free in some sense because you are having that training happen in the workplace. You see them develop. They know nothing when they come in and at the end they are working as a tradesman before they actually get their certificates.

**Mr ADAMS**—I would suggest that they also learn a lot about life in that working process. We lost a lot when we lost a lot of our old institutions of railway workshops and lots of other things. There was a lot of mentoring and socialisation of young people which, in social terms, has never been written up. Maybe someone will do a PhD on that some time in the future.

**Mr Jacobsen**—I think the problem has really been that kids are starting apprenticeships in year 12 instead of year 10. I think that creates a whole lot of different expectations. That two-year age difference makes a big difference.

**Mr WINDSOR**—Earlier on you talked about the pricing of and access to training resources. The way I interpreted what you were saying was that these resources should be made available, irrespective of whether they want to be seen to be accredited or gain the qualification, to those who want to learn in their own time for their own benefit. How practical would actually doing that be? What would be the pitfalls? What do we have in place now—copyright problems, the cost of production of the resource in the first place, the issue of ownership? Is it practical to do that?

**Mr Jacobsen**—I think it is. We could do it on a cost recovery basis from a central clearing house and I am sure it would work fairly quickly. People would understand in time where to go for these resources. New South Wales has developed Cotton Basics. The resources are available from New South Wales DET. I did a project with Rural Skills with some conservation land management guides. They are available. There is no central clearing house for agricultural type learning materials. We could stitch that up in some way and have a web site and make them available electronically, whereby people could download things. Essentially, if the guides are in a PDF format they can be downloaded, given the bandwidth problems in the bush, or you can get them in Word and the RTOs can download and customise them as they require. We have made a special point of providing links or highlighting where further materials may be available from. Once that resource has been paid for out of the public purse—and industry has had a big input into the development of it anyway—why not just put it out there? The administrative process of locking it up is probably dearer than making it freely available, given the benefits of the web these days.

**Mr WINDSOR**—So the resource becomes free and those people who want to get accredited for some qualification purpose pay for the training? Someone could be at home and, in a sense, become highly qualified, but have no qualification in a formal sense?

**Mr Jacobsen**—Yes. Even for, say, fencing, there are a couple of guides on rural fencing. There are a couple of people—a guy in Newcastle who works for Waratah and another guy in Western Australia who works for Smorgons—who are known as gun fencers. They are helping out the contractors. They could download those resources and, when they do a field day, they could hand them out, because they are explaining to people about the new products. It is in their interests to know that people would use the materials properly. Quite a lot of expense is caused—people say, ‘This wire snapped.’ The response is, ‘You’ve overstrained it,’ because they have not been doing it to the specification required. If they could freely hand out learning guides or tell people where to go to get these things, they could customise it to suit their own materials and build their own resource material into it. The advantages are there.

**CHAIR**—That is very good information. We thank you for that. You can also extrapolate that out to the human skills that we are losing touch with because of the way in which governments are rationalising. We took evidence in some of the remote areas of Australia about doggers, as an example. They leave the industry because there is no continuity of employment. So we lose the very real, practical human skills of being able to track and trap wild animals that are creating economically a massive problem for agriculture and, more importantly, in conjunction with that, for the environment itself. Many people do not think about those skills, but they are skills that are required over a period because the people who use them have to then become as cunning as the animal that they are trying to trap. I picked up the points that you made about the fencer et cetera. They are simple skills, but they are skills that need to be passed on to keep agriculture functioning.

**Mr Jacobsen**—I think, as agricultural enterprises become bigger, they are increasingly contracting out more, so they are going to need the services of contractors to do a whole lot of things that they may have done in the past, and I think that is important as well. There needs to be some support for those groups from possibly the rural fencing contractors association, where they could get professional accreditation through that.



**CHAIR**—Absolutely. The thing about accreditation is that I find it difficult to comprehend the evidence that we have heard about professional shooters who are crack shots having to go and be recredited to prove that they can shoot straight. With the best intentions in the world, those are the sorts of anomalies that occur and are in themselves very demoralising for people who are professionals in what they do.

**Mr Jacobsen**—A well thought through skills recognition process would overcome that as well.

**CHAIR**—That is right. Mr Jacobsen, thank you very much. One of the satisfying things about committee work is that we hear evidence from people that is, quite frankly, the driving mechanism for us to put together a very sensible report and, more importantly, come up with some practical recommendations for government. I would like to thank you personally for the contribution you have made today. You have given us some very good evidence. The contribution that you have made, along with the contribution of other people and organisations, will be something we can put into a report which, hopefully, the government will not only read but pick up. It is in the nature of reports that governments do not always pick up the recommendations. This is an issue that we think needs to be treated more seriously than it has been in the past. I thank you for your contribution and I am sure that my parliamentary colleagues would also like to do that. Incidentally, for the record, this committee is bipartisan in its approach to this particular issue and to other issues that this committee has inquired into in the past and will continue to inquire into in the future. I think it augurs well for the future of this country when you get politicians from different political persuasions coming together to work as one on issues that affect our country.

Before I call the next witness, I should mention that we are honoured to have here this morning Dr Michael Morgan, the Deputy Director of the Centre for Democratic Institutions and the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at the ANU. More importantly, Dr Morgan is accompanied by a group of people from Indonesian political party organisations who are here to learn a little about our processes. I welcome you to this committee hearing. You are in a beautiful part of Australia—look at the view out there! I am sure you are being well looked after, and I wish you well in your deliberations.

[11.42 am]

**BAYLEY, Mr Darren Paul, Chair, National Conservation and Land Management Training Providers Network**

**CHAIR**—Welcome. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament and consequently warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. It is customary to remind witnesses that giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. I now invite you to make some introductory remarks.

**Mr Bayley**—On behalf of the National Conservation and Land Management Training Providers Network, I thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee. The network I represent is the peak representative body for vocational or skills based trainers, educators and assessors in conservation and land management as a discipline. Our members are drawn from all states and territories, and a number of our members teach in the conservation and land management field as well as in agricultural rural production. I think it is important to note that both of these skill training areas have a number of key competency standards. Obviously, they also have direct links with land management. There is an overlapping of key topics, including chemical application and weed management. I would like to state at the outset that our network supports the current national vocational training system, which is based on competency based training and assessment, industry based training packages and continuing improvement.

Sustainable and competitive agricultural industries rely on the skills of farmers themselves and their workers. It is our belief that targeted industry based training that conforms to robust national competency standards can develop these skills and is really a critical component of improving the management of farms—but also natural resources and the continued competitiveness of our rural industries. I think any discussion on the adequacy of agricultural training needs really needs to look at the current vocational training system in rural production—and principally at its focus and its qualification structures. Often when I talk about these things it seems very dry and technical, but really this is what is driving skills training in rural industries at the moment. It also affects the ability of teachers and their training organisations to respond to the current client needs and the emerging needs of industry, so we are really bound by that system.

The National Conservation and Land Management Training Providers Network believe that the current national vocational education and training agenda in agriculture and rural production needs a stronger emphasis on sustainable land and water use. We think that is missing at the moment and we think that can be improved. Key issues which are central to sustainable land use in Australia that are very well known, such as salinity, soil erosion and maintenance of biodiversity, are not adequately reflected in the national rural production training package. So vocational based training in agriculture needs to address the assessment and management of natural resources on farms, conservation farming practices and the use of new technologies. We would like to see those adequately represented in the current training system. Our written submission identifies a number of training gaps or inadequacies in the current training package—and therefore in the current provision of training.

In order to protect the resource base on which our farming and the future competitive advantage of farmers depend, we need to do three things. One is to address the current training gaps. The second is to be ready to respond to the emerging needs of farmers in rural industries—to be responsive. The third is to develop the skill sets and qualification structures that adequately reflect current work roles in agriculture. I think that is extremely important.

We believe that the current gaps that we have identified can be addressed largely through the development of new competency standards or the revision of existing ones. We also believe that improving the flexibility of current qualification packaging rules can allow for greater selection of appropriate import units or electives, if you like, for farmers. This would go a long way to addressing some of the training gaps that we have identified and would also meet the needs of industry in providing greater choice and allowing them to select training that suits their needs. In order to be ready to respond to the emerging needs of farmers and rural industries we need flexibility in the training system and in training delivery and the ability to revise and modify components of our national training package for rural production in a short time frame. This is presently too slow and onerous and puts training providers in the position of playing catch-up with industry, which is not good for training providers or industry.

Industry needs to be able to identify the skill sets and qualification structures in its training package. With the current trend in vocational training towards generic competencies and competency standards that have abstract wording and imprecise language, I think we risk alienating industry groups and devaluing the academic transcripts that individuals take to future employers. I think that is a very important issue as well. The conservation network also believe that future training needs in agriculture, as we put in our submission, will be influenced by technological change, diversification and change in land use—which we are seeing in many regions at the moment—and emerging niche markets. One of the big growth areas that is just developing and will be on the horizon is the provision of environmental services by private landholders.

Our network believe that there is considerable scope to improve links with agriculture advisory services and research organisations with vocational training. We have seen the merging of traditional advisory and extension services with vocational training already in New South Wales, through the Profarm program, and in other states through the FarmBis program. I think, and the network believe, that this is a desirable development which provides more opportunities for producers to gain recognition for the sorts of activities they generally take part in. I think that research and development corporations and cooperative research centres should be encouraged to engage with vocational skills based training. Our network has seen some very positive developments with the CRC for Australian Weed Management in the development of good technical resources for training.

We believe that the Australian government can do a number of things in supporting improved outcomes from education and research by assisting in the provision of resources for quality skills training and delivery and in promoting the value of vocational training and its role in promoting change towards sustainable land use, including promotion of the rewarding careers that are to be had by young people in agriculture and related industries. We also believe improving the flexibility and currency of existing training packages will improve industry partnerships and allow a wider and more appropriate skills set for students. Lastly, encouraging research and development corporations and cooperative research centres to include national vocational

training outcomes in their programs would also be a very good development. I will be pleased to answer any questions.

**CHAIR**—Thank you for that very comprehensive, brief statement. Where is your ‘network’—in inverted commas—domiciled?

**Mr Bayley**—We have a chairperson position which is rotated each 12 months, and that is moved from state to state. We have been running for over three years now. Our original chairperson was from Tasmania and the next was from South Australia. Now it resides in New South Wales and next year it will go to Victoria.

**CHAIR**—I will put it another way. Where are your chairpersons domiciled? Are they rural based people?

**Mr Bayley**—Yes. I am the chairperson for the network. I am based in Paterson in the Lower Hunter Valley and I work out of Tocal college.

**Mr WINDSOR**—Who makes up the membership of the network?

**Mr Bayley**—The network contains a lot of head teachers in faculties that are related to conservation, land management, agriculture and horticulture. We also have a number of program managers in TAFE organisations and private colleges. All of the membership have a strong or direct link with the provision of vocational training.

**CHAIR**—To follow up on the question that was just asked, who funds you?

**Mr Bayley**—We are self funded. It is really a professional network. We get together, share information and share resources and developments. Because we are working on a national training package and a national training agenda, we are always resource hungry and also keen to share key learning in how to best deliver vocational training and assessment. This network stemmed out of a need to get together to find out what was happening in other states and territories—to share that information—and to develop a better training system.

**CHAIR**—I note that in your submission on page 1 under ‘Adequacy of current agricultural training’ you are very critical of the gaps or inadequacies in the national rural production training package and current training provisions. You also made reference to that in your introductory remarks. The list on that page is pretty comprehensive. Who or what organisation is best placed to deliver on those inadequacies and where should the delivery occur?

**Mr Bayley**—I think the current providers in the area are able to deliver on each of the areas. I guess the main restriction is that we cannot give credit to the individuals studying in these areas because there is no room in the present qualification structure or competency units that we can put on an academic transcript to identify that these people have studied in these areas. I noted in my opening remarks the trend in vocational training towards more generic competency standards or topics, if you like, where a number of different elements are drawn in, but they are fairly vague at times and do not deal with the specific needs of industry in some of the areas that I have highlighted in the submission.

**CHAIR**—Because of the wide diversity of the experience in your organisation’s various levels centred around agricultural component delivery, do you think there is a weakness in the system overall nationally? Do you think we should have a national database, or a national system, set up whereby we can identify the very things that you have identified and disseminate the information to the various groups—not associated with your organisation—that are allegedly supplying the teaching mechanisms to cover some of those areas?

**Mr Bayley**—One of the key issues is that we know that peak bodies, such as ANTA and now the Agrifood Industry Skills Council, exist to receive this sort of feedback. Our issue is that the time it takes in receiving the feedback and doing anything about it in terms of the national training agenda really takes two or three years which, when you are trying to deal with specific industry needs, is too slow. That is what I mean about training providers being on the back foot and not being up-to-date with addressing industry needs. There is a mechanism of review in these training packages to identify the shortfalls or pitfalls but, unfortunately, it is just too slow in trying to do something about it. If we can make an improvement in the system, the key thing would be to actually improve that response time and make it less onerous for the peak body, Agrifood Industry Skills Council, to make and incorporate these changes into the current training package.

**CHAIR**—Do those onerous pitfalls or hurdles that they face include the pages and pages of paperwork that the bureaucracy seems to generate? Does that have a significant input in slowing the process down? That is the first question; the second question is: do you think that the departments responsible for delivering most of the funds and programs to assist organisations and RTOs to address this issue are not proactive enough in terms of checking, observing and reporting on outcomes which should flow from them? In other words, have we got an inefficiency in the system related to (a) bureaucratic paperwork and (b) lack of follow-up by the departments responsible for the funding that is supposed to fix the problem?

**Mr Bayley**—I would have to say yes on both counts. I think the system has become too bureaucratic. I think it came out of good intentions, in that there would be wide consultation and reviews of that consultation, but it has just become too drawn-out and too bureaucratic, and I do not think those industries are proactive in going out and looking for the shortfalls or the weaknesses. I think there is an assumption that everything is okay. It is really up to networks like ours to go knocking on their doors and keep presenting this information and building a case. I think if a network like ours with industry support comes and says, ‘Look, there’s a deficiency here and there’s something that can be easily done,’ that should be taken into account and addressed rapidly, because there is that industry link and this national network that is providing this feedback. I do not think there is an excuse or a reason to draw that process out.

**CHAIR**—Do you think it would be appropriate for this committee to make recommendations centred on the need for an independent group to be appointed to address the issue of better coordinating the taxpayers’ funds that are being expended to allegedly speed up the process to fix the lack of skills in rural and regional Australia rather than looking for political appointments right across the board that tend to make a contribution on a part-time basis and, in many instances, have a remuneration attached to them that sees the emphasis lost in favour of the chairmanship? I know they are pointed questions, but they are questions that need to be asked, because people are reluctant to ask the questions. I am conscious of the fact that I am a member of a government that is involved in the process. But, if the questions are not asked—and not

answered, for whatever reason—this committee cannot make the appropriate, constructive recommendations to help us reach the outcome that we are all supposedly concerned about with regard to the lack of skills in rural and regional Australia.

**Mr Bayley**—We would support anything that would speed up the process of review and the making of minor modifications. The review of training packages involves two things. One is reviewing the whole training package for its currency and its value. There should also be another system separate from that which deals with minor modifications. If a training organisation says that there is an extra competency that they would like to include for certain reasons, and if they have industry backing, then that should be taken on board and put into the training package almost immediately or with minimal fuss rather than trying to link every minor modification with a larger process of review, which is very onerous and slow and means going out to all the states and territories and undertaking a lot of consultation. The process itself absorbs a lot of resources but we could do a lot to fast track improvements in the training package so we are more responsive to industry needs, and we would support anything that would move us in that direction.

**CHAIR**—Do you have any information that you would like to present to the committee that would help promote the very points that you have just made about speeding the process up? Do you have any criticisms?

**Mr Bayley**—One of the suggestions we make is for the committee to make a recommendation to put a definite time frame on minor modifications to training packages. If that were instituted then there would be a deadline that everyone would work towards—six months or even 10 months. Even if there is an initial 12-month guideline on the process these things might draw out to 2½ years and you are no further advanced and you are up for a review of the entire training package. Clear recommendations on deadlines or time frames for these things would force people to enact it and get on with the job.

**Mr ADAMS**—It is okay for industry to want this, that and everything else. Mostly industry would want people who are multiple skilled and ready to do everything available. How do we make sure that there is a reasonable checking process in place? Just because an industry says they do not seem to be learning X, Y and Z so it should be stuck into the curriculum does not mean we should not have some professional people have a look over it and see if there are any implications running back or whether there is something in it for the individual as well. The individual has to learn the skill to sell their own skill base to numerous employers. Isn't what you have done in your submission simplistic?

**Mr Bayley**—I do not think so. Look at some of those gaps like salinity and biodiversity. People in the industry, the training providers network and those in research would say that salinity is a major issue on our landscape and we should have specific units to deal with that. We have seen anomalies in the current training system where there will be a number of units dealing with acid-sulphate soils, a coastal issue, yet salinity, which is such a powerful issue across our landscape in Australia, does not rate a mention in the training package. I do not think we are being simplistic in picking out these areas. What I am suggesting is not just an industry group saying, 'We want this; let us throw it in,' it is industry working with registered training organisations that go through their networks and presenting a united case to the Agrifood

Industry Skills Council, the peak body, and saying, 'Can we have this issue addressed? This is what industry and the training organisations recommend. Do you agree? Can we progress it?'

**Mr ADAMS**—I did not see pest management on the bottom of that list.

**Mr Bayley**—Pests and weeds are dealt with primarily in the conservation and land management training package. That is the issue I raised about having these common units that cut across both fields of agriculture. Issues to do with pests and weeds in particular are fairly well dealt with.

**Mr ADAMS**—Your whole submission is about trying to bring them together in some process. We were talking about fencing. How do you fence and make sure you do it sustainably? Has anyone looked at that? I see that we have people arguing about sustainability and fitting it in over here in a productive farming sense. There has to be a bringing together of these two moulds. You have not really done that. You have said, 'These are missing.' How should we fit them in in specific terms? As I said, I see it working in the sense that, if somebody is fencing, has anyone thought about how a fence might do something which is unsustainable, such as encourage erosion—those sorts of issues? We do not seem to be able to take these things on. Issues of salinity and everything else are staying out here in an academic sense. We have to get it to the practical sense—how you control weed management and how you control pests—as a part of the whole learning process.

**Mr Bayley**—I think the first point is that sustainable land use has a very practical edge, and what you provide as an example is a very important point. There is one set of skills for erecting a fence; there is another set of skills for putting the fencing in the right place—that is, how far back from a watercourse it is or whether it is in the right place to do with land capability so you are dividing paddocks up into particular land classes. Those sorts of skills are brought in at higher level units, which I think relates to the point you were talking about of being holistic rather than talking about these as separate items. I think that is accounted for by going through the AQF levels. When you look at AQF2 and AQF3, you are looking at very basic skills. By the time you move up through certificate IV or diploma level, you are dealing with the broader issues, such as developing a whole farm plan, which includes questions like: 'Where do I put my fences? Is this an appropriate paddock size? How do I address issues of land capability, buffer zones, protecting riparian areas and those sorts of issues?' They develop up through the AQF structure. I do not think that we are just picking particular issues out. For example, fire management and water monitoring and management deal with a whole range of landscape units and practices, not just a specific little task.

**Mr ADAMS**—I think you have to push them down. They have to come down as well as going up.

**Mr Bayley**—Yes. I think all levels need to be improved, but what we find at the higher AQF levels is that we move more and more to these generic type competency units, and there is a technical edge at the higher levels as well as the lower levels.

**CHAIR**—I think Dick is trying to point out the inherent danger in focusing on the upper level, because it compounds the problem that we already have. It generates a commercial activity out there that is inclined to increase the bureaucratic pitfalls and hurdles that I just talked about

before, to the extent where everyone is jockeying for position to get hold of some government funding and the bureaucrats are putting more and more impediments in front of the people jockeying for position to obtain funds by putting more and more restrictions out there that make the funds difficult to get. The end result is that, between those two parts of the system, the people who are supposed to be at the receiving end are frustrated because they are being asked to lift their level of participation and qualification when all they want to do is get on with the job down here. It creates a significant problem, and it is one of the reasons why I personally believe we have gone through two or three decades of seeing the system slow down to the extent that we are now having an inquiry to try and find out how we get the skill levels up so we can replace the people who have dropped out of the industry for whatever reason. They are the points that I think Dick was making. I made them in a longwinded way, but his concern is our concern as well.

**Mr ADAMS**—Yes, I am concerned that we are looking at two different levels. You are trying to get two different levels of people. You talk about later on having the emergence of niche markets in the provision of environmental services. I think some of those issues need to be a part of the day-to-day working situation that people are going to gain skills in. We have to build natural resource management issues and all those issues into present competencies, not have them sit out here in a different world. There has to be a bringing together of those in some way. There is a whole educational role there of looking at why you are going to do something and learning that process as you go through. I just want to tease this out and talk in more detail about the competencies for registered training organisations. Can you give us any detail? Have you got an example of what you mean by ‘they are too vague’?

**Mr Bayley**—There are units such as ‘Develop a plan for a designated area of land.’ As an employer, if you see that on an academic transcript, what will you think? What will you recognise? I think there are a number of units that are fairly broad and they are designed that way to be used in a number of situations. The problem is that you end up with a transcript that no-one can really identify with—industry included. To go back to some of the points you made: I would be disappointed if the committee believed that we were pushing academic creep or saying that there should be sustainable agriculture units outside of what is going on.

**Mr ADAMS**—I get that feeling, I must say.

**Mr Bayley**—We are not suggesting that. We are saying that there are a whole range of levels, and it is all skills based, but what we need is a pathway so that people are not just—

**Mr ADAMS**—You need whole levels.

**Mr Bayley**—Yes, for people to work their way through. What we see is that there are some skills missing in the mid and higher levels. It is valid, in reviewing skills based training, to look at all of those technical areas, not just the basic skills but also the technical skills that are included in vocational training.

**Mr ADAMS**—We had evidence yesterday from a horticulture association on that area. What you are talking about is a prime example as well.



**Mr WINDSOR**—Your group is fairly unique because it represents the educators, vocational trainers et cetera. You keep referring to industry needs and that the package does not reflect what industry is saying or wants. What connection do you have with industry? Can you elaborate a bit? Are you in touch with the CRCs, New South Wales Farmers Association, Cotton Australia or the conservation movement? Who are the industry that you believe are saying that the packages are not acceptable or are not moving quickly enough?

**Mr Bayley**—Each of our members is based in different training organisations in different states and territories. Take me, for example: I am an education officer employed by the New South Wales Department of Primary Industries and working out of Tocal college. We deliver full-time and external courses in agriculture, conservation and land management. Part of our liaison with industry is that we have an industry advisory group. We are also out every week visiting farmers, doing skills recognition work and using these competencies week by week. We are also working with catchment management authorities. I have close links with the weed management area, the local government weed officers association and the weeds CRC. We are working with those groups all the time. My colleagues in other states and territories also have strong industry links, because their students obviously need those for placements, for the practical skills they are gaining and for their employment after completing their training. So all of our members go to great lengths to either be members of industry training organisations or go to them for consultation in reviewing their training and the short courses that they are providing.

**Mr WINDSOR**—So it is essentially the hands-on people in rural industry.

**Mr Bayley**—That is right. It is the hands-on people in industry and talking with them regularly—otherwise you become out of touch and do not provide the training or assessment that they are looking for.

**Mr WINDSOR**—Your submission talks about salinity and some of the biodiversity problems et cetera. One of the criticisms is that the current packages are not adopting and adapting some of these things quickly enough. How do you come to grips with some of the definitional problems for some of the sustainability issues? If I could just use one example—the use of chemicals in agriculture and no-till farming, or conservation farming as some people refer to it. Some people would suggest that the skills involved in doing those sorts of things correctly will actually deliver a more sustainable outcome on the particular property. Others may suggest that the long-term implications of chemical usage to deliver a sustainable income and usage of water et cetera will deliver a harmful outcome in the longer term. What do you do when you face those sorts of issues? Even with riparian issues, you could demonstrate that there are benefits in the quality of water in the riparian zone et cetera, but there may well be a whole range of other potential problem issues in relation to weeds, feral pests, disease, blah blah blah. How do you resolve those sorts of things in putting the package together?

**Mr Bayley**—That is one of the most interesting aspects of working in this area. To take your first example, about conservation or minimum till and that requiring more chemical use because you are not using conventional tillage methods: that is arguably the case, but chemical application has come down. If you look at the cotton industry, the number of passes they make with chemicals in any one season has been documented and shown to have dramatically reduced. So these ideas about economic pest thresholds, using the most appropriate herbicide and rotating

those herbicides to move away from the threat of herbicide resistance—those sorts of issues—are very important.

Yes, at times there will be trade-offs, so you have to look at what is best for the farm in either maintaining or improving those resources. In terms of soil health and soil structure, it may be more appropriate to rely more on chemicals in sowing a crop than conventional tillage because of the protection of that soil resource base. If best practice is using those herbicides and rotating those herbicide groups and thinking about sensitive areas and appropriate application times, then there will be net benefits in sustainable land use and the environment.

**Mr WINDSOR**—Thank you. You talked about the relationship that you have had with the weeds CRC. One of things we are also looking at is research and how you get the research that is being done back down through the educators to the people within industry. Your group strikes me as being right in the middle of that. How important do you see the CRCs as being? Do you see them as a major contributor from government and industry that push things through?

**Mr Bayley**—They are very important, because they are best placed to provide the latest information. In terms of getting technical material through—we were just talking about the appropriate herbicide application targeting particular weeds—they are the best placed to go for that technical information and the most up-to-date information. But in the past we have seen that there has been no history or encouragement of those groups—whether CRCs or research and development corporations—to engage with vocational training providers. It is disappointing in our mind, because we are the ones trying to get change on the ground and are working with individuals to improve practices. Rather than putting money into a PhD candidate or an honours student who may then go on and leave the industry and use that as a platform or springboard to move on outside of that, we think it is more sensible to invest more time, resources and money into vocational training, which is all about skills based, on-ground activity. To our mind it makes perfect sense for them to engage more. It would be good for their outcomes, for government outcomes and for community outcomes.

**Mr WINDSOR**—How have you established the contact with, in this example, the weeds CRC? What process took place to overcome the problem you just mentioned?

**Mr Bayley**—I was involved in one of the steering groups that put the weed management competencies together. Through that we have had links with some of the people in the CRC. We made a formal approach to them saying, ‘These are the opportunities in vocational education and training, this is why we believe you should be involved and these are the areas of need.’ It really did tie in with a lot of their programs anyway. They were developing what they would call, I guess, community capacity building type material or extension material. It was not hard for them, with the people they had in place in those programs, to convert that material and align it with national competency standards to be used for training purposes. So, all of a sudden, they had research updates, extension material and vocational education and training material that would be used for a number of years by training providers in all states. One of the big things for CRCs is for the information they are producing to be taken up. And here we are coming to them saying, ‘We are really hungry for these resources and we will take them up immediately if you can provide them, make them relevant and link them to the national training agenda.’ The weeds CRC put on education officers; they used some of their existing staff to do that and they have done a very good job of it.

**Mr ADAMS**—I take it that the pest management CRC is also available to make linkages in the same way.

**Mr Bayley**—I think there are a number of CRCs in a position to assist. We have not seen a lot of examples of that. We picked out the weeds CRC example because they are one of the only obvious examples to pick on. But, yes, the CRCs and research development corps could do more.

**Mr ADAMS**—What do you mean by ‘assessing the value of GM technology and farm systems’?

**Mr Bayley**—Farmers need to make a decision on whether they look at these GM crops or stay with conventional crops and they need to know what that will mean to their market position and export opportunities. Those sorts of questions are not seen anywhere in the training package. They are important issues in this day and age, which can be addressed by just posing those sorts of questions.

**Mr ADAMS**—I would have thought that that is more of a business decision than a training process.

**Mr Bayley**—In agriculture there are streams in rural business management. Those sorts of business decisions are brought into training because it is all about practical, hands-on use of those skill areas. So business management is a focus in those training packages.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much, Mr Bayley. Once again, we as a committee appreciate the contribution made by individuals such as you on behalf of groups that have an interest in what we are doing.

As an aside, you may be interested to know that we are just completing a pretty comprehensive inquiry into the impact of pest animals on agriculture, which has taken us around Australia to gather evidence. It is quite obvious in the early stages of this inquiry that in many respects the evidence we have received is compatible in terms of the need for the need for the states, territories and Commonwealth to work together and to have a central knowledge base to address the issues of not only the pest animal problem but also, more importantly at this stage, the issue of the lack of rural skills training and outcomes in rural and regional Australia. So I thank you for your contribution, which has been very constructive, and for making the time to be available here today.

**Mr Bayley**—Thank you very much.

**Proceedings suspended from 12.23 pm to 12.52 pm**

**ARCHER, Mr Cameron, Member, Advisory Council, and Principal, Tocal Agricultural College**

**CHAFFEY, Mr Richard Gordon, Deputy Chair, Advisory Council, Tocal Agricultural College**

**DUNCAN, Mrs Margo Anne, Chair, Advisory Council, Tocal Agricultural College**

**CHAIR**—I welcome the witnesses. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament. Consequently, they warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. It is customary to remind witnesses that giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. Do you wish to make a brief statement in relation to your submission or make some introductory remarks?

**Mrs Duncan**—On behalf of the advisory council I thank you for the opportunity to speak to this inquiry. I am not sure whether you will be having a hearing in the south of the state. If you are not, I am speaking on behalf of both Tocal and Murrumbidgee college advisory councils. Tocal and Murrumbidgee colleges are operated by the New South Wales Department of Primary Industries. Tocal has 125 full-time, mostly residential students who study certificate III to diploma level programs in agriculture and horse husbandry. It also runs a wide range of short courses and external study courses and has broad community and industry involvement. Murrumbidgee College did operate a full-time residential program until December 2003, when it ceased. It now operates an extensive adult education and short-course program as well as a nationally recognised Aboriginal rural training program.

I will speak regarding Tocal but I will also speak on matters pertaining to both colleges, as the submission was put together on behalf of both colleges. One of my colleagues from the advisory council is here today and will assist with questions and clarify issues. In addition, Mr Cameron Archer, principal of the college, is present. He is in a position to clarify technical and educational issues if and as necessary.

I do not wish to labour the point regarding the shortage of skilled people to work on the land as I am sure you have heard this many times before. Most of you may be from rural areas, so you would know this anyway. It is therefore taken as read. My address will look at the issues associated with fixing this problem and adjusting the systems that we have to make them better. Firstly, there is the promotion of agricultural careers. The promotion in schools of careers in agriculture in general has been underfunded in the past despite the efforts of many. It is important that this matter be addressed into the future. Mr Archer is convening a national group on this matter and is holding a workshop in Canberra in November. In addition, there is an initiative in Tasmania which will assist in the promotion of agricultural science to year 11 and 12 students.

These initiatives need strong support from the Commonwealth. Policies are therefore being prepared to enable agricultural matters to be promoted more strongly in schools, whether they be in the primary curriculum or the secondary curriculum. Due to changes in society, most of the

population are totally detached from agriculture. We therefore need to be creative in the ways of providing links to agriculture and the general population. One way of doing this is through school education. Mr Archer can clarify this matter further for the panel, but it is important that you are aware of these initiatives. I am also aware that the national funding for Rural Skills Australia looks like ceasing in the next few weeks and that there will be no specialist rural careers system available across the country. This has been a good way of promoting rural careers but for some reason the Commonwealth has decided to change the system and there will not be specialist rural careers advisers in each state. The committee should be aware of this matter.

Secondly, there are the training structures. Tocal college is involved in full-time and part-time training. 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. Inquiry members should be aware that full-time training is very important for agriculture. There seems to be a trend to get away from full-time training and to just have part-time traineeships. This would seem to be a way of making the statistics look good and of being seen to get more people through, but in fact it is not necessarily the best way to do it.

The other matter that is of great concern to us at Tocal college is the structure for traineeships. 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 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.

Thirdly, there is the funding of training. The funding of training is always problematic. Agricultural training is expensive, the equipment is expensive and often potentially dangerous and, in addition, animals are unpredictable to work with and the facilities need to be of a high standard. All these matters make training problematic, whether it be training in an agricultural college or on a farm. The provisions as to occupational health and safety complicate this further. Therefore, funding for agricultural training is well below what it should be, given the actual costs. While there is a differential between various levels of funding for traineeships, the differential is not great enough to account for the high cost of agricultural skills training. There has been an emphasis on pushing all this training into the workplace and having it ticked off there. This causes problems because if one is not careful one ends up having a ticking and flicking training system, which means that the trainee is totally detached from any institutional group work and from the benefits of sharing their knowledge with others apart from what is just

in their work situation. The incentives for training are also problematic. As stated earlier, the incentives for people to move into traineeship systems are not broad enough and cut trainees off in mid-flight. This needs to be remedied.

Fourthly, I turn to the role of research and development corporations. Research and development corporations were established many years ago to support research and development in particular industries. They have been focused very much on research. The development side, which should include training, has received little emphasis. It is therefore necessary that these corporations put more funds into training and supporting training. The recent move in Victoria, where Dairy Australia has stepped in and assisted with dairy training in Victoria, should be a way ahead for training in other industries.

The council does not want to appear too critical of research and development corporations, as they have done an excellent job within the way their charter has been interpreted in the past. The skills crisis that is now enveloping rural industries would suggest that their charter needs to be broadened and their funding extended further to add value to the existing funding from government for agricultural training. However, there has been some excellent support for training from research and development corporations. For example, the Grains Research and Development Corporation supports full-time vocational education and training scholarships for students in agricultural colleges. The Cotton Research and Development Corporation is taking an active role in planning for future training in the cotton industry.

It is therefore suggested that research and development corporations use funds to add to what DEST provides for traineeships and other training. This would not be a large amount of funding but, if targeted well, it could really assist the promotion and delivery of training for rural skills across Australia. If some discretionary funds are not introduced into the system, nothing will change and in fact less and less rural training will occur. This is an excellent opportunity for the research and development corporations.

Fifthly, I turn to specialist training and the agricultural rural training program. Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture runs an outstanding agricultural rural training program which works across much of southern New South Wales. It has worked closely with youth at risk and also with people who are in correctional centres. It also works with particular Aboriginal communities. This training has been strongly supported by the New South Wales state government and is a model for others to follow. An extensive program has also occurred for people from a non-English speaking background in the Sydney basin. This was undertaken using a whole-of-government approach, and staff from Murrumbidgee and, more recently, Tocal have been actively involved in training in the Sydney basin. Earlier this week, a small graduation ceremony was held for a group of Chinese growers in Western Sydney. Again, this was strongly supported by the New South Wales government and shows what can be done when training is adequately funded.

The New South Wales DPI is strongly committed to agricultural education and sees the provision of short courses as an important adjunct to its extension services. Tocal and Murrumbidgee colleges provide a wide range of short courses both on campus and in other parts of the state. These short courses are a great addition to agricultural education in New South Wales. The colleges also provide a wide range of publications and books for agricultural education.

In summary, we wish to say that more funds need to be brought into targeted areas of rural skills training. The areas particularly needing attention are promotion of agriculture to schools, training incentives for employees and employers, and greater access and use of research and development corporation funding for training. I thank the inquiry for travelling to Newcastle and being available to speak to us today. We appreciate this opportunity, and we wish you well in your deliberations. I will now leave it open for questions which may be directed to me or to my colleagues.

**CHAIR**—Thank you, Margo. Do either of you gentlemen want to make any complementary remarks to the presentation just given by Mrs Duncan, or are you happy just to take questions?

**Mr Chaffey**—I put some information together, and I will run over it briefly. I will hand it over to be tabled when I finish. In looking at an industry overview and what has happened with rural training over the last three or four years, it is interesting to note that, with the difficulties in our industry with drought and the lack of financial ability to pay for courses et cetera, there has been a drop in the number of students going into colleges throughout the state—and not only in this state but also, I believe, in other states. I believe Victoria has had a major problem with a drop in student numbers, with a number of colleges closing. There has also been a rationalisation in Queensland, but I do not know how much the colleges there have been affected. Basically, it has all been due to a lack of ability in the industry to support young people coming back into it, and that comes down to the effects of the drought and the ability of the industry to pay. So profitability has a bearing on what is happening with regard to the availability of students in our industry.

Other areas that I would like to mention are occupational health and safety and industrial relations. The industrial relations issue is currently before the federal parliament. We are concerned about the effect that will have on small farms with family partnerships—which is probably a very large percentage of our industry. How will they be catered for?

Returning to the state occupational health and safety issue, we do not think very many farms can comply with the current occupational health and safety provisions in the state act, and that is creating a problem with the employment of young people in our industry.

When I look at training opportunities, I see this in two ways. There are two sides to it: the basic skills training and the management training. I do not believe that management training is any good without the basic skill structure. Without the basic skills, or without a full understanding of the skill structure below him, a manager is incapable of managing a rural business. This brings us back to the state certificate III and IV training levels. This is critical to our industries working effectively and is probably one of the most important parts of the skills scope and areas of training need, yet it is probably one of the least funded and hardest areas to apply across an industry floor. I have seen where TAFE colleges have endeavoured to do it but, because of industry pressures, the student numbers have not been there. TAFE colleges have not had the student numbers to survive and, in turn, have sold off the resources. Now there is no longer the opportunity for training in those areas. It is difficult to start up something from scratch. If those industries were there, if they were still surviving and being maintained, it would not be difficult to get training going again.

Our major need is guaranteed funding for our training institutions of agriculture—and I mean all training agricultural institutions, whether it be TAFE or primary industry agriculture; whether it be private or public education. There is a high cost structure in providing on-the-ground rural training. I believe the on-the-ground scenario is probably the most important part of it. You cannot learn how to do things in agriculture unless you are actually in contact with it, doing the work in a real situation. I think that is most important. The situation where the training is being carried out has to be realistic.

There needs to be a bit more work done on compatibility of courses across the states and full transferability of credits. That way, students studying in areas that are common across states can transfer easily between colleges and be given credits in other states. A lot of work has been done on that, but I think there is still further to go. There needs to be better control over the quality of standards of teaching, especially in relation to competency based courses. I do not know how you would go about controlling this area. In some areas the standards are quite high, in others they are quite low—and in some cases they are so low that industry personnel have given those courses away as being non-effective.

I believe that management training has been traditionally obtained by doing a degree course. The diploma courses offered by the colleges are very good and have a significant impact on the level of skills in our industry. By the same token, the training in those areas needs to be grounded in basic skills training—that is, the level 2, 3 and 4 skills training areas. Without those, I believe the diploma courses become less effective at the end of the day. I have written a few comments on my notes, which I am quite happy to table. I am more than happy to answer any questions.

**CHAIR**—Thank you. I am conscious of the fact that my parliamentary colleague and deputy chair has to leave very shortly. I would like to give him the opportunity to ask a few questions before he goes.

**Mr ADAMS**—TAFE or technical training has always been undervalued. Why do you think that is so? Why do you think it has been undervalued by our society?

**Mr Chaffey**—I believe the quality of the education is not of the standard required by industry or, in many cases, is not exactly relevant to the industry where the training is being delivered.

**Mr ADAMS**—Do you think there is a broader picture than just the turn-out of students and that what the industry needs is for training and skills to be a bit broader than that?

**Mr Chaffey**—For TAFE to be able to provide training to rural industry, it has to have the flexibility within its system to do the training when industry can be there to take the training up. In many cases, the inflexibility within the system has led to courses being advertised and there being no applications. The courses are often needed but are just not there.

**CHAIR**—I ask a brutal question related to the point that has just been raised by my colleague. Do you think that the TAFE college number which you referred to is dropping off because TAFE courses have concentrated on what I call hobby courses, such as basket-weaving et cetera, at the expense of courses geared to skills training, particularly rural skills training?



**Mr Chaffey**—I believe that TAFEs have adequate courses but I do not believe they have the ability to deliver those courses to the standard that is required by the industry.

**CHAIR**—When you say that they do not have the ability, do you mean that they do not have the expertise or the trained people within the TAFE itself to deliver?

**Mr Chaffey**—Sometimes they do not have the expertise. Under that system, quite often they cannot bring in the expertise to do the training. In many cases, the TAFE system does not have the flexibility required within it to provide the training. I make those comments based on my experience; I have also been involved in TAFE.

**CHAIR**—We appreciate that, and we appreciate your raising the issue. It is an issue that, to my knowledge, has not been raised in the evidence taken to date.

**Mr WINDSOR**—Mr Chaffey makes an important point, because one of the things that Tocal has is a very good reputation with industry. Unfortunately, TAFE and a number of the other teaching institutions have not been able to establish that reputation, partly because of funding, expertise and skills, critical mass and a whole range of reasons. Mr Archer, given that your organisation does have a high reputation in agricultural circles, how important has location been in attracting people and being able to market the product back to industry? Has the fact that you are located in the heart of the agricultural area been a factor? How important is it?

**Mr Archer**—Location is an interesting issue, especially in this state, because you have the Great Dividing Range and people divide either on one side of it or on the other side. There are certain attitudes that go with that. Fortunately, Tocal is located halfway between the big urban areas and the north-western part of the state, which is the grain bowl of Australia. We are in a very good position, but we have to work on that because some people see us as not being in the heart of a grain producing or jute producing area and so on. That is a perception that we work on very strongly. For example, we never put a picture of a dairy cow in brochures. If you are marketing to the dairy industry, you do but, if you want to market our training over the range, you do not put a picture of a dairy cow in your brochure; you put other things in. You have to manage those perceptions. Wherever you are located, there is always an upside and a downside. We have given these matters a tremendous amount of thought. You have to deal with those perceptions irrespective of where you are located.

We find ourselves attracting about a third of our students from traditional agricultural areas, about a third from what they sometimes call periurban areas or the urban fringe and then another third from the true urban situation. When we look at where our students come from, it is associated with where the bigger population centres are. So, because of where we are, we are attractive to students from urban areas. That is good, because those students from urban areas go and live, work and have a career in the country. But we do most of our promotion in the country. We visit all the schools in the north-west and the northern part of the state and, now, across most of the state. We do not visit all the city schools. We visit schools on the Central Coast. We do not visit every school in Newcastle, for example, but we visit all the schools in the Hunter and on the North Coast and so on.

**Mr WINDSOR**—Do you have a rough breakdown of where your students end up?

**Mr Archer**—Yes.

**Mr WINDSOR**—How many stay in agriculture?

**Mr Archer**—In the long term, we think about 70 to 80 per cent stay in agriculture or something related to it, then you have a lot who churn in and out of it, then you have ones who go into other professions and then go back into the country—for example, we have a few people who might have become police and worked in the police force. I was just talking about a student the other day. He is back up at Gloucester. He and his wife have bought a farm, and he is working as a policeman. So you have this sort of in and out, but 70 or 80 per cent are in some form of agriculture. That seems to be the case. There is a very high retention rate, because you have to inspire people to do things; they do not just do it because they want to. Education should inspire people as well as train them.

**Mr WINDSOR**—How do you relate that to the statistical evidence that tells people that young people do not want to work on farms?

**Mr Archer**—A lot of the young people do want to work on farms. We just have to get those, through education, to work on farms. The problem is that there are not enough of them. But, yes, our students are dead keen to work on farms. So the stereotype of young people not wanting to work on farms is probably not helping our situation. We have to promote education and agriculture to schools to make sure that they know what is out there—the great careers, opportunities and things that are there.

**CHAIR**—So what suggestions do you have for governments to further develop and implement strategies to inform career advisers, parents and students of agricultural and horticultural career opportunities? That is picking up the point that you just made.

**Mr Archer**—Rural industry has to have a combined effort on this. It cannot sit back and wait and have government do it all for it. The industry itself has to take responsibility. It does that through industry bodies and through research and development corporations—I think that is the key to it. Once you get a collective action, schools and careers advisers are very receptive to the right message. We are working at the moment through the group I have convened to try to get those things organised so that we are getting a coherent message and coherent structures. We have six different state education systems and two territories, so we have to work very hard to work across all those, because, as you know, school education is a state responsibility. So that is the workshop I am convening in Canberra in November to examine those issues and get a network of people working to overcome them. I think it is possible to do if we are calm, cool and collected about it and work right across the education systems. I reiterate that the education system is very receptive to the right message.

**CHAIR**—Probably Margo would like to answer this question. It is in relation to the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture. In 2003, they did away with full-time and part-time youth education services as well as the availability of full-time residential facilities. They closed them down in December 2003. What consultation processes took place before this happened? Currently, what is left at the Murrumbidgee college, and what is the future for it?

**Mr Archer**—I could probably answer that.

**Mrs Duncan**—I think I had probably best leave it to Cameron to answer that.

**CHAIR**—Okay.

**Mr Archer**—The process is fairly well covered in the upper house inquiry in New South Wales regarding that matter. I am not really in a position to talk about the process but I can talk about what is happening down there at the moment. We are operating accommodation services without having the kitchen operating—that is, servicing short courses and functions that are there—and we are in the process of seeking funding to recommission the accommodation to provide low-cost accommodation for people attending courses as well as other groups that might visit the Riverina. I think that the future of that campus is assured and I do not discount its future role in education.

**CHAIR**—When you say that you are seeking funding, you are seeking funding from whom? Where was the funding coming from in the first place?

**Mr Archer**—I am in the process of having discussions with the Regional Partnerships program to examine funding to support the conversion of the facility to make it work and to put a stronger community focus on it so that it is available for more than just education activities. It is in its early days but that is the process under way.

**CHAIR**—Where was the financial support coming from previously? Was that state government money?

**Mr Archer**—It was state government funding.

**CHAIR**—Effectively we are allowing—and please correct me if I am wrong—a level of government to abrogate and move away from its responsibilities to supply some training in rural and regional Australia. We are going to cost shift that responsibility of the state government—and it has been their responsibility for decades—across to federal short-term funding. Is that really an appropriate way for governments of any political persuasion—and I am probably asking a pointed question here and looking for a pretty straightforward warts and all answer—to treat agriculture and agricultural training in this country when it evolves to the point where it necessitates a joint standing committee of the federal parliament to go out there and seek evidence on why skills training in rural and regional Australia is decreasing? We are undertaking an inquiry to find out what the problem is and the problem is caused by government itself in many, though not all, instances.

**Mr Archer**—The money that we are seeking to recommission that accommodation will make it a user pays, commercial business.

**CHAIR**—I understand that.

**Mr Archer**—Given the amount of money that is being sought and the future benefits, I do not think that that should be considered as a major issue. We want to recommission those facilities for the purposes of community and education.

**CHAIR**—I understand the direction you are going in and I do not want to labour the point. The point I am making here is that, sure, it is only a short-term injection to get up what will be a self-sufficient process supported by the money that is generated in the final outcome of the exercise, but why should the taxpayers of the country make a contribution to get that up and running when the state government has moved away from it? If they are going to move away from those sorts of services, why shouldn't they be making a contribution to set up the very scheme that you are trying to get running—and due credit to you for trying to get it running—and why shouldn't they be responsible for doing it? They walked away from the situation by withdrawing funding.

I am well aware of the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture's problems because I come from Cootamundra. I am well and truly aware of the public outcry about these moves some time ago and the more recent moves. I find it reprehensible, regardless of the politics of the day and the government of the day—and the political persuasion of the government of the day—that governments flick pass and exchange their obligations at the expense of communities. That impacts on our ability to keep agriculture functioning in Australia and creates this exercise that I pointed out whereby members of the House of Representatives decided that we should undertake an inquiry because we are getting feedback from various sources in our electorates that there is a need to stop the haemorrhaging of our rural skills training.

**Mr Chaffey**—I would rather pass some comment than leave Cameron to say anything on that. As an individual, I have seen the demise of agricultural training across this state. I spent three years as Chairman of the New South Wales Rural Training Committee years ago. That was at a time when growth was being developed. A lot of things happened in those few years that I was involved in rural training. In the last 10 years I saw nothing but decline. Nearly all the issues have been geared to funding, with a certain amount of lack of ability and management in some areas to be able to maintain resources and keep the training going. I put the comment in my notes: we need guaranteed funding for training institutions. One of the reasons I put that comment in is that it will avoid some of these systems when we have bad times in rural industry and we do not have student numbers. We need to be able to carry the can until the numbers come back again. That is the hardest thing of all to do with the fiscal people today. They all work on head numbers and that is it. If you do not have the numbers on seats, you do not get funded. That is a very difficult scenario to handle. I believe Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture was in a situation where numbers were lacking and there was no latitude. Industry consultation was, it could be said, limited. I do not know. I will not get into that argument. I do not believe it is my place to get into it.

**Mr WINDSOR**—To save anyone from making any political comments, could I—

**Mr Chaffey**—I could do that without getting anybody into trouble.

**Mr WINDSOR**—Chairman, I appreciate what you had to say a moment ago. I know we are probably taking a little bit of licence. Maybe you would like to ask us questions. The feeling I have been getting from the inquiry so far is that there is a recognition of the problem. Mr Chaffey talks about there being a decline, and suddenly skills shortages and agriculture are back on the agenda and we are looking for quick fixes. I would not be surprised if we end up circumnavigating the nation and coming back to what, in part, colleges like Tocal and Murrumbidgee provide now, mainly because the product that comes out of those institutions has

been wholly marketable and acceptable by the industry. We have been dealing with industry groups and the very thing that they are talking about is having people who fit. Yesterday, representatives from Cotton Australia talked about there having been too much focus on the trainee rather than the client. People are putting it in different ways.

Chairman, further down the track, could we consider looking at specific problems at Murrumbidgee? That might be something that we could consider as a committee. I will get back to the agenda now and ask a question. Margo, you talked about the research and development corporations and how, in your view, they were not relating to the training end of industry. You mentioned the Cotton R&D Corp and that it had been positive. Could you elaborate on both the problem and the positive nature of the Cotton R&D Corp?

**Mr Archer**—We work closely with Cotton R&D Corporation, Cotton CRC and Cotton Australia to develop training. It is unique because it is a priority, it is on the radar for them and they are serious about it. I think it is very good that they are serious about it as a corporation—as distinct from having an individual in an organisation who is serious about it. We have to wait and see how much extra funding leverage we will get from that. The issue is that you cannot get special deals from central government for what we do; we just get the basic funding. You are whistling in the wind if you want any more than that, so you have to go to industry and industry has to take ownership for that. You have to work out how you complement the money from government with industry money. That is the sort of model that we are working towards in the cotton industry. It is early days, but we think it can work.

Young people working in rural industry, such as trainees, need mentoring and support. They need someone to ring up if they are not going so well on the farm or if something happens. The current traineeship systems do not have anyone there who can help them. Having somebody there who can help them, mentor them and be a liaison between the training institution and the producer they are working with and so on can get them over the humps that they might not otherwise get over. That goes for all industries. When people are spread around on farms in isolated locations it is more crucial because when you work on a farm you live and work in the same place, as distinct from going to work and coming home in an urban situation. Extra resources are necessary to make sure that you do not have too big a drop-out rate from traineeship courses, you have the right trainees on the right farms and so on. That is where I think research and development corporations could help—with not a lot of money, if you look at the total budgets.

**Mr WINDSOR**—What about CRCs?

**Mr Archer**—Some CRCs have been pretty good in this area. We have had some very good work done, particularly with adult vocational education through the weeds CRC. Some of the newer CRCs are very switched on to it. For others it is a very low priority and the university and doctoral programs get the bulk of the money and energy. So it depends on the CRC, but once money gets tight the first thing that goes is the skilled and vocational education. But I think that situation is getting better, not worse.

**CHAIR**—In your submission you state that communities should be treated as a whole and not as separate entities. Can you explain to the committee what you mean by that?

**Mr Archer**—It is really looking at how agricultural education fits into a community situation, how your students relate to that and also how you market it to the community. I do not think you can extract agriculture from the actual community in which you are working and you have to be mindful of that all the time, especially in the marketing and delivery of programs. You cannot just say, ‘This is what we’re doing here and we don’t relate to anyone else around us.’ For example, with our resources at Tocal, we put a lot of effort into the community use of our facilities and all those things which help market our courses. We do not work separately from the community. That is the main issue behind that. Lots of ideas went into this submission from both advisory councils so perhaps Richard or Margo would like to add to that.

**CHAIR**—What about the issue of bringing the identification of training needs and the delivery of training more into line with each other?

**Mr Archer**—Again, I think the identification of the real needs for training are often fairly vague. Sometimes people are quite happy to sit in meetings and say that other people, rather than themselves, should do some training. It is a problematic issue. My approach over the years has been to get a product and see whether it sells. If people turn up then you know that you have met a need. You can put a lot of money into market research and employ consultants to identify needs and you will get a report, but it may not necessarily solve your problem for you. Without being too cynical about that end of the spectrum, you have to be really careful about doing market needs surveys. You need to do some but you need to have some good scouts around, such as advisory council members as we have at Tocal and Murrumbidgee, who are your real market researchers—they tell you what is going on.

**CHAIR**—I have one more question. It is in relation to the views that you have expressed in your submission on research and development corporations and their marketing back of intellectual property that you believe industry producers own. Could you expand on that?

**Mr Archer**—I have quite strong views on that. It has probably diminished a little bit but some research and development corporations have thought that developing their intellectual property through their research is an asset that they get and then they sell it back to the people who paid the levies in the first place. We have been in a situation where we tried to get farm management material from one particular research and development corporation for our youth education students at Tocal and we were going to be charged a reasonable amount of money for that to train young people to work on the land. I thought that was really not a particularly productive arrangement to be in when all this information is sitting in an office in North Sydney and it is either inaccessible to young people who want to do a course or they have to pay more for it. That is why that is in the submission.

**Mr WINDSOR**—I think that is a very important point and I would like the secretariat to note it if they could. Another point that is related, I think, is that there has been some criticism. We had the MLA in yesterday. The question was raised that is raised in your submission about the pricing of the educational resources such that the MLA has been out of the reach of students. They are going to respond to that allegation, but could you elaborate on that particular issue? It could be a good example.

**Mr Archer**—It is a good example. There have been some management changes there in recent times, but last year we made approaches to them for material for courses which our

students would have had to pay for; we would have had to enter into a contract to pay for this material. We thought it was just another added impost on our students, so we found other ways of dealing with it. The problem is that it is a barrier. The whole business of research and development corporations holding material and selling it back to producers is just a barrier where there are already enough barriers in the way of getting this material to producers without putting more in place. That is what has concerned us.

**CHAIR**—Especially when the barrier is pretty insurmountable in the lack of financial resources available that are resourced to cover the costs. Thank you very much for your contribution today. One thing about people coming in and giving this evidence is that we get some very interesting information that is certainly going to assist us to put forward some recommendations in our report which hopefully will highlight some very obvious, significant shortcomings in the system as it flows through from government. Hopefully the government will pick up the recommendations and do something constructive for the industry as a whole, because the bottom line is that we cannot afford to continue to see young people moving away from agriculture. More importantly, as the precursor to that occurring, we cannot afford to see the skills disappearing that we know need to be lifted back to the level that they were at 15 or 20 years ago. Evidence has been given to this committee about the need for practical skills, which do not carry certification, to be recognised as well. They are very important to the continual operation of agriculture as a whole across the country. We thank you for your significant contribution to this inquiry today.

**Mr Chaffey**—I would like to table my opening statement.

**CHAIR**—Thank you.

[1.40 pm]

**SEYMOUR, Mr Gregory Kenneth, General Manager, Australian Mushroom Growers Association Ltd**

**CHAIR**—Welcome. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament. Consequently, they warrant the same respect as proceedings of the parliament itself. It is customary to remind witnesses that giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as contempt of parliament. Do you wish to make a brief statement in relation to your submission or would you care to make some introductory remarks?

**Mr Seymour**—The important things that you should note from the submission are that we see training as an absolutely paramount and strategic need for our industry and that our industry requires workplace based training rather than institutionalised training. It is essential for us that the structures and the funding sources are flexible and enable us to achieve this outcome. I think it is important to note that the expertise required to deliver the training is not likely to reside in the formal institutions that are about; it resides in industry. We need to get it out of there, through the formalised system and back into the workplaces. Whilst there are state based institutions, the need for our industry is a national one. At times, particularly through sources such as FarmBis, that has been difficult. Whilst 50 per cent of the money comes from the national government, the 50 per cent that comes from the state government seems to provide us with an enormous amount of difficulty to operate on a national basis. I think that really summarises where I am coming from, and I am pleased to answer any questions that you have.

**Mr WINDSOR**—I have a question you probably cannot answer, and it is a shame that the people who have just left the room are not still here. There was a comment made earlier today that a workplace training program was put in place for the Chinese gardeners in the Sydney basin. I think Tocal had something to do with the delivery of those services. Are you aware of that program?

**Mr Seymour**—Yes. In fact, I was the initial chair of the NESB work force task force for the Premier some years ago. I worked for 18 years in New South Wales agriculture, so I know Cameron and the system. Yes, I am familiar with getting that going. I left the department and that chair's position 10 years ago now. I guess what we are talking about here is similar in a focused need, so you are spot on in grabbing hold of that, but I do not want our issue to be seen as an NESB issue. This is about training for all nationalities.

**Mr WINDSOR**—This program took place only in the last few months.

**Mr Seymour**—It has been in the planning process for nearly a decade, I reckon.

**Mr WINDSOR**—Is that right?

**Mr Seymour**—Yes.



**CHAIR**—That is a very important point raised by my colleague. Am I to understand that that program which took a decade to come into being was centred around supplying interpreters or training in Chinese and other languages for people who could not speak English?

**Mr Seymour**—Yes, that is my understanding. I have not had any hands-on detail in recent times. There was a very heavy emphasis on bringing people from the community—say, the Cambodian community around Kemps Creek or somewhere like that—and training them up and sending them back into the community with those language and culture skills. That is important.

**CHAIR**—That is interesting.

**Mr Seymour**—You would need to get some advice on the details about what has happened, but that was the concept behind that process.

**Mr WINDSOR**—The reason I raised it is that you talked about the need for workplace training rather than institutional training.

**Mr Seymour**—Correct.

**Mr WINDSOR**—Could you elaborate on what you actually mean and why it has to be in the workplace?

**Mr Seymour**—There are a number of reasons, but primarily it is because businesses cannot afford to have staff leave the business. In our business, 90 per cent of the employees are pickers. But, because of OH&S and all of those sorts of things, we need to have constant training in the workplace and we need the efficiency of those employees to be increasing all of the time just to make us profitable and productive businesses. To have people leave the work force and go away from the farm is just not possible. You have to pick mushrooms when they have to be picked. One might ask the question, ‘Why don’t they do that after work and things like that?’ Most of them are involved in family situations and it is not possible. We are not talking generally about young people here; we are talking about mature aged people from 30 onward. Very often it is a second part of an income in a family. But, very much, for some of those NESB people, they are the primary earner of the income as well and a primary person in the household. So it is very difficult, in a cultural sense and a lifestyle sense, for those people to actually go away and do external training. We are not talking about getting young people and training them to work in mushroom farms. We are not talking about that at all. It is about upskilling existing workers.

**Mr WINDSOR**—Given your background and training in agriculture, if there was a single recommendation for the future—not only for your industry but also for other industries—in terms of training, what would it be?

**Mr Seymour**—Flexibility is the key word. I was interested in some of the comments about marketing and market research. The basis of any market research program is to identify what the consumer needs and deliver the product for them. The need for training has not gone away. The difficulty in moving to get into institutionalised training is increasingly difficult. My recommendation is that it is horses for courses. We have a need for scientists. That has to be a university based thing. But the primary driver for the skilling we need is in that work force. We need to have the people with the skills, expertise and knowledge and have a flexible enough

system so that there is rigour and the outcome is positive. But we need to have the systems to meet the needs of the workplace, not to have the workplace meet the needs of the institutional systems.

I did not put it in my submission, but education is an industry and it really should be more market focused, saying, 'How can we use our skills to get better outcomes?' Just to take that a bit further, we had a terrific relationship with Murrumbidgee. That was because they said to us, 'How can we help you to get your needs?' If you rock up to a TAFE, it tends to be, 'You have to do this and you have to do that; you can't do this and you can't do that.' It is an attitude and a cultural thing. It was a great sadness to us that Murrumbidgee demised. I cannot give a big enough rap to the principal there for trying to find ways to help us to get our outcomes. It was a partnership between industry and education to deliver an outcome for industry. It was not just someone's sole responsibility to do it. It was not easy, but it worked for us. It was a sad day when that all happened.

**CHAIR**—Just on that point, what do you think should be the role of the states and the Australian government in terms of extension services, including through agricultural colleges such as Murrumbidgee?

**Mr Seymour**—Would you mind explaining what you mean by 'extension services'? I used to be an extension officer so I understand what that was. But the world has changed a bit.

**CHAIR**—If training is to be a workplace program, what contribution can governments make to assist the colleges that are working in that environment to actually deliver that in a practical application through their colleges?

**Mr Seymour**—I would simply say that governments can contribute money to provide the resources to enable colleges to deliver the outcomes they need.

**CHAIR**—Attached to guidelines?

**Mr Seymour**—Absolutely. I think the education industry provides us with a framework and rigour in which training can take place. From 1990, the industry has been trying to get guidelines together that fit in with the formal things. That is why I say flexibility is important. It is a very small industry when you take it in toto. It is also very small when you take it in the economic framework of Australia. We recognise that and we are not asking for anyone to give the industry any special favours.

I would have a number of colleagues in industries of a similar size who have the same view—that is that, when we go to an institution, we want the institution to help us deliver training outcomes that are going to be meaningful for our industry. We do not expect a course in mushroom production at a TAFE. That is just ridiculous; it is a waste of resources. A TAFE would not have the expertise to deliver; all the expertise is in the industry. We have found that, if they have the resources to have the framework in which the training takes place, so there is formal recognition for the employees, it is extremely empowering for people.

People may have been working in a place for 10 or 15 years, but they do not have anything to show for that. But they come along, do the course and get a certificate, and I am amazed to see

that these things are up on walls. There are pictures of the groups that they graduated with. It is part of networking in industry, which is often underestimated. I can give it to you in a practical sense. Industry decides to do training. They go to an RTO, because you need to have rigour in these things. You cannot have cowboys running around the countryside calling themselves lecturers and teachers. There needs to be a framework so that the training that is given is appropriate, so the RTO needs to be—if you like—the police of that. Industry needs to know that the people who are delivering the training are competent, so the RTO needs to police the competency of the trainers. Then, when the results are finished, the RTO needs to be the one that signs off that it is formally recognised. All of those things are possible; there just does not seem to be a lot of desire out there, because it is different from the norm, and it is more work.

**CHAIR**—Do you think that there is a lack of desire out there in many instances because, in the context of governments making funding available, there appears to be an agreed criticism that part of the problem that we have is attached to the availability or access to the money not being as simplified as it should be? Is it that, because of the guidelines, qualifications and requirements laid down to get into the package, you are meeting an ever-increasing pile of paper to get to it? The process has slowed down to the point where it becomes very significant in how long it takes for a practical course to be delivered and a positive outcome to occur for the people looking for it.

**Mr Seymour**—I could not have said it any better; that is exactly what the situation is. There seem to be so many hurdles and so many difficulties put in the way.

**CHAIR**—Why do you think that is occurring? I have some views on it and I have made them public in this hearing and in other hearings, because I am highly critical of the lack of control and the empire building of bureaucrats. Would you like to give us your view on why you believe that obstructive process is there of fastidious requirements to fill out paperwork? Is there a need for it to be there? Do you have a view on how or why it has occurred?

**Mr Seymour**—The answer is no. I do not know. I observe that the culture that would drive it is one that you have described—that is, empire building. I would argue that it is because there is too much focus on process and not enough on outcomes. I think I could summarise it in that way.

I would make my judgment just on how many people we could train and, once the training has taken place, measure the improvement. That is the proof of the pudding. You cannot make it any plainer than that. It is because these things are so big—they are massive—and there is another language in there. These courses are driven by industry. No-one comes along from the education sector and says, ‘What can we do for you?’ We are the ones who are knocking on their door saying, ‘We would like to do this; can you help us?’ You are deterred from getting these courses up, running and completed because, quite frankly, it is so difficult.

**CHAIR**—Considering your submission’s comments about the lack of university graduates, what are you doing to encourage university graduates to enter the mushroom industry to fill research and development and technical positions? Also, what do you believe the Australian government can do to assist in that respect?

**Mr Seymour**—Part of our dilemma is the demise of government funded institutions—and we are talking here about departments of agriculture. Generally it has been state funding, although,

through running costs, certain federal funds find their way into those programs. That is just a natural fact of life. I do not think we can do anything about that.

In a practical sense—you might also note from my CV that I am Chairman of the International Society for Mushroom Science—we make very strong links in a global sense between the scientists that work in our programs and those around the world. We have a research facility at Sydney university and we will be offering scholarships to undergraduates and postgraduates to run research experiments in the unit. In that way, we will attract people to the industry to get a feel for it and some employment opportunities may emerge out of that. In that unit, we have someone doing a PhD at present and a postdoctorate coming next year. So we hope that will deliver for us, even if only in a small way. We are just part of a total agricultural demise. Kids are not interested in going into agriculture, quite frankly. If any of the kids going to school in the Sydney basin are interested in horticulture, it will be in parks and gardens. The simple fact of life is that we just will not have that skill base coming out of Australia. I know of many companies now that are interviewing and bringing in a skill set from overseas. We will see more and more of that.

**Mr WINDSOR**—I think what Mr Seymour has to say is interesting, on the back of what was said yesterday. Yesterday the beekeepers gave evidence to the committee, particularly about the export of queen bees. There are similar problems there. Workplace training is required and, with the shortage of people in that particular industry, they are looking offshore as well in trying to get people in. The meat-processing industry is having difficulties also. It is in these industries, Chairman, that we need many people, whereas in lots of other industries mechanisation is shrinking employment opportunities and fewer and fewer people are being trained to oversight the machinery.

**Mr Seymour**—You are right. Ours is a growth business. We have been growing for the last 30 years and will continue to grow, so we will be a larger and larger employer. We are important in a regional sense. For example, in the Hawkesbury basin in Sydney, the three major employers are all about the same size: the University of Western Sydney, the RAAF base and the mushroom industry, which all have about 600 to 700 people. To work at the university and the air base you have to be a rocket scientist, but you do not have to be one to work in the mushroom industry. So we are a very important socioeconomic factor of that society. We must make sure that we can continue to exist and we need those trainees.

I will highlight what I would argue. This is not to do with my submission but is in a general sense, because you asked me about reform. The industries that we are involved in are pretty low-paying businesses; most of agriculture is. These businesses employ people on the lowest wage, the bare minimum, and cannot afford to pay any more. Wages already represent 50 per cent of our cost of production. Until these businesses are in a position where they can afford to pay more, people will work elsewhere. It is a free labour market out there; if you have a skill set, you take it where you can get the best return on your investment.

It is not in the government's interests that we double the price of food, so I think we are always going to be in a difficult position in that sense. Whilst we will play at the fringe, I do not see that there is going to be any fundamental change until there is a fundamental economic change. The disappointment I have about the tertiary skill set is that, whilst there are some terrific opportunities to be well rewarded in Australian agriculture and horticulture, there is some

difficulty with entry level places and whether people are prepared to put the time in to get further up the ladder when they can go to other jobs and get higher pay straightaway.

One fundamental change I would like to see is that, when money is handed out to the institutions, some of it should be quarantined for workplace training. It should not be discretionary spending for them; it should be absolutely quarantined spending and they should have to develop the skills to be able to maximise the outcomes from that money. If it goes into the big pot, we will never get any—because we are too hard.

**CHAIR**—Thank you for that comment. Comment has been made in a number of submissions and in evidence given to the committee that training has been overlooked in terms of the granting of taxpayers' resources into these areas and that, in some small way, that has probably made a contribution to the demise of rural skills right throughout the country and in every industry. So that is a very good point that you have picked up, and we appreciate your comment.

**Mr Seymour**—Another thing that attaches to that is that distance learning is a reality for people in the bush, and there should be funding around for people to be able to travel. If you live in Sydney, going to the local TAFE costs you \$1 on the train. If you live at Wee Waa and have to go down to Sydney to do some in-house training, those fees should be picked up. I do not know whether they are or are not, but we always seem to be putting our hand in our pocket.

**CHAIR**—Particularly in rural areas, the dollar that used to be in the pocket is no longer there, and that makes it difficult for people to travel. We have also heard evidence that we need to ensure that some of the training organisations have more outreach programs where they can go out into the countryside to deliver training sessions. If there are no facilities, they can do it in the local hall or wherever people feel comfortable. One of the points made in evidence given yesterday by the New South Wales Farmers Association was that farmers feel safe in going to the local hall, the local motel or the local shire chambers to sit down and talk to people and listen to the experts giving them advice. Fortunately, that infrastructure has not been removed by government. Those facilities are well used and well known by country people. That is a longwinded way of complementing your point about people not being able to come to the courses. Let us take the training courses to the people more than we do, and stop concentrating so much on research.

**Mr Seymour**—Absolutely. When you drive past a TAFE college these days, you cannot help thinking that massive kingdoms have been built. I am not saying that is right or wrong, but you just cannot take your eyes off them. If you were to put that money into training resources that are dispersed among the work force, maybe you would get a better result. I will leave that with you.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much, Mr Seymour. We appreciate your evidence. As an individual who comes from a very fertile ground for mushrooms, I thank you for your contribution today! As I have said to other people, your contribution and the spontaneous comments you have made about some of the issues raised here today have been very beneficial to the inquiry.

**Mr Seymour**—My pleasure.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Windsor**):

That this subcommittee authorises publication of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

**Subcommittee adjourned at 2.05 pm**