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STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND
FORESTRY

Reference: Rural skills training and research

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FORESTRY

Wednesday, 8 February 2006

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 Martin Ferguson, Mr Michael Ferguson, Mr Forrest, Mr Schultz, Mr Secker, Mr Tuckey 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

HAMILL, Mr William George (Bill), Chief Executive Officer, Rural Industries Skill Training 1

Committee met at 5.05 pm**HAMILL, Mr William George (Bill), Chief Executive Officer, Rural Industries Skill Training**

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 11th public hearing for this inquiry and is part of an extensive program of public hearings and visits. The program is designed to gather information from the people directly involved with the main issues of the inquiry.

Today the committee will be hearing from Rural Industries Skill Training's Mr Hamill. Thank you for taking the time to travel to Canberra and give evidence today. I admire your commitment, considering that you could not meet us at Geelong. 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 Hamill—I will just make some introductory remarks, and then I will be very happy to answer questions. I will give a little bit of background—our submission has obviously been presented to the committee—on Rural Industries Skill Training, which is commonly known as RIST. I think that will give a flow-in to what we are talking about in our submission. The organisation was set up by a group of wool growers in the Western District 13 years ago because they saw a dearth of training, especially in the wool industry at that stage. So a group of farmers set up the organisation. We are a membership organisation, so a not-for-profit or community based organisation. We are not a profit-driven organisation, but I hate the term 'not-for-profit', because if you are not for profit you do not survive. But we are a community based organisation.

In those 13 years we have delivered training to in excess of 14,000 farmers. We have delivered across Australia. Our principal location is in Hamilton, and most of our training is done in Victoria, but we have done training in New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia, Tasmania and South Australia. In that time we have also delivered—I put 1.3 million in our submission, but that was last year—nearly 1.5 million training hours.

Our model of delivery is quite different to the publicly funded providers of training in agriculture. We deliver training on farm, on location. We do not have salaried deliverers, presenters or trainers. We only have a staff of eight. But we use industry experts. Our way of doing business is to consult with industry and farmers. We have regular farmer focus group meetings where we talk to farmers about their needs and their training requirements. We talk to industry bodies like MLA, AWI and the Department of Primary Industries—we do quite extensive consultation before we develop training programs that we take to the marketplace. On that evidence that we get, we then identify their needs and take that to the farmer. We identify experts within the industries or the particular areas of the market that we are looking at. We contract those and that is how we deliver training.

We are a registered training organisation. All our training, or 99 per cent of our training, is accredited, so it is recognised across the nation. Any statement of attainment from RIST is recognised at other training organisations. So that is the background of it. We are quite unique. We have looked around Australia and around the world, because we like to benchmark ourselves to see how we are going, and we really cannot find another organisation like RIST. We have had a couple of international inquiries looking at our model. So that is where we are coming from in this submission.

The key reason for the skills shortage in agriculture generally—and there is a general skills shortage right across Australia in a lot of industries—is the perception of agriculture as a blue-collar, non-skilled industry. This is one of the critical areas. It starts at schools. Many schools now have done away with agriculture in their curriculum and there are a lot fewer schools now offering it. I will just use the example of our Western District, which is the hub of what was probably the biggest wool-growing area in Australia. It is a rural area. I find consistently that, when children are not doing well at school, teachers and other people say: ‘You’re not doing well at school; go back on the farm.’ That is a common statement that is made. I do not think it is only in our area; I am sure it is right across Australia. That gives the perception that, if you are not bright academically and you are not doing too well, you should go back on the farm.

The linkage there is that agriculture is farming. Agriculture is not farming. Agriculture is a dynamic industry, and there are a lot of career paths you can take from agriculture. So we have to address that—and not at year 12 or at university. We have to address it at year 5 and those lower levels by saying: ‘This is an industry where you have a future. You can go forward. You can do it.’ We have talked to the VFF et cetera about who is going to do it. Everyone keeps saying: ‘They’ll do it. They should do it.’ But who is going to address this change of attitude in the young in the areas of schooling? That is one critical area, because young people are not taking up agriculture as a career.

The second issue that we face as a private training provider is that there is a significant amount of public funding, in every state, put through public institutions like TAFEs and departments of primary industry, but for us as a private training provider it is really difficult, when we try and move out of Victoria, for us to offer training on a level playing field with other institutions. We are very fortunate in Victoria because we are funded by the Department of Education and Training, but we are again quite unique because not many other private providers, right across Australia, are funded. We would like to take our model across Australia, but we find it very difficult. I have said in my submission—and I will not cover it all—that there is a whole plethora of funding coming to ‘agricultural training’ but not a lot of linkages there.

It is really important that we have training. There is a diminishing workforce out there, and they need to be upskilled. We have to get that training to them. We have to provide it. So I think there has to be a better, more even distribution of training funds from the public purse to private training providers who can demonstrate the ability to deliver that training.

The other area I have covered in here is research, and I notice that your committee is looking at research. We do a lot of work with research organisations—the Department of Primary Industries, Meat and Livestock Australia and AWI. I think that, in future, funding for research should have an implementation component. When you are giving funding for research, people must be able to demonstrate that they can take those research findings to farmers, because, at the

end of the day—and I am just talking about our area—most rural research should benefit farmers and the productivity generation of Australian agriculture. But I think there are probably a lot of research papers sitting on desks and in filing cabinets that farmers have never seen the results of. And that is not the fault of the researcher; it is actually the fault of the funding structure. A researcher gets funding to do a project. They get halfway through the project and they are looking over their shoulder for the next project and then they go and get that funding. They are already onto the next project before the last one finishes, because that is the way they keep going. And there is not sufficient funding within those projects for implementation.

There are two good programs that have been successful. One was the Triple P, the Paired Paddock Program, which was done in south-eastern Australia a few years ago. That had a research component and also an implementation component. It was taken up by about 4,500 or 5,000 farmers. There is also a program going on in the south-west at the moment called Lifetime Wool. It has a research component and it also has an implementation component. It is going to be a highly successful program. So, when we are looking at research, I think we have to look at funding research but also at the implementation of it. I have a few other points in there, but I think that summarises where we are coming from.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr Hamill. Would you be receptive to taking some questions now?

Mr Hamill—Very much so, yes.

CHAIR—I ask my parliamentary colleagues, before they ask their first questions, to give an indication of who they are and where they are from, so that Mr Hamill has an indication of where this cooperative committee comes from. I am very proud of the fact that we have a very cooperative, bipartisan committee working towards one goal, and I thank my parliamentary colleagues for that.

Mr WINDSOR—I would agree with the chair—you have got to!—that this is a very good committee. I would like to congratulate you on your submission. It is excellent, not only in terms of the achievements but also in the way you are marketing the message. I took on board your comment—and I urge the committee to—about the attitude to agriculture and getting to people early. I know that is a longer term thing and probably outside the gamut of this committee, but it is very important that we develop a positive attitude to food production. I think you also send a positive message when you say that you have delivered training to 12,200 farmers—and then put in brackets ‘farm employees’. Farm employees are farmers, and that is a message you have delivered too. I think it is a very important one and it has a lot to do with the credibility of the industry. Young farm workers are now highly skilled people; they have to be. So I compliment you on that. I have one question and it is on an issue Mr Tuckey has raised a few times. Does your organisation train people in grain harvesting operations—header driving and those sorts of things? If so, how do you do it?

Mr Hamill—No. We are very focused; we are not trying to be everything to everyone. Our organisation was set up as a wool training organisation. We have moved on from that; we encompass wool and red meat and we have moved slightly into dairying. Last year we set up some strategic alliances with some grain research organisations in the south-west: Southern Farming Systems and Birchip Cropping Group. We are talking to them. So we are moving into

grain. The only reason we will move into grain is that we see it as an integrated package. Most sheep and beef producers in the high rainfall areas have a grain component, so we will look at that. We are not in that at the moment.

Mr WINDSOR—In your training circles, do you pick up any difficulties with grain harvesters, heavy equipment operations, bulldozers, excavators and those sorts of things?

Mr Hamill—No, not really, but we have identified that in the grain industry there are issues with those areas. But heavy earthmoving is not our field.

Mr MICHAEL FERGUSON—I would also like to chuck you a bouquet for your submission, which gives us a good overview. Others may disagree, but I think this is the first time someone has so comprehensively pointed out all of the many different learning experiences and skills development programs available, principally through the federal government but also through the state governments. First of all, you have pointed out how many there are—

Mr Hamill—And that is only a sample of them!

Mr MICHAEL FERGUSON—It shows, perhaps, how difficult it is for the man or woman at the grassroots looking to access some help. Can you advise us in our recommendations which way you think would be the most productive way to go? Should we be looking at rationalising those and making it more of a single program with different options, or do you think the government should be looking at providing some sort of one-stop-shop interface for the farming and agricultural community to be able to access those programs in a more coordinated way?

Mr Hamill—I am from an organisation that has had a very great deal of support from the Victorian government and the Victorian Department of Education and Training. What they have done with us in Victoria works perfectly. That model could be adopted. We are community based but we are a private training provider even though we are funded by the Department of Education and Training in Victoria similarly to a TAFE—we are quite an exception; we are in a little box on our own—and I commend them for that. But the issue is that when we try to go into New South Wales or other states—and we have actually done some training with the Department of Education and Training in Tasmania—that does not apply. The majority of the education dollar from the public purse is coming through the publicly funded institutions. Even FarmBis is publicly funded, if you like—it is funded by state and federal taxpayers' dollars.

So private training providers like us who are trying to be innovative find that a very great restriction on moving outside a boundary. We have a very good relationship in Victoria, but when we try to move into New South Wales it is a totally different kettle of fish, because New South Wales does not even have FarmBis. So it is a different issue. I would say that the arrangement, if it could be replicated across Australia, is a good one because you have state involvement.

Mr MICHAEL FERGUSON—Are you saying the Victorian arrangement?

Mr Hamill—The model that we have in Victoria is a good arrangement. I would like to see us get access directly to federal funding, and I have tried that—I have had a go at that one. If we could get that direct access we could deliver training in Western Australia or anywhere, because

we are unhindered by boundaries and state restrictions. But I do believe that the model we have in Victoria is good. I think there is an opportunity there for the federal government to look at direct funding, but I would say that our relationship with Victoria is a good model.

Mr TUCKEY—Does your training extend to farm related activities off farm or is it specific to the farm? That is the first question I am interested in. Secondly, I wonder if you could expand on your reference to commencing this training in the secondary years of education and whether you see an on-farm job experience type component for that. Finally, you talk about commencing a diploma course. I wonder if you would comment on an argument that I promote regularly about such a diploma. Considering the seasonal nature of a lot of employment on farms today, should our government be promoting that diploma on an international basis, for it to become a virtual green card, if I can put it that way? Personally, I see an opportunity for it to operate in other parts—in other words, you could come from the northern hemisphere and get a job on a farm, particularly in the grain industry or in other seasonal areas such as shearing or whatever, because you had a recognised skill in that area. Our people, by arrangement, could use their diplomas for virtually automatic entry into that type of employment in other countries. Younger people in particular could then have both a travel opportunity and an employment opportunity, with continuity of employment, by trekking around the world.

Mr Hamill—I am very conscious of the fact that all our training is hands-on—it is on farm, it is related to farming activities. Although we are a registered training organisation that delivers accredited training, there is obviously an amount of theory in that, and we accept that, but all our training is taken outside. For instance, Prograze, which is a course we deliver, is about pasture management. It is about growing the right types of grasses, the weather and the whole integrated process of growing pasture. We take that out onto the farm. We also interrelate that with livestock. We are on the farm and they do fat scoring with sheep or cattle or whichever. Farmers and farm workers learn better in that environment because that is the environment they work in.

That is what competency based training is about. It is about training people in the workplace to do the activities they do on a day-to-day basis and to upskill them. So that is what we endeavour to follow. As far as competency based training goes, we think we take it to the best level—we try to take it to the workplace. Sometimes you cannot do that. In the middle of winter in the Western District when it is minus three degrees it is very difficult to be out in the paddock, so you take it back into a local town hall or shearing shed or something like that. Does that answer that question?

Mr TUCKEY—Yes.

Mr Hamill—With the schools, the reason I am saying we should come back to the lower levels of school, to year 5, is that by the time you get to years 11 and 12 you have probably got a preconceived view that agriculture is not a way to go. Very few people are going to quickly change their minds in year 11.

I am saying that, as far as the agricultural industry is concerned, we need to be putting as much pressure as we can on the education systems across Australia. I am not talking about the government. I think the agricultural industry needs to have some mechanism to get into schools to start changing that culture and showing children that there is a whole new world out there in agriculture. It is not just about going onto the farm. But, again, you have to be highly intelligent

and highly skilled now to go onto a farm because farms are running operations worth millions of dollars and they cannot afford to make mistakes.

As to the diploma of agriculture, I totally agree with you. The diploma of agriculture that we offer is nationally accredited. It used to come under ANTA, but it is now DEST accreditation. That would have to be between the federal government or DEST and international providers of education. You would have to do that at a federal level—that is, talk to England—

Mr TUCKEY—I am asking you to comment on whether we should be recommending to the government—

Mr Hamill—It is a great idea.

Mr TUCKEY—that it should take this international approach. That is what I am really asking.

Mr Hamill—It is a fantastic idea because what you are doing there is internationalising our education standards in Australia. So you are getting acceptance. It is a bit like the medical registration board. You are getting acceptance in England for that level if you take it to them. It is a great idea.

Mr TUCKEY—I have one last question. Do you have any knowledge of the Western Australian residential Colleges of Agriculture?

Mr Hamill—No, not personally.

Mr TUCKEY—I am talking about young people—admittedly, they are in years 11 and 12. I suggest that you have a look at it. I am extremely proud of it. It is surprising, when I go to their final year celebrations, to see how many kids with addresses in the capital city are out there. You see that some of the girls can shear and other things. It is quite remarkable.

Mr Hamill—What people have done in skills is go into the farming areas to try to get skilled labour. We have to move into the cities. We have to bring them out of the cities into the farming areas.

CHAIR—Incidentally, Mr Tuckey is the member for O'Connor in Western Australia.

Mr Hamill—Yes, I know.

Mr TUCKEY—I apologise—I live under an assumption in that regard!

CHAIR—I have some questions on your organisation and how it operates. How many people work in your organisation? If your organisation were able to expand its model interstate, would you need to employ additional trainers or personnel? Where would you draw them from?

Mr Hamill—The administration of our organisation consists of 10 people. We are an organisation that does not believe in fixed costs in education. The federal government a number of years ago provided funding to build a building in conjunction with the DPI experimental

station. But I think this is really important: I get very frustrated when I see bricks and mortar going up everywhere in the name of education. Our belief is that you can deliver agricultural education anywhere. You can deliver it in town halls and on farms. Regional towns have ample facilities. When you get to specialised engineering machinery, that is a different kettle of fish. You have to have the equipment. But, in agriculture, you do not need bricks and mortar.

If we were to move interstate, the number of administration staff would obviously have to go up. But, when you look at the number of hours, that would be the model. If we were delivering another 200,000 hours, our staff would not go up by another 10; it would probably go up by another three or four. We contract the deliverers. They are all on contracts. If they are not delivering a workshop today they do not get paid. They get paid by the day they deliver. So they are all variable costs. We attract our deliverers from departments of primary industries. We attract agronomists, vets and a whole range of people. Every state would have those so we would attract them from there.

CHAIR—So you draw your additional people from the region in which you are delivering the service?

Mr Hamill—That is exactly right. And we identify the experts—the people who have an affinity with agriculture, those who are well-respected and have the knowledge to deliver. We just identify them. They would be paid as they deliver.

CHAIR—There is an obvious reason for asking that question. It keeps the skill levels up for the people you would draw on and it continues to maintain the level of employment in the area, which in itself is assisting. Another question is centred on the RTOs. The committee has received evidence that RTOs cherry-pick training courses that they can make the most money out of without regard to actual training needs. Can you comment on that?

Mr Hamill—Yes. I think I summarised it earlier. Our whole philosophy is about delivering training. This is a bit of a round-about answer, but I think it is important. My belief is that, unless we are making a difference to skill levels in agriculture and productivity and profitability improvements on farms then we do not deserve to exist. To measure that, we now have implemented a process which is called a pre- and post-course survey. We measure people's skill levels and what they are doing before they enter our course. We measure with a post-course survey what they have changed—their perceived change in attitude and skill levels. It is what they perceive after they finish.

With our courses that go for 12 months we will have them do a pre-course survey at the start. When they have finished the 12 months they will do a post-course survey. If we do not see measurable differences from start to finish we want to know why. If it is a short course, which is one or two days, we will do it six months afterwards and ask whether they have made any changes.

I believe there are RTOs out there that will go out to make a dollar. We are fortunate in the fact that we have too much demand for our training as it is. We are fully committed for 2006 now and our training has not even started. We have no capacity at the moment to increase our training, except for some FarmBis funding that we can get. We are in a very fortunate position

that we have a good reputation. But, yes, I believe that there probably are opportunists, like in any industry. I would not say they are in the majority, but there will be opportunists out there.

CHAIR—In your submission you draw attention to the Australian government's announcement not to include agriculture in technical colleges. Would you elaborate and comment further on that?

Mr Hamill—The Australian government, during the last election, made that announcement. As soon as the election was over and the government was in, I came and visited Minister Hardgrave to comment on that. Because most of the technical colleges were going to areas where agriculture was a predominant industry around them, I felt that they were remiss in not putting agriculture in there. I lobbied for them to put agriculture in there. I felt it was demeaning to agriculture because they did not consider it a skill. I got an appropriate response. I think they are considering it. That was my argument.

Mr ADAMS—I have a couple of questions in relation to the fact that you measure your success yourself. There is no independent body that says, 'They're doing okay. People are learning from this process.' Has there been an independent assessment? You are telling us how good you are. I accept that, but I have not seen an independent assessment of your model.

Mr Hamill—Because we are an RTO, we do get independently audited to make sure that we are complying with all the processes and we are also doing the right assessment. We are unique in this one too—and I am saying we are good—because we have not found another education provider that is doing it. We are starting from that point. What we want to do this year or next year is to have an independent research organisation come in. We have done some independent work in our BeefCheque programs. We have had an independent researcher do the evaluations because they have been going for five years. The same with Triple P; it was independently evaluated. They saw a 40 per cent productivity improvement in those programs for people who had undertaken them. So those two programs were independently evaluated. We would like to see independent evaluation. We want to do that ourselves but also get an outside person to do it.

Mr ADAMS—Can you give us some advice on how you would see that working in the future—having an independent assessment process? You are talking about productivity, but there have to be other measurements too, I guess.

Mr Hamill—FarmBis, in their national scheme, have done independent assessments. They have had independent people evaluate people who have gone through FarmBis and they have come up with some statistics. It is a difficult one. As an independent organisation, the way we gauge our success is that people keep coming back to us and we keep growing our business. I am just not too sure how you would handle it nationally. I would have to think about that. To do it nationally you could get so much bureaucratic red tape, which we are already overburdened with. We have found that in training once upon a time it was 20 per cent administration and 80 per cent delivery of training. Now it is fifty-fifty and it is heading to 70 per cent administration and 30 per cent training. I would hate to see, just for the sake of a couple of examples, another lot of red tape coming over the top of it which would even further diminish how much you could actually give out to the farmers. I could think about that and come back to you.

Mr ADAMS—I would like you to do that, because you can grow anything. You can sell a bad product, but you can grow it by being a good salesman. So I would really appreciate that. I understand what you are saying, and I accept it, but if public money is being expended there has to be accountability. That is the future—they are the sort of models you have to build accountability into.

Mr Hamill—We are very conscious of that.

Mr ADAMS—You use local experts. What training levels do they have to deliver your training?

Mr Hamill—Under the Australian Quality Training Framework, which we operate under, they must have a certificate IV in workplace assessment training and they must be skilled. For instance, if we are getting them to deliver pasture, they must have educational qualifications, and we mainly insist on a degree level in that field. So they have had tertiary education in that specific field. If someone was a vet and we wanted them to deliver pasture, we could not do it. They could deliver animal health, but they could not deliver pasture. It is a pretty strict requirement of the Australian Quality Training Framework that you have to comply with and the resources back this up.

Mr SECKER—Does your organisation deal mainly with one- or two-day seminars, or are they much longer training periods?

Mr Hamill—About 60 per cent of our training is over 12 months. We have programs, but they are not cert IIIs or IVs. They are one or two competencies, but we take them. So we will use BeefCheque, which is an MLA product—we are the licensee for them—and that is an eight-session program. That is delivered in eight sessions over a year—usually from February to November. It covers the whole cycle of a farmer. That is probably 60 per cent of our work now, because we also have the diploma of agriculture. The other 40 per cent is short course training, which is done over one or two days.

Mr SECKER—So you go as far as certificate I or II, but not III or IV?

Mr Hamill—No. We do not do any certificate I. This year we are taking on traineeships, which is the certificate II and III. That is being funded by the department of education in Victoria. Most of our training is above cert IV, because FarmBis will not fund below this level—and that is just a bit of a criteria. So it is cert IV and above.

Mr SECKER—So if someone was trying to get an entry level certificate 1 or 2 they would still have to do it through the school system?

Mr Hamill—Yes, through school or TAFE.

Mr SECKER—What areas are you involved in? I see you are involved in beef, sheep, pastures, dairy and so on. Are you getting into things like fisheries and forestry?

Mr Hamill—No.

Mr SECKER—Because I think there are fairly big vacancies in that area.

Mr Hamill—From running an organisation and having a very good board, I believe that you stick to your knitting and concentrate on what you know best. We could destroy our business. We did look at the wine industry, because we are surrounded by the wine industry, especially on the South Australian side.

Mr SECKER—So you come into South Australia quite a bit too.

Mr Hamill—Yes.

Mr SECKER—And you have had no problems crossing that border?

Mr Hamill—We do have problems with funding. We have to use FarmBis funding.

Mr SECKER—FarmBis funding is quite different. You get a better funding level in Victoria than you do in South Australia.

Mr Hamill—No, it is better in South Australia. A farmer gets a better subsidy in South Australia than in Victoria. They get none in New South Wales. At the moment our core focus is red meat, wool and the grains industry—anything that relates to hoofs and horns and the integrated process that goes around that. I would be very reticent to start moving into other areas until I knew enough about them, because you can actually defray your whole business and your whole business can collapse because you are trying to do things you have no skills in.

Mr SECKER—The first Australian vet course in forestry is starting in South Australia this year. We are talking about certificates 1 and 2 there. It will probably be down the track before we can go on from that. Certainly something I would be interested in is that a company like yours or someone else could find the expertise to get involved in a couple of years.

Mr Hamill—We are probably going to have to move into this area, because we are being surrounded by trees.

Mr ADAMS—Farm forestry.

Mr Hamill—We do cover environmental planning. We incorporate farm forestry in the environmental program, but we are being surrounded by plantations of trees, so we are going to have to look at the forestry industry. We do have a program of farm forestry, but not specifically in the timber industry.

Mr SECKER—Is the diploma that you are doing nearly full time?

Mr Hamill—It is a part time, two days a month. The idea of our diploma is that people can still work on farms and be part of the operation. They do not have to go away; they can come here and do it. They have to do other study, of course. We have a study tour that is incorporated in it. But our diploma is hands-on. Again, it is not just theory. We are not locking students up. Our last diploma, which was highly successful—it just finished; they graduated this year—

involves the age group of 22 to 38. That is the target market. They may not have either the money or the time to go further afield.

Mr SECKER—Is that done over two years?

Mr Hamill—Yes.

Mr SECKER—That is probably almost the equivalent of what we had years ago in the certificate of agriculture. Of course, it has all changed now.

Mr Hamill—Yes, certificate IV. The diploma is at certificate V level. It is above IV.

Mr SECKER—I am talking about 30 years ago.

Mr Hamill—Yes. You start at certificate II, which is very basic. Then there is certificate III. Certificate IV and V are management type programs. That is the way it is all gauged. In certificate II you are basically being told what to do. In certificate III you are having a bit of an influence on things. In certificate IV you are moving up to more of a management role. You can actually make decisions on your own. In certificate V you are moving into a management role.

Mr SECKER—By the sound of it, you are not getting involved in VET in Schools. Do you have a connection there so that you are networking with them and knowing what is coming online in the future?

Mr Hamill—We are getting involved in VET in Schools this year.

Mr FORREST—I come from the Mallee, up between Glenelg and the Murray. I have seen pretty close-up what you do. It is a good model. One of the questions that I would like to ask you, though, is about attracting the trainers. That is not easy in our part of the world. When you are describing the qualifications you expect, I hope you do not overlook the accumulated expertise that some of those old cockies and sheep growers have. What would you look for when getting a farmer to be an instructor?

Mr Hamill—We would like to have some of the progressive farmers as our deliverers and we look for them. The issue that we will face as a provider of training because of our delivery model is the new certificate IV and workplace assessment. Certificate IV in workplace assessment training was revamped in December. It finished in December and there is a new one coming out which is nearly at a diploma level. It is a lot more difficult to get. Under AQTF you must have that to deliver training. That is one of the obstacles. I do not think it should be done away with, because you need that. People who are delivering accredited training need it. But it is going to be an obstacle for us in getting those sorts of people. They will say, 'Look, I'm running my farm and I'm doing it really successfully,' and we would love to get them. But they may say, 'I have to spend six months getting this certificate IV and then I mightn't have time to deliver.' So there is an obstacle there, but we would like to have them because they are the people who relate better to farmers.

I would rather get someone who has a lot of experience and train them in education than get an educationalist and try to train them in agriculture. That is the way we work. We will bend

over backwards if we have someone who has practical, hands-on experience and can talk to and relate to farmers. We will work on the education side. We will work on the administration and the theory and all of that stuff. We can help them there. But you cannot get an educationalist and try to teach them agriculture.

CHAIR—Do you have an age level that you work within or is that not an issue?

Mr Hamill—The average age of our participants in our training courses is 48. Our oldest participant, who has done about three training courses with us now, is 85.

Mr FORREST—Good stuff!

Mr Hamill—That is why we brought the diploma in. We only brought it in in 2004. I saw that we were not having a problem with the older generation. Our problem was with the younger generation. That is why we are now taking on traineeships, VET in Schools and the diploma. From our demographics, over 50 per cent of our participants—the farmers—are over 45. I think we are handling that quite well, but it is that younger group we have to target.

Mr FORREST—The reason I asked that question is that the Birchip Cropping Group, which is farmers themselves, are getting collectively together to say to the researchers: ‘Thanks for your work, but can you write it in a language we can relate to?’ The same thing happens with education. It has to be delivered in an environment they are comfortable with. That is the key. It is from wool classing right through.

Mr Hamill—We do wool classing at Dookie. We actually run the wool classing at Dookie for their agricultural students. We have a practical wool classer who comes in and does it. He is our lecturer.

Mr FORREST—Can I go back to a question asked earlier about the age group. You are obviously talking about a primary school level of introduction to agriculture. How can you do that?

Mr Hamill—I am not trying to pass the buck on this. It is not our core business, but I am saying that we as an agricultural industry—I am not even trying to put it on the government—must address it. I will use the society of accountants as an example. They promote themselves—they say, ‘Get a CPA and you can do this and you can do that.’ It is always out in front of people: ‘This is what you can do.’ We do not do that in agriculture, and we have to address that perception that agriculture is just going back on the farm. It is certainly not within our scope at the moment, but we would like to make stakeholders aware of that fact.

Mr FORREST—There has been a lot of good work with that age group on the environment. There is River Watch, and the kids go down and take salinity samples. That kind of hands-on work, like a visit out to a farm, is what you have to do at primary school level. You could not—

Mr Hamill—No, you could not do a course. You also have to get to the teachers. I am not being critical of the teachers. I am just talking about the perception. We have to get that perception away from a lot of stakeholders—probably even mothers and fathers.

Mr FORREST—I was going to say that we have to do a job on the parents.

Mr Hamill—I addressed a group of year 9s last year at Hawkesdale—you know where Hawkesdale is—and there were 150 year 9 students who came from all the little schools in the south-west of Victoria. Hawkesdale, for the committee's information, is right in the middle of a primary industries area. It is a little school, but it is surrounded by others, and they all came in for a year 9 vocational education day. I addressed them and asked, 'How many of you are going to pursue agriculture as a career in the future?' I asked in a nice way—I did not say it in those terms—and one hand went up out of 150 students. I said, 'Come on'—joke, joke—'this is not right.' One hand stayed up. Then we had them in smaller groups, and I asked them in smaller groups. That one hand was still the only hand, because they all wanted to get away, they did not want to live the lives their mothers and fathers lived and all the different reasons. It was a frightening experience, because there was a group of people of whom you would think at least 20 or 30 per cent would want to go back on the farm, but, no, they want to get away.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—Your training outcomes are transferable and recognised across all state and territory boundaries?

Mr Hamill—Yes.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—In terms of young people, is the entry wage to a traineeship or apprenticeship—and the period of training—much of a barrier in their minds?

Mr Hamill—We have just gone into traineeships this year, so I cannot come at this from a very experienced viewpoint. We have only taken it on from 1 January. Since we have broadcast that we are doing it we have had eight employers looking for trainees. We have no trainees. I met with the VFF and the deputy president of the Dairy Industry Association last year. He told me that there are 5,000 job vacancies in Victoria in the dairy industry. That is where we have a problem.

We would like to be a bit innovative with this. We can adapt the training to suit the employer and we can adapt the on-farm training to suit the employee, but I think the challenge is getting those people who have the commitment to do it. That is why I started with the schools and how to change perception, because we cannot get the people. If you have a bit of a lateral view and you do not try to stay with a narrow focus, you can actually make it work. But the employer has to be comfortable and the employee has to be comfortable. You have to make it work for both of them. You cannot just say, 'This is the way it is going to be and if I am doing it in the wrong time of the year for the employer, too bad,' because you lose both. In the two months that we have been at it, we have seen a dearth of young people.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—In respect of the traineeship, what is the cost to the kid per year?

Mr Hamill—Depending on what level they do—I am going from memory here—the range is \$200 to \$600. But if they are on Austudy or their family is on family benefits it will come back to \$51.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—Do many employers, in terms of trying to attract the kids, pick up the cost of that traineeship?

Mr Hamill—They do, yes.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—It is very common?

Mr Hamill—They do. In fact, they do it because they need to.

Mr TUCKEY—I think you have promoted an argument for my international diploma. You would sell it not on the idea that you have to get up at four o'clock every morning to milk some cows but on the fact that when you got it, if the arrangements were made internationally, you could tour the world.

Mr Hamill—Another example is a New Zealand company which is coming into the Warrnambool area buying up dairy farms. They are like a property trust and they manage properties. They are bringing all their employees over from New Zealand because they cannot find them in Australia. They do not have one Australian employee in their operations.

CHAIR—Could I refer you back to your comments about your organisation servicing the red meat industry—does that include abattoirs?

Mr Hamill—No.

CHAIR—Could you comment on the inconsistencies in funding for training and skills development in agriculture.

Mr Hamill—The federal government obviously funds a significant portion of the funding going down into the state Department of Education and Training. The state Department of Education and Training then funds the individual service providers—the TAFEs, for instance. ANTA used to fund it and DEST now does. The state then puts some money in and the funding goes out. In Victoria, as I said, we have a very good model, but if we went into New South Wales we would have to apply to the Department of Education and Training to get funding. I do not think we could, because I do not think there are any private training providers getting it there—or in other states.

That is one stream—the official stream for how funding comes down to the VET sector. Then you have FarmBis, which has been a great program. It does not operate in New South Wales. It operates in other states, and they have different levels of subsidy. In Victoria we have a 50-50 subsidy: farmers pay 50 per cent and FarmBis pay 50 per cent. In South Australia it is 65-35. So you have that level of funding there. Then you have the National Heritage Trust funding, which comes down through all the landcare groups—land and water and the whole spectrum—and that could be going anywhere. None of that, I think, is accredited. So you have accredited training and non-accredited training. You have all these streams coming in. You have the MLAs and the AWIs providing funding for educational programs in different areas, and you have the CRCs. I have not put that myriad together, but there is a whole plethora of training funds coming down. So the farmer, at the end, must get terribly confused—

Mr TUCKEY—I am!

Mr Hamill—when he/she gets all these brochures. If he/she is in, say, a landcare group in a local area, they will put on something about X and it will be free. I am not knocking that; I am not knocking philanthropy. But then we will put on something under FarmBis and it will be Y dollars. Or if we are doing it under education funding it is Z dollars. So the farmer must be terribly confused.

CHAIR—You have identified the problem. How do you suggest we fix it?

Mr Hamill—You are not going to stop the free ones or the commercial operations like Elders putting on training programs. You are not going to do that. But I think that with whatever the federal government is funding there should be some linkage to results. I get a bit concerned about some of the funding. I hope that in five years time we do not look back and say, ‘We spent a lot of money but what did we achieve?’ Who is going to measure that? I think if you actually linked it to accredited training and had a result with a common measurement across Australia you would have a better result.

CHAIR—How can a balance between private and government extension services be achieved?

Mr Hamill—I think government has a role to play. Again, it comes down to state governments, doesn't it? Extension services are run by state governments, by state departments of primary industries—you are talking now about extension, not training. But the private extension officers will earn their income by their credibility. You will find that private rural consultants who are very good have a lot of work; private rural consultants who are very bad do not have any work. It is similar with the Department of Primary Industries—my experience is that you have some very good people in there, and if they are very good they will have high credibility with the producer; if they do not have the right skills they will not.

Mr ADAMS—How do we continue to upskill farmers? Some of them are not that good at taking on the new ideas and the new directions. Will you let them fall over in the end?

Mr Hamill—About 35 per cent—I said in there 40 per cent—of farmers do not undertake structured learning programs. If anyone can come up with the answer to that, please let me know, because it is a real issue. Those people are not not successful. Some of them are highly successful. They are an older age group. I have a lot of friends in that group. They do not like to be put in a room with people where they might be shown up, although most of the time they could show other people up. They do not like that. Once they do it, once they break that barrier—and FarmBis was a great leader for that because it actually encouraged people who did not usually take training to take it up—it is okay, but we still have that block that we need to chip away at. I do not have an answer for it. If someone could come up with it I would like the answers because it would be a great marketing tool. We just have to chip away at it, I think. There is no magic solution.

Mr FORREST—That is why that Birchip Cropping Group is so important. That is what they are doing. They are encouraging each other to share knowledge. They can make a contribution and not make a fool of themselves. You are right on that.

Mr Hamill—Southern Farming Systems is the same. We are working not so much with Birchip but with Southern Farming Systems to try to take them to the next step. We say: ‘You’ve been to a group. You’ve been to a field day. You’ve really enjoyed each other’s company. Why don’t we just take you to that next level?’ Some of them say, ‘I don’t need it.’ Some of the very established farmers say, ‘Why do I need a piece of paper?’ But that is happening less and less. When we do a training course now people say, ‘Farmers aren’t interested in pieces of paper; they just want to know the business,’ but if we do not send out that piece of paper, the phone rings. So they are interested, but I would not say it is a high priority for the established farmers.

Mr TUCKEY—To what extent do you promote your courses and your activities at field days? I might include in that clearing sales.

Mr Hamill—Yes, saleyards.

Mr TUCKEY—There are certain things that rural people attend because they like them. What opportunity do you give yourself there?

Mr Hamill—We are in a position, as I said earlier, where we are stuck. We cannot offer too much more at the moment. We are up to here. We do not have a problem attracting people. If we wanted to go and grow our business and we had the capacity it would be through the footy clubs—giving support to local country footy clubs—saleyards and those sorts of things, because that is where farmers gather. You could give a sponsorship to the local footy club. But we are not interested in bums—sorry, bottoms—on seats. We are interested in quality education and getting a result. I do not want 200 people at a workshop. I would rather have 12 and give them quality education. They are the avenues we use to get to the farmers.

CHAIR—Bottoms are a sensitive subject in this place at the moment. Mr Hamill, thank you for the very comprehensive evidence you have given this committee today. We simply cannot function as a committee unless we get people coming in, telling us what the problems are and suggesting to us ways and means by which we can address the problems when we finally get around to completing our report. So thank you very much for your considerable input and for coming all this way to give it. It is very much appreciated. We have benefited by it. Hopefully, the community—and, more importantly, the rural community—will benefit by it in our deliberations of our recommendation to government.

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

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

Committee adjourned at 5.58 pm