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Mr Alby Schultz
Chair
House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries & Forestry
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Re: Inquiry into Rural Skills Training and Research

Dear Mr Shultz

Please find attached a submission prepared by the Project Manager, Rural Training Council Australia NSW. This is a part-time role (contracted through the Agri-Food Industry Skills Council) to provide advice to the NSW Department of Education on a range of training matters affecting the rural and related industries.

I am also currently contracted as the National Coordinator, School to Industry Programs for Rural Skills Australia and the former National Coordinator of ChemCert Australia. Prior to the withdrawal of federal funding to state Industry Training Advisory Bodies (ITABs), I was Executive Officer of the NSW Primary Industries Training Advisory Body.

Over the last four years I have come to appreciate the significant challenges facing training providers in the delivery of training to rural industries. I also have an understanding of the issues that inhibit farmers' effective engagement with the national training agenda.

I trust that this submission gives you an insight, at least in my view, into the issues facing both training providers and farmers. Hopefully it contains a number of useful suggestions that may assist the Committee in its deliberations. I believe there is a bright future for rural skills training graduates at all levels. Also, I would be pleased to have the opportunity to appear before the Committee should the opportunity arise.

Yours sincerely

(signed)

Niel Jacobsen

Project Manager RTCA NSW

1. 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.

It is my view that the ***availability and adequacy*** of educational services in terms of delivery against national training packages (competency standards) is variable across Australia due to a number of reasons:

- 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 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).
- Generally large publicly funded RTOs remain entrenched in the notion of curriculum development and institutional delivery. This approach is at odds with the numerous research projects conducted over the years into "best practice" farmer education. By comparison, agricultural colleges such as Tocal and Yanco have a good understanding of effective delivery strategies and practices.
- Due to the diverse geographical spread of rural industries, there will always be issues with "availability" of training due to the thin market and cost of delivering courses in regional and remote locations.

Most current training funding models require a full qualification outcome rather than a more flexible unit of competency funding strategy. This greatly limits the uptake of training and appears at odds with the User Choice principles under the AQTF. Also, these models do not address the well documented learning preference of rural industries. This creates a disadvantage for rural industries when compared to the level of public funding that is accessed by other industry groups.

Creating effective ***pathways*** from vocational training to further education remains a difficult hurdle. Agricultural colleges readily acknowledge qualifications gained at school as a pathway to their tertiary courses. There are instances where RTOs have failed to recognise qualifications even though they are required to do so under the AQTF Mutual Recognition requirements. This may be due in part to their difficulty in accommodating AQF II qualified students into a course delivery structure that spans two qualification levels i.e. AQF levels II and III.

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

Generally the most effective pathways for students moving from school to work or further study are through the agricultural colleges.

2. 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.

Industry has demonstrated a great capacity to specify the required ***skills sets***. This is reflected in the range of competency standards in the rural and related industries training packages. The most significant problem for industry is the restrictions imposed by the overarching AQTF requirements and the qualification and customisation rules in the training package. These rules are an attempt to enforce a consistent degree of "rigor" required to attain a qualification level across all industries covered by training packages. Unfortunately, these rules often reluctantly agreed to by the industry representatives, are a necessary evil for training package endorsement.

An outstanding example of industry having the ***expertise and capacity to specify its training needs*** is Cotton Basics. This program, based on the training package and units of competency, was designed by industry for industry. Cotton Australia has applied for funding to implement the program under the Department of Education, Science and Training Regional Skills Shortages Program (it is understood that Cotton Australia is making a submission and further details may be found there).

However, it is often the case under the vocational education and training system"that RTOs determine the ***training*** that is required (or will be provided). Often industry is unaware of its right to negotiate training delivery. This in turn inhibits its ability to articulate its training needs within the national training framework. However, there are exceptions where RTOs such as agricultural colleges have industry advisory councils to provide broad industry input and advice.

Where RTOs attempt to be flexible and adapt programs to meet industry needs they are ultimately obliged to comply with the national training framework and state training authority imposed requirements. In some instances RTOs may also use these "requirements" as a means of maintaining the status quo.

Rather than specify (industry) or deliver (RTOs) innovative training programs on a cost plus basis, it may ultimately be in the best interest of all concerned to comply with requirements that provide access to public funding.

A new integrated ***learning/teaching/assessment resources*** model was developed and is currently being used for the Cotton Basics program. The Animal, Plants and Science Skills Series is an innovative approach to the packaging and use of existing educational and research resources. It provides far greater opportunity for industry/enterprise customisation and badging thereby potentially meeting the needs of a wider audience than traditional resources.

Careful attention has been given to limit the use of traditional training jargon with the emphasis on skills development. Feedback on the model is positive and Rural Skills Australia is using it to develop a number of resources under the Environmental Education Grants Program. The Animal, Plants and Science Skills Series consists of 4 sections:

Section 1 – Skills Guide (traditionally referred to as a learner guide)

Section 2 – Facilitator Resources - CD including PowerPoint presentation and handout notes, lesson plan, electronic version of the Skills Guide in Word and pdf, assessment instrument, self assessment checklist and the unit of competency from the training package.

Section 3 – Reference Text, this is the most appropriate text applicable to the subject

Section 4 – Other resources - fact sheets, brochures, web based resources and other information identified as useful for trainers and participants (see further notes on the potential of metadata to be used here).

The myriad of **reports into farmer education** identified a number of factors that inhibit farmer participation in traditional institutional delivery of vocational education and training. These include the demand of seasonal production cycles, weather conditions, 50 – 80 hours per working week being the norm in some industry sectors, distance from a town with a college or other educational facility. The reports list a consistent range of factors that RTOs should address:

Flexibility – course must be held in a suitable location and at a convenient time with due regard to seasonal and other work demands. The provision for child minding is becoming increasingly important as more women undertake training. RTOs should consider providing an opportunity to “try before you buy” in order for participants to assess the value of the course (particularly for courses that require a longer time commitment). Connections to industry based accreditation programs need to be established where they legitimately exist.

Marketing – is most effective when prospective participants hear about courses from a variety of sources. The following groups were identified as being potential RTO marketing partners - community groups, agribusinesses, extension officers, industry associations and government agencies.

Delivery style – important aspects of delivery were identified as - opportunities for discussion with other group members, presentation of case studies, courses having practical hands-on components, credible trainers/facilitators, phone contact person for further support over the term of the course.

Meeting the needs of learners is another consistent theme throughout the reports. This is often overlooked by RTOs and other providers to the detriment of what are potentially valuable programs. The research indicates that courses have substantially improved outcomes if the following needs are recognised and met.

Local application - the program must address the needs of participants at a local level. Therefore effort must be made on the part of providers to ensure that topics are relevant and that local factors are addressed.

Self confidence of learners - for many participants, it may be the first course they have attended since leaving school. Some participants will have significant literacy and numeracy difficulties and may need extra support.

Value for money – even in subsidised courses, participants look for value in terms of cost and the time required away from their properties.

Skills recognition opportunities – programs must recognise existing skills and knowledge,potential for further study and accreditation. Panel accreditation of RPL/RCC based qualifications was viewed as adding value to the “piece of paper”.

Ongoing peer/social network – learners often develop ongoing networks long after a course is completed. Assistance to establish these informal networks should be provided as an integral part of the program.

3. The provision of extension and advisory services to agricultural industries, including links and coordination between education, research and extension.

A recent project conducted on behalf of the Rural Training Council of Australia identified that a wide range of "informal training" takes place including on-farm workshops, field days, one-to-one sessions with agronomists and agricultural consultants and industry based accreditation courses. Farmers prefer programs that:

- are delivered in an informal setting e.g. local club, hall or rural property
- incorporate local or regional content
- provide opportunities for hands-on activities
- encourage group discussion and further interaction with other participants.

Many of these workshops are conducted by private providers on behalf of industry associations, peak bodies and suppliers to the industry. For example, rural merchandisers may establish trial plots and invite local farmers to see first hand how different soils and crops affect the uptake of fertiliser. They provide information on appropriate application rates and techniques, environmental protection measures and interpretation of soil test results.

While extension is not seen as part of the traditional vocational and education framework the potential in terms of training and technology transfer is very significant. Traditionally, extension services were provided by state based agriculture departments. With the downturn of state provided services, private consultants, agronomists and professional staff working for rural merchandisers are increasingly being called on to fill this role. There is also an informal aspect of extension whereby "training" sessions are conducted by manufacturers and suppliers of agricultural equipment. However, the links between these activities and formal training structures remain tenuous.

Efforts are being made by a number of research organisations to create stronger links between research and training including the Weeds CRC and AWI. If the purpose of research is to identify new work methods and practices that ultimately improve productivity, sustainability and profitability then the most effective means of getting the message to farmers is through education and training programs.

As a means of facilitating knowledge transfer, the use of metadata technology may provide an effective strategy. Increasingly large amounts of scientific and technical data are being created and stored electronically by research bodies. A metadata strategy, that develops partnership between the research and training sectors, could bring to fruition the significant potential of this data. Metadata could provide a means of readily incorporating the latest research into training resources such as the Skills Guide.

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

The greatest potential to ensure the **availability and adequacy of (vocational) education** is to create demand for these services. This could be achieved by developing a long term strategy that fosters the adoption of a “learning culture” throughout the industry. The foundation of this strategy would be for all stakeholders to build an awareness of, promote and support the uptake of vocational education and training; starting at the school level.

Success of VET in School (VETiS) programs relies heavily on industry support through the provision of work experience job placement and resources. Organisations such as Rural Skills Australia and RTCA NSW are already promoting the benefits of VETiS to industry. These efforts could be further enhanced by developing policies that incorporate industry based accreditations such as ChemCert into school delivery.

Farmers understand the benefit of industry based credentials. The development, integration and promotion of these credentials into the vocational education and training system will foster a sense of value at both school and tertiary levels.

Further research in the area of rural education and training is not required. Numerous reports have been written and are sitting on shelves awaiting implementation of the recommendations. There is a clear understanding that the current vocational education and training frameworks inhibit effective training delivery to rural industries. New policies, that address the needs of farmers in the delivery of vocational education and training, need to be developed.

Recognition of the learning preferences of farmers is a key factor in determining new policy. These reports show that farmers seek “knowledge transfer” from a wide range of sources and do not rely solely on the traditional education system. There is also strong evidence to suggest that many are not interested in a full qualification outcome. Government support is required to rewrite funding models for the provision of training to rural industries. In particular, funding of RTOs should be based on the delivery of units of competency rather than a full qualification.

Policies that assist RTOs focus on the training/skills development needs the industry rather than the burden of regulatory requirements would be of significant benefit. With the incorporation of the Australian National Training Authority into the Department of Education, Science and Training, it may be opportune to propose an alternative strategy for RTOs that deliver to rural industries (based on the collective feedback to the Committee).

In terms of **pathways**, the industry has identified a real shortage of trained staff for farms in rural areas. Many agricultural colleges are experiencing a demand for graduates that outstrips the numbers available. Further investment is required into rural training for young people for agriculture and horticulture careers. A pool of qualified highly skilled workers will provide the industry with a high degree of confidence in the training system

Additional funding is required to support schools to deliver agriculture and related courses and to promote the industry through careers advisers. These initiatives require a long timeframe. In the past, effective initiatives have attained the required momentum just as funding ceases.

The possible adoption of an industry based skills recognition model such as ASSESS (developed by Hortus) should be investigated. A single model has the potential to become an industry standard if supported by Government and industry alike. Further funding will be required to develop a portfolio or skills passport to enhance ASSESS and existing skills recognition efforts.

RTOs provide a significant potential to strengthen the **links and coordination between research extension and education**. Development of a metadata strategy could establish partnerships and allow RTOs to access and incorporate the latest research into educational resources. A formal system to educate the educators (trainers and extension officers) should also be an integral part of this strategy.

Training resources

- All publicly funded training resources should be made available on a cost recovery basis through a dedicated rural RTO clearing house (possibly Rural Skills Australia).
- These resources should be made available in a choice of hard copy and electronic (Word and PDF format) possibly via web download or on CD/DVD. Availability of electronic versions will enable RTOs to more easily update the resources in accordance with the metadata strategy. They will also be able to customise the resource to suit industry/client specific needs.
- Generous copyright provisions (limited to acknowledgement of developer, funding source and modification rights) will greatly enhance the uptake of learning resources in the thin rural training market.