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14 NOV 2005

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON
AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES
AND FORESTRY



Primary Skills Victoria

**Submission to House of Representatives Standing
Committee on Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry**

**Inquiry into Rural Skills Training and
Research**

**Documentation in support of appearance by Primary Skills Victoria at
public hearing to be held 14th November 2005.**

Introduction

Primary Skills Victoria (PSV) is an Industry Training Advisory Board governed by a Council of representatives from industry which, since the withdrawal of federal funding, is solely funded by the Victorian Government.

The purpose of the Council is to provide advice to government on the training needs of industry with coverage of six sectors; agriculture, production horticulture, amenity horticulture, conservation and land management, animal care and management, and seafood as well as their many sub-sectors.

The Council obtains advice on many training needs through an ongoing close working relationship with industry associations and individuals with an interest in training through a series of Standing Committees as well as direct contact between the secretariat and individual industry representatives, training providers and regional organisations such as Local Learning and Employment Networks across the state.

The PSV Council and its Agriculture Standing Committee thanks the Parliamentary Committee for the opportunity to lay a number of issues before it with respect to agricultural training within Victoria.

Rural Skills Training and Research

In its initial letter to the Inquiry, the Primary Skills Victoria - Agriculture Standing Committee relayed members' disappointment at the omission of agriculture from the list of industry sectors whose training needs were to be addressed through the Commonwealth's Agricultural Technical Colleges Initiative. The letter briefly comments on a number of reasons why the PSV Standing Committee would like agriculture included in the training programs provided, particularly in regional settings.

With permission, we would like to expand further on these issues in the hope that the Parliamentary Standing Committee could use its influence to assure the sector's inclusion in the future at the pilot centres and any further locations to be nominated as part of the Technical College Initiative.

In the PSV Council's previous letter, the issue exploring the "drift" of young people to urban areas was raised. With no evidence of an arrest in this decline, concerns abound as to the future of expertise to maintain agricultural enterprises as well as the wider issue of the structural stability of regional towns where a skilled workforce, required to maintain accessibility of basic services such as electrics, plumbing, emergency and medical services, is also in steady decline.

With the greater proportion of the population in the metropolitan and more in regional centres and with the generational loss of connectivity of agriculture which was a feature of earlier generations, it is important that young people in metropolitan areas be encouraged and assisted to undertake pre-vocational programs in agriculture and, if necessary, provide these at locations in regional areas.

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

The state of Western Australia provides a very good template which could well be considered by the federal government for Victoria and perhaps other states if young people are to be given the opportunity to enter industry.

It is the industry view that the earlier a young person is able to be engaged with the industry, the greater the chance of their viewing the industry as a viable career option and that commencing the programs at Year 10 should be seriously considered in the future.

With respect to options available to students within schools, the number of options has increased to the point where these are causing confusion amongst parents and students alike. The federal government's promotion of School Based New Apprenticeships (SBNAs) by providing subsidies to employers has not necessarily helped since there is considerable evidence that this has been seen by schools as an

opportunity to "shift costs" with funding liabilities being transferred to other state authorities. Further, in many cases, school administrators are not adjusting program schedules to ensure that those students undertaking SBNA's and VET in Schools are not disadvantaged by the missing of classes in academic subjects.

In terms of funding, the Commonwealth is wise to avoid allocating high levels of funding to capital works. Representatives of sectors such as the dairy industry believe that there is no value in replicating expensive milking facilities in educational facilities. Funding of general equipment is however important if training at operational levels is to be effective. Access to equipment of farms for pre-vocational training is problematic.

In terms of access to equipment, schools and TAFE institutes not only have difficulty acquiring equipment, but also in maintaining up-to-date equipment. A well-respected principle which has underpinned much agricultural training in the past has been, "don't put your funding into bricks and mortar, apprentices in agriculture do not have the luxury of these in the work environment. Put your funding into the purchase of up-to-date equipment, trainees/apprentices will have little respect for the training if the equipment they use at college is inferior to that which they use on the job." This maxim is relevant to pre-vocational training also.

Concerning access to workplaces for students in the case of rural communities, increasing regulation with respect to OH&S and risk minimization is leading to many farmers, who have provided valuable on-the-job experience, questioning the advisability of participants to the point that this workplace experience, particularly for training in the use of equipment will become more difficult, rather than the reverse. The situation is further exacerbated by heightened concerns with animal welfare which has led to the demand for establishment of animal ethics committees and tightly structured guidelines for access to animals need for experience in animal handling and health procedures operations. If the trend continues, acquisition of properties by schools to provide the essential workplace experience will be the only solution.

Further, competence and confidence comes with experience and with pressures on farming businesses, those applying for positions need to be "work-ready" not only with respect to attitude and maturity, but also with a set of saleable skills.

Alternatives to purchase for expensive and seasonally critical machinery are available as evidenced by the successful partnerships brokered by the Grains Industry Training Network (GITN) with equipment suppliers in the Header Operations training program, but these suppliers cannot be relied upon for basic training in equipment such as tractors and all-terrain-vehicles

With respect to the number of secondary teachers available for delivery of secondary agricultural programs, this is also of concern. Many teachers recruited in the late 70 and early 80s are either retiring or have been promoted to administrative positions within secondary schools and, as such have no longer been a source of professional expertise to the next generation of students. In addition, few teachers with agricultural expertise are being recruited.

Concerning the current overall situation in Victoria, members of the Inquiry Panel may be interested in comments made by secondary school staff recorded during the Victorian Qualifications Authority's (VQA) funded examination of the extent to which the national competencies form the basis for all agricultural training in the state. The responses detailed below are illustrative of the problems faced:-

- The programs tend to be driven by individual teachers who have a passion for agriculture.
- There is no succession planning at the school level. Well run VETiS programs with high local credibility are often left high and dry when a teacher transfers, is promoted, or retires.
- Schools have often set up their own facilities for VETiS programs. This is particularly so for production horticulture. This situation does not encourage the involvement of industry or TAFE.
- School facilities are rarely of a commercial/industry standard.
- Schools links with industry are being developed by a range of people, including local farmers, teachers and by the VFF's School to Industry Project officer.
- The links with industry vary considerably between schools
- Funding, as with many VETiS programs, can be an issue and it is felt that the cost to students impacts on student participation.
- Schools that pool resources to run programs to achieve efficient class sizes are usually presented with transport issues. This is particularly a problem in rural Victoria where cost and time lost in travel are major issues.
- There is a perceived lack of appreciation in secondary schools of the philosophies behind the concept of competency based training and workplace training and assessment.
- There is a strong view that the SBNA market is being distorted by funding subsidies and the priority governments have placed on this program. The SBNA system has been introduced more to assist schools with their retention rates, rather than as a workforce program designed to meet industry needs.
- VETiS and SBNA present schools with many organisational problems that cannot be solved to their satisfaction. Problems such as understanding the training system, timetabling, disruption of school programs and funding.
- Involving relevant TAFE institutes with VETiS where possible is generally seen as a positive. Students gain knowledge of the different pathways available to them and TAFE teachers usually have good local knowledge of career opportunities.
- Sometimes secondary students do not fit well into the adult learning environment at a TAFE Institute although this is seen as fairly rare.
- Everyone surveyed or interviewed felt that the VETiS program was a pathway to employment in the rural sector.

Many of these comments give strength to the view that the inclusion of agriculture in regional Victorian Agricultural Technical Colleges would see a much more acceptable outcome for the industry.

The PSV Standing Committee is of the view that current programs, while successful, if better funded and targeted, would deliver a higher percentage success rate across the industry. A survey conducted of VET students undertaking a program at a Victorian TAFE institute may be of interest to the Inquiry. Many of the farms in the surrounding district to the TAFE were dairy farms but in the wider area, many of the enterprises included sheep and beef.

A survey undertaken by a number of agriculture students this year drew attention to a possible variation in attitudes towards the industry at completion of training under different delivery conditions. Students involved in VET in Schools programs in Victoria currently undertake this program within an academic framework

Results of the survey are detailed below:

Question	VET in Schools Students (16)			Third Year Apprentices (18)		
	Yes	Maybe	No	Yes	Maybe	No
Do you consider Agriculture a career?	15	1	0	15	1	1
Do you think you will stay working in Agriculture?	5	8	3	15	2	1
Would you tell anyone else to take on the same job?	10	4	2	15	3	0
Do you think you need a very high skill level in Agriculture?	9	2	5	9	2	7
Do you think anyone could do your job?	8	3	5	6	0	12
Do you think it was necessary to do training?	16	0	0	17	1	0
Does your employer explain/teach you things as you go through the day?	14	1	1	15	2	1
What would be a down-side to your job? (responses included)	Hard work Safety concerns Long hours/Low pay Insecurity various unpleasant operational tasks			Hard work Long hours/ low pay Industry image/respect Standards		
What would be a good side to your job?	Variety Challenge Conditions Community			Flexibility Technical skills Lifestyle		
Where do you think you will be in 5 years time?	Half of the responses indicated intent to pursue occupations in unrelated fields and industries			all but 2 responses referred to either being in the same job or related work in the same industry		

Some of the more interesting conclusions to be drawn from this sample are that the longer term training delivery method draws a more favourable picture when assessing the potential outcomes for industry with respect to the successful recruiting of new entrants with longer-term career prospects. However, it must be noted that VET in Schools students must contend with the training within the academic framework rather than through a more targeted vocationally oriented program exemplified by the concept underpinning the Australian Technical Colleges pilot. The Agriculture Standing Committee contends that, from the Apprenticeship survey, it is obvious that the depth of involvement in the program provides much higher levels of retention within the industry.

With respect to other issues which will impinge on the future quality of the workforce within rural industries within the state, could the PSV Council be permitted to make a number of comments?

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

With respect to the ageing farming cohort, the problem has been well canvassed. What is less well appreciated is the issue of the professional capital within training organisations and, for that matter, within the extension section arms of the Department of Primary Industries has also been steadily depleted.

Ability to communicate with increasingly more mature trainees and apprentices is, of course, paramount in dealing with this cohort but it should be pointed out that, over recent years, there has been a dramatic loss of mature aged staff with industry experience as well as those who are experienced communicators. Students and apprentices generally increasingly do not readily suffer fools gladly and are very sensitive to attitude.

Of recent years, the loss of teaching expertise within both the industry environment and also the more formal training environment is exacerbating the problems associated with the lack of a skilled workforce. The pool of knowledge and breadth of industry understanding is becoming less comprehensive as the appreciably more technically skilled older cohort are replaced by often part-time training operators with industry experience but little time for preparation and the increasing level of reporting protocols demanded by QA. They have a range of industry skills which is of great value but may have a limited ability to communicate which can limit their capacity to act as trainers. Their industry skills are not necessarily matched well to the technical craft of teaching.

The Certificate IV in Workplace Assessment and Training is a generic course not specifically relevant to primary industries or to the particular cohort which limits its value and does not address the larger problem of technical skills loss across all sectors.

The PSV Standing Committee does not subscribe to the view that, with respect to training, the government is on a "race to the bottom", but with initiatives such as those characterised by the recent drive to the conduct of total on-the-job training is of concern for a number of reasons:-

- Currently there are few resources available to support training in regional contexts.
- Most farms have few employees and trainees are often operating in isolated locations giving few opportunities to develop communication skills. Council members point to the importance of off-the-job training with the advantage of provision of a forum for the development of socialisation skills as well as the opportunity for broadening networks through exposure to a wider industry environment. It is interesting to note the importance placed on these skills by peak employer bodies at the recent Inquiries into VET. The limited ability of trainees and apprentices from rural backgrounds was particularly noticeable during the interview process for the recent Victorian Training Awards.
- The balance between theory and practice in agriculture is very important. Without a framework within which operations are carried out, acquiring the capacity to operate in an increasingly changing technological environment will become more difficult. It is believed that the industry will pay a very heavy price in 10-15 years time for the failure to provide students with background knowledge to support skills when current trainees move into supervision and management and have to make considered judgements on planning and management of farm or enterprise operations.

With respect to National Training Packages, the use of them in training has met with a mixed reception. While the national Rural Production Training Package (RPTP) underpins all accredited training in the state, there are concerns surrounding the package and competencies within the package. In summary, perceived disadvantages with the package include:-

- The package is seen to be inflexible with qualifications becoming increasingly lengthy from Certificate II to Advanced Diploma.
- There are no nesting arrangements in the qualifications of the RPTP.
- Mechanisms to review and update the RPTP at the national level are proving complex leading to the tendency towards it becoming a fixed document rather than an evolving one.
- In its current form, the package not readily used to develop pathways.
- The number of "gaps" which are still apparent in the training package requiring creativity in use of competencies in the current package.

Glaring inconsistencies in the package with respect to the variation in the number of hours allocated within the Purchasing Guide from Certificate and Diploma courses with the same title depending on the competencies chosen. Industry has queried the structure of an identical qualification respectively demanding 600 hours against 1100 hours depending on the competencies selected.

Secondly the RPTP is unusual as a training package in that it does not include nesting arrangements within its structure. The concept of nesting if available would allow and encourage short accredited courses to be designed, which on completion would be credited towards higher qualifications (notwithstanding the current problems associated with the complexity of the competencies).

The stand-alone concept of an integrated competency was a concept championed by the Rural Training Council of Australia which developed the original Agriculture Training Package however the lack of nesting discourages those in the industry from seeking to undertake further formal training and gain higher qualifications. To currently complete a full Diploma program having previously completed 800 hours or more of Certificate III training followed by up to 1200 hours for a Certificate IV, still requires a further 715 to 1760 hours totalling a possible 3760 nominal hours of training according to the current Purchasing Guide.

This is a major disincentive for industry personnel who have been for some time in the workforce to undertake a higher-level qualification is that they receive little recognition for the qualification they have completed at lower levels. Many stakeholders feel that if this package were to have Certificate II nested under Certificate III, nested under Certificate IV and so on, training would be more readily taken up.

Further, nesting has another advantage in that it encourages the development of pathways and ensures that practical skills at operator level are integrated with the requisite background knowledge components in the higher qualifications that underpin the skills and form a stronger basis for management decisions at that level.

While a small number of providers develop and conduct programs tailored to industry need, in general there is limited imagination applied to course design to meet specific requirements. Providers are invariably more inclined to use the full qualifications that have been centrally designed and delivered to traditional cohorts. A number of reasons advanced for this include the constantly changing landscape in which they operate alongside a constant drive for productivity improvements, which leaves little time and funding to devote to industry liaison and individual course design. The challenge (given these limitations) is to use the RPTP in more flexible ways to meet industry needs.

The focus on balancing the budget can lead to public providers of TAFE becoming introspective and hence unresponsive. The annual focus is on committing or locking in all Student Contact Hours to predetermined usually full time programs rather than taking on the harder-to-deliver short courses.

Other issues which lead to a lack of innovation in thinking concerning the use of the Package include: -

- Current auditing requirements lead to training providers being supply driven in their approach to the provision of training. Emphasis is placed on students completing the whole qualification because funding and the training package rules ordain this. Added to this there is also the tendency for administrations to enrol participants for the full quota of hours within the Purchasing Guide to take full benefit of the state government's funding model. This results in extended program length and as such is counterproductive since it is unattractive to young people who are seeking a pathway to employment in the agricultural sector. In addition this strategy is a disincentive to industry as a means of upgrading the skills of their existing workers. Flexibility in provision is also restricted because of the tendency for the public providers to concentrate on the full-time cohort at the expense of industry staff and owner/managers requiring service outside of normal trading hours. To be more responsive and have greater relevance to industry, providers need to become more demand driven.
- TAFE institutes, particularly those delivering to the rural sector are often faced with very thin training markets and receive no extra funding to compensate for this or the delivery of accredited short courses to part time students. Part-time delivery is recognised within the system as being far more expensive to conduct than training for full time students. The thin market is exacerbated by the National Competition Policy. Economies of scale that might be achieved through cooperation between providers are not permitted. This also leads to the criticism frequently levelled at training providers in that they continue to offer general and broad qualifications rather than targeted industry training.
- As stated earlier a significant problem with the RPTP is the length and complexity of the competencies. This causes significant difficulty when trying to put together flexible courses to meet industry's requirements. There are too many skills embedded in any one competency. Short course designers find it difficult to use competencies in their entirety and hence cannot develop accredited short courses that still meet the needs of participants also tending to use elements from various competencies yielding no credits.

In examining the individual competencies of the RPTP one, *RTC2307A - Operate machinery and equipment* is a good example which illustrates some of the problems associated with the generic nature of many competencies. It covers the operation of all farm machinery however, the skills required for driving a tractor with trailed attached equipment are completely different to those required for operating machinery such as harvesters and clearly need to be acquired separately. This is an example of generic competency delivery which does not allow adequate skills development for different equipment in different contexts.

The state authority has declared that a competency once completed cannot be redelivered to a student to cover the different contexts. For example if a student has already undertaken Machinery Operations in learning to drive a tractor he/she cannot re-enrol in the same competency to acquire skills in harvester operations at any later stage. This is one example of many which present difficulties. Others which could be cited, particularly at the higher levels include *RTE5002A Manage Integrated Crop and Pasture Production* and *RTE5603A Design irrigation drainage and water treatment systems*.

With respect to "gaps" in the training package, the Rural Training Council of Australia/Agri-Food Industry Skills Council (AFISC) is currently undertaking a project to develop competencies for a number of industries including emerging industries. These include beekeeping, commercial composting, alpacas etc. Even here, the problem of rationalisation has emerged. Initially there were ten sector "gaps" to be targeted however, given that AFISC has responsibility for food processing, which has within its structure viticulture - associated with the wine industry, competencies associated with grape growing were not pursued. This has disenfranchised the significant table-grape and dried fruits industries whose specialised training requirements will not now be addressed.

Other "gaps" in the training package continually emerge. Of recent times, three major areas include agronomy, sustainable agriculture and agribusiness (seen to have separate training needs to rural business management). No amount of creativity within the use of the current training package can address these issues adequately.

Another issue likely to exacerbate problems with the take-up of the package again concerns the AFISC as the national training body, and which over the next two years intends to undertake a series of projects under the banner of continuous improvement. These are aimed at developing common units and qualifications across all industries within its jurisdiction (agriculture, horticulture, animal care, conservation, seafood, food processing and racing). While moving to reduce duplication in the packages which is laudable, industry believes that this action will create generic competencies that, if this leads to a loss of specificity in competency detail particularly in the technical areas, will result in industry disengagement with training.

The lack of engagement with accredited training is already apparent in Victoria. The Department of Primary Industries already delivers an estimated 300,000 Student Contact Hours or more as non-accredited or unaccredited training. The case advanced for this centres around the need for immediacy and the differing learning styles of farmers as well as criticisms of the package embodied in the above discussion.

There are many other issues facing the rural industries which will have been already canvassed with the Inquiry Committee by representatives of other agencies which we will not at this stage seek to address in the interests of avoidance of repetition. The Primary Skills Victoria Standing Committee wishes to thank the Committee for the opportunity to make a presentation and looks forward to the published results of the Committee's deliberations.