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**Submission to the  
House of Representatives  
Education and Training  
Committee Inquiry into  
Vocational Education and  
training in Schools**

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# **Inquiry into Vocational Education and Training in Schools**

## **Executive summary**

The National Farmers' Federation (NFF), as the peak national body representing the interests of Australian farmers and their families, welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training inquiry into Vocational Education and Training in Schools (VET in Schools).

The NFF supports the VET in Schools concept and activities. It is essential to the Australian farm sector that students are given exposure to careers, jobs and the culture associated with farms and farm life. It is equally important that the school sector, parents and farmers recognise the career pathways that currently exist and provide opportunities for young people to be aware of and access these pathways.

Structured Workplace Learning (SWL) and School Based New Apprenticeships (SBNA), in general, are effective in preparing students for post-school options to the point where future employment is often secured by these type of work placements. Much of this success can be attributed to the support provided to schools through the cluster activity but could also be attributed to major skills shortages in various industries creating a need for employers to become more proactive in finding workers. These factors have helped employers recognise their role in training the future labour force and being more open to new ways of accessing workers. However, due to a number of reasons the farm sector has not had access to VET in Schools to the same level as urban based industries.

A formalised approach needs to be taken to ensure that School VET Coordinators are able to organise remote or rural VET in School placements without relying on the good will of an associate to complete the work placement visits. It is important due to the geographical locations of our industries that we are able to remove any barriers preventing students from entering SWL or SBNA in our sector.

We are aware that not all young people will want to work in a farm situation. We also know that many young people would consider a job and career on farms as potentially more exciting and fulfilling than office work and more attractive than city based employment. Our experience is that many young people want jobs in the 'great outdoors', dealing with nature at its best and worst, producing real products, being part of an industry with many different career pathways, confronting issues of environmental care and sustainable production - and being part of a culture that is a fundamental to Australia's heritage.

The biggest hurdle we have to young people taking up rural jobs is the image that has developed for our industry. Young people, and more importantly their parents, are often told by teachers and career advisers that farm jobs are poorly paid, dead-end jobs and that farm life is dying off. Recent work undertaken by Rural Skills Australia, with federal government support, is helping to change that image. Also, the Enterprise and Career Education Foundation (ECEP) has assisted the NFF and farm organisations in four states work more closely with

schools to increase VET in Schools activity in the farm sector and to change the attitude of teachers and career advisers to careers in rural industries.

These activities are helping to change attitudes and increase access to farms but there needs to be further support to overcome some of the inherent structural issues associated with placing students on farms.

The main issue is the distance from schools and from large and small regional centres to farms. This issue needs to be solved through some recognition of the distance problem with extra support either for the farm family or the school. We believe that targets of some kind may need to be developed for schools in non-urban areas to ensure that the farm community receives the attention and support it needs.

The issue of distance is compounded further for those students in remote locations completing their schooling through Distance Education. A large range of VET subjects on-line would allow for children on Distance Education to continue schooling and also allow for self-paced learning. A small start has been made in this area but further work needs to happen.

Farming is a vital part of Australia's economy and society:

- In 1995-2001, rural production represent approximately 3% of Australia's GDP<sup>1</sup> but provides around 19% of our goods and services export<sup>2</sup>.
- Many rural communities depend upon agriculture for their prosperity. Agriculture contributes more than 30 per cent of employment in 66 per cent of small non-coastal towns<sup>3</sup>.
- Farmers are vital custodians of the land, with agricultural activities covering 60% of the Australian landmass<sup>4</sup>.
- Agriculture is one of the largest employers in Australia, providing around 320,000 direct jobs – a level that has increased by 20,000 or 6.58% between 1996 and 2000<sup>5</sup>. According to the ABS, the average employment in agriculture and services to agriculture in the year 2000 is 409,200, or 107.34% of the 1995's number.
- Agricultural productivity increased by 3.3 per cent per year between 1988 and 2000, well above the average of 1.2 per cent and the second highest in the market sector (after communications)<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: ABS, *Agriculture (Cat no 7113.0)*, table 1.3

<sup>2</sup> Source: ABS, *Balance of Payments and International Investment Position, Australia (5302.0)*

<sup>3</sup> Agriculture contributes more than half of total employment in 28 per cent of small non-coastal towns. Source: ABARE, *Country Australia*, p38

<sup>4</sup> Source: ABS, *Agriculture (Cat no 7113.0)*, table 5.1

<sup>5</sup> Source: ABS, *Agriculture (Cat no 7113.0)*, table 1.4

<sup>6</sup> Source: OECD, *Economic Surveys – Australia 2000-01*, p82

- This fact in particular should dispel the myth that the agricultural sector is 'old economy'. Farmers have been adopting new technologies and improving practices with fervour.
- Agriculture also represents a significant input into many other industries, particularly the food processing industry, which had a turnover of \$51.2 bn and an added value of \$14.2 bn in 1999-2000. Food processing is the largest industry subdivision of total manufacturing, both by value added and by employment. It also provides over \$11 bn of exports<sup>7</sup>.

## **General factors affecting Employment in Agriculture**

In a survey undertaken by the NFF in respect to a recent submission on small business activity it was found that there are three main factors that create difficulties in employing staff in the farming industry, those being in no order or priority:

- Remoteness of the location of the business
- Labour/Skill Shortages in the region
- Government regulations

The impact of Government regulation in specific instances is important but can be dealt with in other forums. In this paper the focus is on an area that is not within the parameters of government regulation, but may require the assistance of Government to rectify the problems that are causing a deterrent to increasing the choice of careers for young people and employment in farming businesses.

### *Remoteness & Labour Shortages*

In many respects these two issues are interlinked with the remoteness factor being a key contributor to labour shortages. It is particularly interesting that labour shortages are a constant complaint within the farming industry while there is still unemployment in Australia particularly youth unemployment.

The remoteness of working on a farming property, particularly when it is a substantial distance away from the nearest town, will always be a factor that deters potential new recruits to the farming sector, however, the benefits of working in the industry, even for a short period, should outweigh those concerns.

Accessibility to the right person for the job is also an issue that is affected by remoteness. Farm businesses normally do not have the resource base to access employees nor do they have the competitive support mechanisms in respect to recruitment agencies that are significant in the cities.

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<sup>7</sup> Source: ABS, *Manufacturing Industry, Australia*, (Cat no 8221.0)

Remoteness also comes into play when considering access to training for both the employer and employee.

Training is a significant component to address skill shortages in the farming industry but training opportunities are limited due to the remoteness of the business. While the employer and employee may be interested in increasing the skills of the employee to the benefit of the individual and the business, access to training support may limit that opportunity. Flexibility of training and increased access to training support is important. The New Apprenticeship System has created more flexibility in training. SWL and SBNA are an important variation on the older system but further flexibilities and access to training support in rural areas needs to be given particular consideration to the benefit of both the employee and employer.

The perception of working in the farming industry is also an issue that relates to the labour shortages being experienced by many farming small businesses. Do potential new recruits understand the skill involved in working machinery or the detailed scientific approaches taken to pursuing farming businesses along with business development and marketing that is required in such a competitive industry both domestically and internationally?

This question was considered by Rural Skills Australia, an affiliated organisation of NFF, in the development of *Ontrack: Real Skills – Rural Future*, an interactive CD ROM for students in highlighting the benefits of pursuing a career in the rural industry (a copy of the CD ROM is enclosed). The CD ROM is backed by a website highlighting rural careers. The CD ROM is proving to be effective where it is accessed and the development of better support for SWL and SBNA into farms will add to its impact.

An issue that needs to be addressed and requires the assistance of Government is how do we attract more people to work in the farming sector? Are there people in the cities that would consider working if the concerns of remoteness and what is required to work in the industry are removed? Do they need assistance in assimilating into a country environment? These are some of the issues being considered by the NFF and we seek the assistance of the Government in addressing some of the concerns in respect to the labour shortages being experienced by some farming small businesses. Providing better support to schools on accessing rural VET in Schools placements is vital to any strategy.

For the information of the committee, through a mechanism called the Rural Education Forum of Australia (REFA), NFF is currently working with several community and Government stakeholders, and other agencies, to further explore means to break down the participation imbalance, this should have an impact of vocational education in schools.

Further, the efforts of Rural Skills Australia are directed towards raising the education and skill base of rural Australia with a focus on school to industry pathway development and raising the awareness of teachers, parents and students on careers in the farm sector. RSA receives support from the Department of Education, Science and Training, the Enterprise and Career Education

Foundation, Golden Circle (in particular for SBNA), Westpac and other sources for these activities.

## **Schools working with the farm sector**

A major issue for vocational education in schools is the lack of interaction by schools with the farm sector. The school sector has a sketchy history of structured workplace learning activities outside the major centres and into agriculture and horticulture. The recent placement of project officers funded by the Enterprise and Career Education Foundation with farm organisations in four states will increase the profile of the industry in schools and will eventually lead to an increase in use of the programs in the farm sector. But the issue of the distance to potential work placements in the farm sector needs to be considered.

It is not uncommon for a potential work placement to be well over 30km outside a town centre, or from a students home, and this is often considered too far and too costly for both the parent and the school. The costs for a school in organising a work placement is also seen to be high in travel time and in travel costs. It is far easier to arrange placements in town or in a major centre. The perception is that these placements are easier to organise, easier to fill and easier to supervise.

The issue of involvement of stakeholders from industry is also impacted by distance. There is a need to utilise local knowledge to make education more relevant and VET in Schools is an ideal instrument to involve farm stakeholders. Their input is necessary to ensure courses are responsive to their needs and that the industry as a whole develops better knowledge of VET in Schools and improved experience and skills in employment and career development.

All this points to a need to supply better support for schools in rural locations to provide VET in Schools on farms. This includes travel and time consideration for teachers and for students.

Another option that is currently being investigated is better use of distance education structures to provide SBNA and SWL support. Currently there are a small number of SBNA being completed through distance education and some assessment may help in development of structured support for the training organisations and the new apprentices and an expansion of the take up of these types of new apprenticeships.

There are apparently no SWL placements by distance education. There is a need to make sure this type of support is available to remote communities, students and employers.

There is also a situation where young people at boarding school return to the remote locations for holidays. This is an opportunity to involve that remote community, whether it be a cattle station or small hamlet, in VET in Schools activities. SWL can be completed in agriculture and horticulture as well as information and communication technology, transport, tourism, hospitality and

retail sectors. A major barrier to this is that the school term does not extend into holidays and insurance and supervisory coverage for a SWL placement in school holidays is normally not available. This impacts disproportionately on remote students and on potential placements into the farm sector.

The numbers that may eventually take up these programs will be small but will be vital to the development of these small communities and associated industry.

## **Consistency of VET in Schools**

There appears to be a great deal of inconsistency between models of delivery of VET in Schools. To some extent the differing requirements of specific industries and geographic locations has contributed to this, however the major differences appear to have arisen where VET school staff operate with limited knowledge of the VET system and generally in isolation of each other. Confusion between the various components of VET in Schools eg Structured Work Place Learning, School Based New Apprenticeships and 'Farm Studies' programs, adds to the complexity.

In recognition of the wide range of approaches Rural Skills Australia has a best practice case study for working with the farm sector on its web site, whilst obviously not the only suitable arrangement it does serve to highlight a very effective model that can be adopted or modified.

This case study model is consistent with the NFF's view that VET in Schools can be a very effective pathway from school to work. In this case the school/work relationship was maintained even post year 12 for many students.

## **Differences between VET in Schools programs**

There is likely as much difference between school-based and post school VET programs as there is within each category. The differences generally occur as a result of various approaches taken by Registered Training Providers, either school based or otherwise. For example the fast food model for new apprenticeships as portrayed by SBS television is vastly different from the model adopted in rural Western Australia for agriculture (fortunately!). Schools as RTOs or in partnership with RTOs similarly create a number of other models.

There are some issues specific to schools delivery that have impacted on the pattern of industry acceptance. These include a tendency for schools to select competencies popular with students, driving machinery for example is usually more popular than weed control. Where a school based new apprentice is employed directly by the employer the competency selection will have a greater degree of enterprise input, however where, as is often the case, a Group Training Company is the employer the enterprise input can be limited.

Where the industry/enterprise has a limited input into the training program the outcomes may not be the workplace skills that maximise industry acceptance of the program. This will then make it difficult for farmers to become further involved.

Group Training Companies are ideally suited to SBNA as they should have greater VET knowledge and experience than schools. The Group Training Company, as the single employer contact, can virtually manage the program for the school. To facilitate this Group Training Companies need to receive some motivation/incentive to become more involved with the farm sector and provide what the farmer and the student want rather than what is easiest for administration and management purposes.