

# Primary Industries Curriculum Maintenance Manager

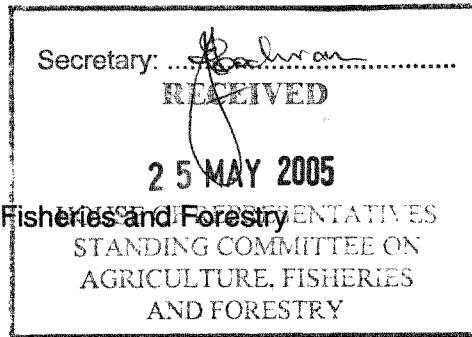
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Committee Secretary  
House of Representatives  
Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600



Dear Sir or Madam

### Re: Inquiry into Rural Skills Training and Research

Thank you for the opportunity of providing input to this inquiry, which has the potential of providing improved arrangements for vocational training for the rural industries.

Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE has the designated role of Curriculum Maintenance Manager – Primary Industries (PICMM) within the state of Victoria. This carries with it the responsibility for agriculture, horticulture, conservation and land management, seafood (inland aquaculture), forestry, animal care and management and racing. Primarily the focus is on VET provision but it also includes provision within schools through the VET in Schools and the VCAL programs. It has a newly emerging role in relation to higher education programs given the state government’s decision to allow VET providers to deliver degrees.

Curriculum Maintenance Managers (CMMs) have a designated role in, and provide an important conduit in assisting the Office of Training and Tertiary Education<sup>1</sup> (OTTE) in achieving the State Government education goals and objectives. The CMM roles and responsibilities are specified by OTTE. Those relevant to the inquiry include provision of authoritative advice and intelligence to OTTE and key stakeholders on vocational education and training matters including professional development needs of training providers, as well as provision of support to OTTE in training packager development, review and endorsement. Also included is the development of state accredited curriculum where industry has identified gaps in training packages.

To undertake these roles, the CMM requires a comprehensive knowledge of the State/National Training System, VET stake holders, VET in Schools, and government policies impacting on the Training Package as well as of curriculum implementation and a knowledge of issues associated with the implementation of Training Packages.

<sup>1</sup> The State Training Authority in Victoria

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Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE has adopted a number of strategies to meet the roles and responsibilities of the CMM – Primary Industries. It has appointed an Executive Officer and established a PICMM Reference Committee comprising senior representation from public and private training providers in Victoria, the relevant State Industry Training Boards and appropriate representation from government and other organisations within the primary industries. The Executive Officer and Training Package Adviser also have direct contact with and consult with public and private training providers and participate in primary industry teacher networks, both state and national. The Executive Officer also works closely with the relevant national industry training advisory bodies and provides advice to OTTE concerning the development and re-development of training packages.

As a result of these strategies, PICMM has a systemic, representative and well-informed view of training for the rural industries, both on a state and a national basis and it is on this basis that this response is made.

Individual providers in Victoria will provide data to the inquiry on their own training provision. PICMM looks forward to the Inquiry identifying the level of training provided to the rural industries on a state-by-state basis, given that the rural industries are national and there is a variation in effort among the states.

This response will limit itself to the following aspects of the inquiry

- The skill needs of agricultural industries in Australia, including the expertise and capacity of industry to specify the skill sets required for training, and the extent to which vocational training meets the needs of rural industries
- Concerns that training packages approved for an industry do not actually meet the needs of that industry, including concerns that present quality assurance processes are compromised or corrupted
- Rural community access to training and educational opportunities, including staged qualifications

A number of issues to do with training delivery for the rural industries are general training issues. The agriculture industry is highly segmented and geographically diverse, factors that make it a thin training market, especially at the higher levels of qualifications. The forestry industry has a priority for training and recognising the skills of existing workers. This too results in a thin training market with a wide geographic spread.

Factors of diversity and geographical spread as well as the need for access to real life resources also contribute to making it a costly training market for rural industries. While distance delivery (in itself costly) can be applicable it is not the preferred learning mode for farmers, who prefer face-to-face learning situations with ample opportunity for hands-on learning. Opportunities for hands-on learning require access to a wide diversity of resources, which also add to the costly nature of training for rural industries, especially agriculture and inland aquaculture. Many of these issues relate also to training within the forestry industry. Both forestry and agriculture are high-risk industries in terms of OHS and thus trainer/trainee ratios must be low to allow for adequate supervision. This also adds to the cost of training.

Additionally, it is widely recognised that management training is a priority for agriculture. For management training, it is critical to create pathways from VET levels 5 and 6 into higher education. This has provided a challenge for a number of providers in the past, as it has been historically difficult to achieve acceptance from institutions offering degree programs to accept VET qualifications. However, the market is thin at this level also, notwithstanding the critical need for the rural industries to develop not merely generic management skills but also high level technical skills, including agronomy and soil science, reclamation of land degraded by salinity, introduction of biotechnology and GM, and the application of current technology (including GIS as a farm management tool) and principles of sustainability and maintenance of biodiversity.

The industry itself is also having difficulty in employing skilled people in the agricultural industries. Career prospects and opportunities are perceived as being negative

As you will be aware, national training packages have been developed and designated as providing national specifications for training and assessment for Australian industries. RTE03 Rural Production is the current training package applicable to agriculture in Australia. Other relevant packages to the inquiry are RTD02 Conservation and Land Management and FPI99 Forest and Forest Products.

PICMM is strongly committed to national training packages and to the notion of nationally developed industry specifications for training and assessment. Training packages provide national consistency. They are also the most cost effective way of developing national specifications, with the potential for these to be high quality. PICMM would not wish to discontinue the benefits that can result from the national approach but would wish to improve it. PICMM therefore wishes to raise the following specific issues that are of concern as well as indicating action that may result in improvement.

### **Issue 1: The need for training packages to provide current, detailed and clear specifications for training and assessment**

It is vital that training packages provide current, detailed and clear specifications to providers for training and assessment. If they cease to do this, they fail in their primary objective in our view. Providers rely on the national specifications for the purposes of training and assessment. If such specifications cease to be current, or do not provide sufficient detail as to the intended benchmark, industry sees the fault lying with providers and not with ANTA or with the relevant Industry Skills Council, neither of which organisation they may be able to identify. The reputation of providers in part rests on the quality of the national specifications. Providers do not have the role within the national training framework to further flesh out the actual needs of industry if the national specifications provide limited detail and where the gap in required information may be quite substantial. There is a real danger in ANTA's current view that the number of training packages and the number of competencies should be rationalised through the greater use of imported units and especially in the view that more generic units should be used to reduce the number of competencies. While the development of more generic units may reduce costs at the national level, they run the risk of becoming "content free" and have the clear capacity to result in poorer quality training at the RTO level where the training is judged by industry as being "too general" and "not relevant to my needs". PICMM does not support an extensive move into the development of generic competencies. A balance needs to be found.

### **Issue 2: The need for continuous improvement of training packages to maintain their currency and to reflect new trends in industry**

While ANTA has in place some measurements for improvement in regard to processes for development and maintenance of training packages not all of these processes appear to be effective and some appear to carry with them the likelihood of negative rather than positive outcomes as planned, as for example the intention to produce generic units which are likely to be unable to provide clear and detailed specifications required by both industry and by providers as indicated above.

It appears that either the newly formed national Industry Skills Councils are not sufficiently funded or that they do not have the directive to maintain the currency of training packages or even in some cases, to recognise the variety of their stakeholders. The Agrifood Industry Skills Council is currently conducting a scoping report prior to the stage 2 redevelopment of RTD02 Conservation and Land Management. A number of units designated as being common units, and proposing to reflect the skill needs of Conservation and Land Management, Rural Production and Amenity Horticulture were developed as part of RTD02. There appears to be no intention to include either the Rural Production or the Amenity Horticulture industries or training providers in the scoping report leading to the redevelopment stage. This appears to be an incomprehensible oversight.

There is a view among providers that ANTA no longer has a strong commitment to the maintenance of training packages. Providers, in contrast, see the development and maintenance of national specifications to be core business of national industry training advisory bodies and not of marginal or diminishing interest.

RTD02 Conservation and Land Management and RTE03 Rural Production were endorsed in 2002 and 2003 respectively. Since that time, *no* new versions (designated by ANTA as either Category 1 or Category 2 changes) have appeared. The ANTA processes for continuous improvement clearly do not appear to be working. This is notwithstanding the current recognition that the critical issues facing rural production in Australia are salinity, land and soil degradation and strategies to address extreme drought and water shortages. It can only be assumed that it has been deemed that these issues do not warrant any updates in the training package that appears from the viewpoint of providers to be extraordinary. The absence of these issues in RTE03 Rural Production would seem to suggest that training packages are better able to reflect the status quo or the recent past rather than having the ability to take a forward view as it seems highly unlikely that these issues were *not* seen to be looming in 2002/3, at least by some in the industry. Future directions are not clearly identified in training packages. Yet the objective of training is to prepare for the future, not for the past and providers have a right to expect that national industry specifications will support this objective.

Currency of training packages may be enhanced through closer cooperative effort between ANTA and the states. ANTA has not worked as cooperatively as they might with the states in terms of addressing the difficulty of maintaining the currency of training packages. States may develop state accredited curriculum only in response to gaps in the training package. The expectation is that states forward such curriculum to the relevant national industry training advisory body to be considered for inclusion in the training package, a process that requires validation in all states. The packaging rules do not allow for the importing of units developed in state accredited curriculum, permitting import of units only from other nationally endorsed training packages. Allowing for the cumbersome nature of the ANTA continuous improvement process, the inclusion of new units (Category 2 changes) may take up to 3 years before they are included. Three years is too long for providers to respond to industry needs and too long for industry to wait. Hence states are able to respond quickly to changes in industry needs but the national training package appears unable to do so. VET has prided itself in the past on its responsiveness to industry. The current lack of maintenance of training packages at the national level erodes this capacity.

### **Issue 3: Providing a response to thin training markets**

There are a number of cohorts that may present for training with differing expectations of outcomes

- **Existing workforce.** These people generally desire not to obtain full qualifications but, in common with other industries, are interested in ongoing skills development. Hence this group will be interested in achieving skills sets represented in RTE03 Rural Production, RTD02 Conservation and Land Management and FPI99 Forest and Forest Products as one or several units of competency. This training may be funded through recurrent funding available to a provider in VET or through funding programs such as Farmbis.
- **New entrants – youth.** This group is generally concerned to complete full qualifications as obviously they intend to obtain employment as a result. This group includes new apprenticeships. New entrants are not a priority for the forestry industry but they are in other rural industries
- **New entrants – career change or retirees.** This group may or may not desire to obtain full qualifications, but they are very interested in developing skills that will support them in their new venture. This is a significant and growing group in agriculture.

Training packages can support all of these groups. Training packages have always provided access at either an individual unit level or to a total qualification. There is no problem in issuing Statements of Attainment in relation to individual units of competency. It is currently possible to complete qualifications in stages. However, the training system sometimes puts an emphasis on “completion

rates” of qualifications as an indicator of the quality of the provider<sup>2</sup>. Realistically however it needs to also be stated that the new entrant cohort wishing to complete a qualification provides greater security for providers in terms of long-term viability in the thin training markets applicable to rural industries.

TDE03 Rural Production, RTF03 Amenity Horticulture and RTD02 Conservation and Land Management do not readily support on-going skills development for the existing workforce, however. If there is a desire to do more than acquire individual or groups of competencies, and to move from one qualification level to the next, pathways are in fact limited, with few “ladders” providing advanced standing or recognition of earlier levels. All qualifications are designed as stand-alone with entry at any level. Hypothetically, an individual completing Certificate II and wishing to move to Certificate III, IV and then to Diploma could find themselves completing over 3,000 hours of training which must be seen as both daunting and unlikely.

Thin training markets can be better supported by packaging rules that allow for greater rather than limited flexibility. The issue of insufficient flexibility in training package rules is repeatedly raised. An example of a very thin training market is in Rural Business where there is great difficulty in packaging together an award at any level that reflects the needs of the client. More flexibility in the packaging rules would better support the thin training market in such sectors.

Providing access to training by regional and remote communities is more problematic, given the points raised in regard to the cost and the practical difficulty of responding to thin markets where solutions are costly and frustratingly difficult to achieve, as in catering for the preference of the client group for face-to-face delivery. As noted, distance delivery is one solution and is more widely used in some states than in others. In Victoria, some providers make greater use of distance delivery than do others, perhaps in reflection of the acceptability of this medium by client groups in a geographically smaller state with different industry expectations. Flexible delivery making use of provider based and remote delivery may provide an acceptable solution with good results. Distance delivery or expanded face-to-face delivery, and the need for adequate resources all carry with them the requirements for higher levels of funding.

In summary, the vocational training needs of rural industries can be met through the use of training packages. Training packages have the capacity to provide excellent specifications for training and assessment – provided they are properly maintained and updated, and they provide sufficient detail and are clear in what they say about the industry’s needs and do not limit themselves to general advice, and provided they reflect “management” needs to mean not only generic management skills but also the high level technical skills the industries need to grow and prosper. Modifications to packaging rules and to the design of qualifications should be made to allow for greater flexibility and to better reflect patterns of ongoing skills development in the existing workforce. The capacity of providers to respond to the needs of thin training markets generally, including the needs of regional and remote groups are not jeopardised by training packages but by cost factors. Finally, the views expressed here should be forwarded to DEST, which will assume the roles currently held by ANTA in July 2005.

PICMM looks forward to the Inquiry identifying ways in which improvements may be made in addressing the complex training needs of the rural industries  
Please contact me to discuss any of the matters raised, or where further detail is needed.

Yours sincerely



Gay Gallagher

Executive Officer Primary Industries Curriculum Maintenance Manager

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<sup>2</sup> Including by DEST In their discussion paper, Skilling Australia. Only one of the groups outlined above is primarily concerned with the attainment of a total qualification