

Submission to the **INQUIRY INTO RURAL SKILLS TRAINING AND RESEARCH**

Author: Mr Graeme Harris

Role: Agriculture and Primary Industries Vocational Education Teacher at Farrer Memorial Agricultural High School, Tamworth NSW. Vocational Education coordinator at the above school.

Immediate past President NSW Association of Agriculture Teachers
Secretary of National Association of Agricultural Educators.

I have been an agricultural educator for the last 27 years following completion of a degree in Rural Science from the University of New England, and secondary schooling at Hurlstone Agricultural High School. I am also an accredited trainer for SmartTrain Chemical Application and Chemcert Gold Trainer. I believe that my experience in both training school age students, many from Rural and Remote areas, and adults allows me to present some ideas to the committee that are based on real experiences rather than straight empirical evidence.

Agricultural Education at the Secondary Level: there has been a decline in the numbers of students attempting Agricultural or horticultural courses over the last 15 or more years. This has been an issue of concern to teachers throughout Australia. I would suggest that a number of factors have resulted in this in NSW. These include:

- a change in the content of Agriculture syllabi with a trend away from the “how animals and plants work and how we can manage them for sustainable production” towards an emphasis on the social and environmental impacts of agriculture.
- far greater emphasis on literacy skills in HSC examinations assessed through terms such as “evaluate”. This has had the unintended(?) effect of students who have very good agricultural knowledge and skills but not advanced literacy skills being heavily disadvantaged in their attainment of high marks at these exams. (this has been so for rural and remote students particularly for boys from rural and remote areas.)
- the scaling of subjects for the University Admission Index (UAI) through mapping against the highest levels of English has reduced the likelihood of top students in the subject being able to gain the maximum UAI mark. (hence James Ruse Agricultural High School in Sydney no longer making 2 unit Agriculture compulsory)
- These factors have resulted in students wishing to work on farms or become involved in scientific agricultural research not electing to study the subject for the HSC.

The “Clever country” and similar campaigns resulted in a community belief that Agriculture was a “sunset industry” and that there was no future for any young boy or girl in Agriculture. Most parents and teachers advised that students had to “get into computers” to have any future.

- This was reinforced by the design of Year 7 to 10 curricula that focused upon the design and use of technology by all rather than the development of skills that could be used in the traditional trades and agriculture. This is best illustrated in the demise of the “Sheep Husbandry and Wool Technology” Year 9 and 10 NSW course which following a review where the chairman of

the committee stated verbally that the wool industry had as much relevance to Australia as aquaculture or beekeeping. Not surprisingly the course was deleted

- Agriculture as a stand alone School Certificate was also to be cancelled. It was only the result of a great deal of media exposure, and political pressure that a meeting between the NSW Association of Agriculture Teachers, a representative of the NSW Board of Studies and the NSW Minister for Education was held and that a stand alone subject was retained rather than becoming one small elective strand of the Design and Technology course.

Thus the focus of what is to be taught in schools has often moved away from the development of skills and knowledge that permit young men and women to enter the workforce and be able to be useful employees, to meeting some other political or social agenda that often represents the needs and aspirations of the cities or universities rather than those of rural students, communities and employers.

Vocational Education has always been an important part of the education provided by agriculture teachers who have often had to find creative ways to ensure their students develop skills that are relevant to their students and the needs of the community. For example many schools have cattle or sheep that they prepare for shows and livestock competitions and these develop a wide range of skills that students can employ usefully if they enter rural workforces.

The development of school based vocational courses has been a major improvement in provision of skilled workers into many industries including Primary Industries. Schools teaching Primary Industries vocational courses have teachers who are accredited Vocational trainers, have industry experience and a wide range of relevant skills. Most subjects allow students to complete or work toward AQTF Certificate II level. They also require a certain component of structured work placement where specific competencies are practiced and enhanced.

These courses have a major role to play in addressing any skills shortage and as there are already vocationally trained teachers in schools throughout Australia the potential for rapid deployment of training to students at a level that matches student to local community and employer needs is great. There are however a number of factors that limit the ability at present of schools to meet these needs.

- The requirement (at least in NSW) that competency based vocational courses also have a HSC component to allow assessment in an optional external examination. This has resulted in the situation where the competencies being assessed are at AQTF II level and the HSC requirements are at a level equivalent of Cert IV! Thus classes have to have a much greater theoretical base than should be required for a Certificate II.
- An enormous disincentive to development of courses at a higher level such as AQTF III exists at present. Where schools have facilities, staff have the requisite industry experience, students already possess skills of at least a Certificate II level and rural employers need such students, barriers seem to be created in the beurocracy and it would appear that some sectors such as TAFE view them as trying to take over “their patch”. As VET Coordinator at Farrer MAHS I can describe some of these barriers to two courses we have developed and have been approved by the Tamworth RTO, NSW Department of Education and Training, NSW Board of Studies, are still awaiting approval from VETAB.

- Application forms have to be completed for Boards of Studies for a Locally developed school based course. These are based upon the relevant national training package in this case at AQTF3 level (time taken by 4 teachers: 6 school days in total relieved from classes at school expense).
- Application made to VETAB
- Application for RPL for these 4 staff to NSW DET QRRC involving almost 600 pages of supporting documentation. (time taken by 4 teachers: 6 days in total relieved from classes at school expense)
- local RTO and school develop VETAB application (2 days)
- RPL by DET only given for units already within existing Primary Industries course. Advised that other certification institution required.
- RTO identifies CB Alexander College and Murrumbidgee Agricultural College as the only centres in NSW certified to issue certificate III in Beef and Grain Production. Negotiation on cost results in between \$60 and \$100 per person per unit. To be funded jointly by school and RTO. Further 150 pages of supporting information submitted,
- Staff complete RPL applications for these units (equivalent to 3 days each- undertaken in own time). Submission sent. Telephone interviews held using “HORTUS ASSESS” protocols. (teachers replaced from classes for interviews 6 hours at school cost)
- Further VETAB advice that all assessment tasks for all units to be submitted rather than samples for one unit in each course as previously advised. Time to develop (4 teachers 4 days each removed from class plus own time)
- This has taken over two years of planning to identify needs, develop courses and seek approvals.
- The BOS course approval is for 2 years. When a new training package is developed the whole process has to happen again.
- Where the name of a Unit changes then certification of staff will have to happen again.
- These administrative impediments demonstrate that to develop such a course requires tenacity, financial and emotional support of the school, RTO, industry and teachers, just to meet the needs of students and be responsive to local and community needs. To repeat this every two years is intolerable.
- There is no doubt that schools can be very responsive to the needs of their local students, and industry with which they often have close links, however unfortunately the weight of beurocracy inhibits schools and individual teachers from proceeding even further in meeting the skills and training needs of the community.
- The model that now exists within the NSW Board of Studies Primary Industries syllabus with a core, and different levels of training permitting students to gain Certificate II in a range of industry contexts and progression for capable students towards gaining a Certificate III in industry specific areas is to be applauded and was the result of concerted action at an educational and political level by NSW Primary Industries and

Agriculture teachers. Shortcomings in the model are the preponderance of units at AQTF III level in sheep and wool and the lack of units in other industry areas precluding students from gaining a CERT III in these areas.

- The concentration on assessment of skills based on completion of each element of competency within each unit of competency often means that more time is spent assessing than actually teaching and mastering skills in an industry context. This can be put in the following terms:

“some people seem to think the best way of fattening a pig is to weigh it more often”

- The availability of learning resources is improving through the development of centralised repositories of resource links, and the development of metadata for new technologies and processes in primary industries allowing trainers and teachers to access information in MS Word format.
- The possibilities of enhancing Primary Industries skills needs and ensuring access to rural communities can be met through more resourcing and support for secondary schools throughout rural Australia.
- Reintroduce the model of seed funding which existed when the ASTF permitted small grants to individual programs. The move to ECEF and now within DEST has resulted in aggregation of programs so that possibilities for small innovative programs to develop without the need to make submissions to at least three levels of decision making.
- The possibilities are exciting, the opportunities great and the likely outcomes substantial. This could be achieved by targeted special purpose funding for staff training, resources, release to permit assessment whilst students are on structured workplacement, and some relief from the overzealous nature of some of the quality assurance mechanisms which appear to be paper based audits rather than industry assessment of the competency of the students completing the program.

Never the less there are very sound programs in operation such as those at Farrer Memorial Agricultural High School, a NSW Department of Education secondary school which is one of only three government Boarding schools in NSW.

A copy of some of the subject choice options for students in rural industries at Farrer Memorial Agricultural High School are shown in (appendix 1 and II)

Farrer was one of 13 case studies from throughout Australia surveyed by DEST as part of a study of excellence in Structured Workplace training and the only one in rural production.

I would like to request to appear before the committee should the opportunity arise, and invite the committee to visit the school to gain a true understanding of the excellence of our educational programs.

Graeme Harris

B Sc Ag (Educ) UNE, Cert Gifted Education (UNSW), Cert IV Workplace Assessment

Farrer Memorial Agricultural High School

585 Calala Lane

Tamworth

NSW 2340