

23 January 2023



Submission

Committee Secretary
Education, Employment and Training Committee
Parliament House
George Street
Brisbane Qld 4000

Submitted online: eetc@parliament.qld.gov.au

To Whom It May Concern

Re: Inquiry into the Delivery of VET in Regional, Rural and Remote Queensland

The Rural Jobs and Skills Alliance (RJSA)'s purpose is to address mutual goals for our member organisations that focus on the attraction, development and retention of new entrants and existing workers to underpin the prosperity of Queensland's agricultural sector now and into the future. Our mission is to identify agricultural workforce needs and seek effective solutions to ensure a sustainable agricultural workforce for Queensland.

Industry members of the Alliance are (in alphabetical order):

- AgForce
- Australian Prawn Farmers' Association
- CANEGROWERS
- Cotton Australia
- EastAUSMilk
- Growcom (representing fruit and vegetable industries)
- Nursery & Garden Industry Queensland (NGIQ)
- Irrigation Australia
- Queensland Chicken Growers' Association
- Queensland Farmers' Federation (lead organisation)
- Timber and Building Materials Association

Supported by the Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries.

RJSA also acts as the advisory role to two positions that support the industry in workforce development:

- The newly appointed Industry Workforce Advisor role, who aims to provide support for agriculture businesses - with a particular focus on small to medium employers - by helping them address workforce challenges, diversify their workforces, and support workforce growth. The Agriculture Workforce Advisor has an active role in assisting employers to connect to available education, skilling, employment, and economic growth initiatives helping to strengthen their capacity to fill employment gaps and needs.

- The Industry Skills Advisor (ISA), who engages with employers, small business, and industry stakeholders to provide high quality, evidence-based industry advice and intelligence about current and emerging industry direction, regional skills needs and training solutions, jobs growth and employment opportunities. These advisors are key in ensuring that the investment in training is targeted to achieve the best outcomes for industry.

The Rural Jobs and Skills Alliance (RJSA) welcomes the opportunity to provide comment to the Inquiry into the Delivery of VET in Regional, Rural and Remote Queensland. We provide this submission without prejudice to any additional submission from our members or individual farmers.

Background

Agriculture is the backbone of the Queensland economy and the lifeblood of regional communities. The growing world population is increasing the global demand for food, fibre, and foliage, according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, the world must increase agricultural output by 70% over the next 20 years to meet this demand.

This demand presents new opportunities for Queensland agriculture to expand production to feed a growing and more urbanised global population. The levels and types of skills needed by agribusinesses and workforce are changing with the evolution of the industry. The industry needs to ensure that its workforce is appropriately skilled and supported by flexible training and education pathways that are industry lead and responsive industry trends.

The industry reports significant skills shortages at all levels. Agribusinesses anticipate providing both entry level and ongoing training for their workforce. Industry stakeholders report that the current training offering needs development and tailoring to enhance industry and regional relevance and strengthen soft and technical skills. Access to training and education is not equitable across Queensland's regions, with VET facilities not located in some local government areas. School-based training, traineeships and apprenticeships, and alignment of agriculture education with STEM are highly regarded. A range of extension initiatives and diverse learning opportunities can support training and employment outcomes for graduates.

Responses to the inquiry

1. The role of public providers in VET delivery in rural, remote, and regional Queensland.

The variety of food and fibre that Queensland produces and how it is produced has changed greatly in the last 50 years. This change brings with it the need for new skills and new training models. Agriculture is and will remain a key employer, particularly in Queensland's regional communities, so it is critical that the awareness, education, and employment pathways for the agriculture sector are effective.

Following the Queensland Government’s decisions to close operations of the Queensland Agricultural Training Colleges (QATC), the sector is facing a significant gap in pathway responses. These programs must be replaced by more responsive and flexible structures into the future. The closure of QATC opens an opportunity for TAFE to develop this new model and skill the ag workforce for tomorrow.

TAFE may not be able to meet all the sector’s skilling needs but they can collaborate with industry to identify where they can add value and where they are best placed to fill current gaps.

One current example where TAFE has been collaborating with industry to fill the gaps is through the Agriculture and Aquaculture Tech Skills Hub project in North Queensland, which is looking at ways to bring Food and Fibre training into the 21st century. This project brings together industry, government, and education providers to deliver career pathways and skilling solutions that will equip the Queensland's Agriculture and Aquaculture sector workforce with the skills and capabilities needed to support economic growth.

The project is jointly funded by the Australian Government under the Regional Recovery Partnerships, Greater Whitsunday Alliance (GW3) and Regional Development Australia, and is being delivered in partnership with the Queensland Government, TAFE Queensland, and Central Queensland University Australia to support existing plans and priorities within the region. This initiative includes working groups looking at not only at courses and course content but also career pathways, technical skills and very importantly innovation in course delivery.

With the development of TAFE based centres of excellence in multiple locations across Queensland there is an opportunity to ensure that these centres address local needs. However, it is key that across all locations a model of industry engagement to ensure the facilities deliver benefits to the local industry is key. The model can be based in effective frameworks already available such as the TOCAL model in NSW and could also include the learnings from the Agriculture and Aquaculture Tech Skills Hub project in North Queensland. The key is to get industry involved from the start in the design of the solutions that could be offered in the centres of excellence.

TAFE will need to be funded to ensure these facilities are resourced to be able to deliver training and learning in their local catchments and to have the technology to deliver the learning to rural, remote, and regional Queensland.

2. Major barriers to the provision of localised and place-based VET, and priority areas and cohorts in Queensland

Over the years, RJSA has been interacting with VET providers through various forums including an annual VET in agriculture event. These events have allowed us to gather intelligence about the barriers and opportunities. These are some of the key barriers mentioned:

- There is a decline in language, literacy, and numeracy skills and there is no allowance to improve these prior to training commencement.
- Uptake of technology and new knowledge in training packages needs to be significantly improved.
- Industries lack of understanding of what qualifications are there and what they mean, the processes involved, delivery options, or career paths and terminology used.
- Connectivity -access to reliable internet in both quality and volume (distance education).
- Distance to courses and cost of travel.
- Lack of quality trainers: there are skills shortages in the VET sector and a need to continuously upskill. Contract arrangements are complex and this needs to change to attract a better quality of trainers. The cost and time take to gain a TAE qualification is seen as onerous and difficult to undertake for those without experience or practice in the delivery of training.
- Lack of flexibility in training and delivery.
- Thin market and cost of training delivery (RTOs): to service the market, there needs to be a viable return on investment to be able to develop the resources necessary and to then deliver the training (often in rural and remote areas).
- Incentives for RTOs to deliver in schools and in remote locations.
- Stronger links between VET pathways and tertiary education pathways would allow people more flexible approaches to career development.
- Retention of students; there are instances where the training commencements may increase, but the issue is trying to get students to complete. The question is why. Do people want only what they need? Do they want short and relevant training that addresses their needs?
- The VET system needs to be easier to navigate for the employer and the employee. The complexity of the system gets in the way for people to participate. Information needs to be simple and digestible.
- Training needs to be targeting the business' needs, and training providers need to think about the impact on businesses. Training needs to be cost-effective for business and relevant to both employee and employee.
- Responding to future demands. We should concentrate on the areas where skill demands are to grow and change. For example, horticulture, how can we provide training that is relevant to support a growing industry.
- Ensure that there are transferable skills across sectors.
- Be able to use innovation in delivery. Digital methods can be effective, but the cost is too high.
- The way that RTOs get paid through subsidies by the completion of subjects.
- Training service providers (RTOs) and their trainers will be required to upskill to remain current and able to deliver up-to-date training that is relevant to the industry.

Further consultations that took place to develop the recent published Queensland agriculture Industry Workforce Plan also provided intelligence about issues as follows:

- Participants reported in consultations that they are confused about the training system, and they questioned the relevance of current vocational and academic educational offers. They reported that school leavers, university graduates and Vocational Education and Training (VET) graduates were not job ready. Other pathways to agriculture employment, such as employment programs, short courses, and traineeships, were also not well regarded as they did not necessarily result in developing motivation or ‘the right attitude’.
- Consultation participants repeatedly commented on a need to address a gap in agriculture education. The need for greater accountability of industry was noted and many stakeholders indicated that training should be industry-led. While a commitment to continuous learning was expressed by participants, concerns about affordability, relevance and good practice were raised.
- There is a challenge in raising industry’s confidence in the capability of graduates and the quality of course offerings. This requires greater flexibility and adaptability in both the industry and the training sector, including Registered Training Organisations (RTOs). This can be addressed partly by cultural change in agribusinesses and partly by ensuring training pathways meet industry needs. Through greater engagement between the training sector and agriculture industry, continuous learning can be valued, rewarded, and built into career progression and/or opportunities.
- Some larger agriculture corporations report that they are influencing cultural change to value, integrate and promote training. The training sector can demonstrate greater flexibility, industry engagement, credible and relevant teaching and learning methods, expert trainers, and demonstrable outcomes.
- Industry requires different models and delivery modes of training. This would enable flexible participation and diverse pathways for learners including mentoring, micro-credentials, extension, and intensive study blocks that enable concurrent earning and learning. This flexibility could smooth the transition from study to work. This was particularly relevant for university graduates whose academic activities take precedence over practical farm skills such as operating machinery.
- Another issue experienced by employers is the lack of awareness among students, trainees, and staff of regional geographic and climatic conditions. It was noted that course offerings relevant to agriculture in the wet and dry tropics, for example, were not available in those regions.
- Some regions have limited access to education and training. This was noted as a significant shortcoming in the provision of socioeconomic infrastructure that was not well addressed by the online learning offerings or short courses offered by RTO’s. Accessible education is an integral element of regional development and plays a role in workforce attraction and retention. The training landscape was regarded as uneven and inconsistent with funded programs prioritised over regional industry relevance and currency.
- Schools are critical for engaging prospective agriculture workforce entrants. Participants in consultations stressed the need to reinvigorate agriculture education

across a range of initiatives including curriculum development, immersion programs, VET in Schools, traineeships, work placements, work experience and industry engagement.

- Education and training industry benefits from industry current, qualified trainers and teachers who can teach up-to-date agriculture programs and content to students. The attraction and continuing development of agriculture trainers and teachers is a concern consistently raised by industry. Increased collaboration between industry and education providers may assist in the attraction of STEM teachers into agriculture teaching and alignment of subject areas, together with attraction of additional industry experts who will support industry endorsed education outcomes.
- In anticipating future skills and a more diverse workforce, consultation participants expressed an expectation that contemporary and innovative practices are reflected in course material. Participants from the VET sector and agribusinesses commented that AgTech was not integrated into course offerings, was outdated or not available in their region. This indicates a need for currency and new approaches to training in this field. Regional disparities were expressed including inability to address modern challenges in course offerings that recognised that agriculture is in transition and facing disruptive conditions.

3. Existing programs that might assist in reducing barriers or supporting priority cohorts in accessing localised and place-based VET.

The agriculture industry has been proactive in engaging with the VET sector to create placed based solutions. Examples of existing programs include:

SmartAg Queensland is based on AgSkilled which is a proven model of delivering industry led training to the agriculture industry in New South Wales. AgSkilled has been running in partnership with the New South Wales Government since 2017 and has delivered industry relevant training to over 9,000 people in agriculture with a completion rate of 85% during this time. Training will be delivered against four key pillars: business, safety, production, and technology.

As a thin, and geographically dispersed market, agriculture is not an attractive market for training organisations. Industry-specific funding for a predetermined period presents training providers with an incentive to engage in service provision and assurances to invest in new course development to meet industry needs. An industry led model would facilitate connections between industry and training providers to ensure training leverages the latest R&D knowledge and is contextualised to meet genuine industry need.

LEADAg is a new agricultural education program, operating out of Emerald in Central Queensland, and is aimed at high school students and young adults.

- The program provides young people an opportunity to gain practical, hands-on training and skills in preparation for the workforce,
- Training led by industry mentors, utilising their knowledge and expertise,
- Builds confidence and capacity to choose a career in ag.

- Connects young people to peers and industry leaders.

4. Opportunities for the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training to facilitate improvements in these areas.

Solutions that have identified include:

- Greater involvement of farmers in collaboration with RTOs and technical experts to design content requirements (their skills & knowledge, currency of practices), and to provide, where possible (especially in remote areas) their locations and equipment to assist training options and alternatives.
- Nominated farmers to become mentors and promoters of training. Establishing industry leaders (as content experts) would ensure increased industry acceptance and garner support for training through their personal endorsement, helping to build trust and better relationships with training providers.
- Enhancements to the funding model that would provide employer incentives, not just incentives for training providers.
- Assist to provide mentors for Ag teachers to increase the uptake of VET in schools.
- Better resource schools or provide better access to ag training through training facilities or centres of excellence where schools can provide relevant ag training. For Example, Wilsonton HS ag centre.
- Assist industry to build a network of businesses/ employers ready and able to take of work placements, trainees, and apprentices.
- Encourage and fund skill sets that will have the greatest impact for the Ag Industry.
- Embed agricultural studies into the school curriculum.
- Provide a higher level of funding to industry endorsed qualifications and skill sets.

In addition to these suggestions, the RJSA has been collaborating with Government and Agribusinesses to find solutions to help the sector get through the short-term crisis and longer term, to put in place a plan that will build a secure workforce for the future. The resulting Queensland Agriculture Industry Workforce Plan 2022-2027 identifies strategies to respond to skills needs and shortages affecting the growth, profitability, and productivity of Queensland’s agribusinesses over the next five years.

This plan was developed by the Queensland Farmers’ Federation in partnership with Jobs Queensland and in collaboration with the Rural Jobs and Skills Alliance (RJSA). RJSA has played a critical role in guiding the development of the plan on behalf of the sector. The delivery of this industry-led workforce plan will ensure there is a modern and skills workforce ready to meet the growth and opportunities in the agriculture industry.

A copy of the publication is attached to be considered as material that can inform the inquiry into the Delivery of VET in Regional, Rural and Remote Queensland

If you have any queries about the plan, please do not hesitate to contact Dr Diana Saunders at diana@qff.org.au.

Yours sincerely,

Jan Atkinson

Chair Rural Jobs and Skills Alliance