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Management Skill Development and VET in the Livestock Industry

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Executive Summary

The Management Skill Development and VET in the Livestock Industry project provides a detailed analysis of current VET (vocational and education training) activity for the livestock industries. The objective of this scoping study is to provide recommendations to Meat and Livestock Australia and Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) on strategies for the development and funding of training programs to improve the management skills of producers.

To this end, the project examined national data collected by the FarmBis Program and the National Council for Vocational Educational Research (NCVER), and surveyed Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) to add to that data. We then conducted interviews with VET and livestock industry stakeholders to assess the perceptions of VET's role and effectiveness in achieving improved management practices through uptake of research and development information. Case studies of four RTOs provide examples of good practice in delivery of VET management training to livestock producers.

The research finds that numbers of people doing qualification-level training at management skills level in this industry sector have declined. Although 2005 subsidised training statistics are not yet available, it would appear that decline in VET delivery has not been matched by a decline in attendance at short courses.

It is clear that these traditional industries have not yet embraced participation in education and training courses leading to qualifications as a key means of learning about innovative business practices necessary for sustainable futures. The literature identifies a number of barriers to participation in learning activities by primary producers. Some of these relate to the nature of the industry, while others are attributed to shortcomings in service providers. Preliminary results from a recent ABARE survey¹ shows that 30% of sheep/beef producers are not prepared to spend any time on any one training course in farm management and technical skills; 27% are prepared to spend two days; only 17% are prepared to spend five or more days. The average was two days. However, the recent Solutions Survey² shows that in the last four years there has been a significant increase in the adoption of a 'culture of continuous learning' in the farm sector. This includes both participation in training, and willingness to consult (and pay for) expert advice. FarmBis 2 data confirm that there is a willingness by producers to engage in training at this level. Nevertheless, many VET providers in our survey of RTOs claimed that there was 'no demand' for training in agriculture.

¹ ABARE (Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics) (2006). MLA Supplementary 2004-2005. Survey commissioned by MLA.

² DAFF (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry) (2004). Review of the Agriculture – Advancing Australia Package 2000–04. Summary of Findings and Issues. http://www.daff.gov.au/corporate_docs/publications/word/innovation/aaa/aaareviewsurveyFeb2004.doc [accessed December 2005].

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This report concentrates on non-industry barriers to training in the VET system. These are perceived to be in three main areas:

1. **Costs and funding** The tensions between costs and funding are one reason for the relative lack of success experienced by many providers in the marketplace for management training for the livestock industries. The training market is a thin one³, with low demand in any one location coupled with limited choice of providers in most locations. Subsidies have a positive effect on training. In New South Wales, where FarmBis has been discontinued, 27% of our NSW RTO interviewees and 23% of our other stakeholders specifically commented on the negative influence of its absence. However, 18% of other stakeholders we interviewed made the point that subsidies create a negative attitude towards paying and budgeting for training.
2. **Customisation** While the VET system in theory encourages customisation to meet learners' needs, and with 58% of the RTOs we interviewed saying that customisation was a positive influence on the training they delivered, the findings of this project nevertheless suggest that many training providers have not been able to develop or market a training product that large numbers of producers are interested in purchasing. Most other stakeholders believe that customisation is essential, but 27% of these said that RTOs were not customising sufficiently for the industry. Content may not be sufficiently up to date. Training also needs to include a mix of capacity building models. To maintain motivation and a framework for development and on-farm change, training workshops need to be backed up with supporting information in an ongoing process or cycle of support. The case studies in this project provide examples of the strengthening effect of complementary models. An effective ongoing learning support framework opens out pathways for the producer, encourages the farmer to envision himself as embarked on a learning journey.

As livestock managers describe themselves as 'time-poor' and many are unwilling to spend extended periods on any one course or training activity, VET training products at AQF4 – 6 (management skill level) are much larger than many producers are able to commit to. One alternative would be for VET to deliver a smaller package of training as a short course, and then to cover the rest of the competency requirements by the RPL process. The VET sector could look to successful models such as the EDGENetwork as an example of effective customisation. The EDGENetwork model allows for training to be run as individual short informal sessions, including assessment and accreditation, which can then be combined with accreditation from other short EDGENetwork courses towards a national qualification.

³ Primary Skills Victoria (2005). Report on credit and articulation issues in agricultural training in rural and regional Victoria.
http://www.vqa.vic.gov.au/vqa/pdfs/Agr_%20credit_and_articulation_rpt_20050902.pdf [Accessed March 2006].

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3. **Quality of trainers** 61% of the RTOs we interviewed and 45% of other stakeholders thought that the quality of trainers was a negative influence on training. 36% of other stakeholders commented specifically to VET providers' lack of high quality, credible trainers. Their criticism of trainers included inadequacy of technical expertise, lack of industry background, lack of professional development, lack of empathy and ability to communicate with producers, and being uncomfortable with the workplace training and assessment model. Quality of trainers is linked to low funding.

The research indicated that strengthening of a further main area would also assist in overcoming barriers to management skill training:

4. **Need for coordination** Because of thin markets⁴, competition alone is less effective than coordination would be. There is a need to facilitate better coordination at a regional level so that organisations are not at odds with each other. 14% of other stakeholders spoke, unprompted, of this need. These were from three states and included interviewees from the industry and extension sectors. Coordination could include an important role for training brokers, working with providers to identify courses that would be appropriate for producers, helping to customise where necessary, and to recommend and refer clients to appropriate courses.

The research also identified examples of good practice in the VET system:

Good practice

A small number of providers have been successful in attracting and retaining students in courses. The profile of these providers includes access to practical on-site farming, or industry placement, this package appealing to mostly younger students; or access to training from an industry worksite through RPL and training, this package appealing to mature people in work. Their experience suggests that demand may be stimulated through marketing and through innovative adaptation of delivery to better match industry and regional needs.

Best practice elements identified in four case studies of RTOs included:

- Provision of professional development for trainers/teachers
- Collaboration and networks
- Mix of capacity building models
- Identifying needs of clients (through surveys etc)
- On-farm, in-workplace delivery
- Promotion of training
- An effective skills recognition process.

A more successful VET sector would be delivering content to meet industry's needs – accessible, attractive, up-to-date content presented with a mix of capacity building models which complement each other as vehicles for teaching and learning and which involve some kind of cycle of support geared towards on-farm change. It would include

⁴ Primary Skills Victoria (2005). Op. cit.

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and benefit from a capacity for better fit with learning supplied through the extension system. As such, the VET sector would have more appeal to existing and potential managers of farm enterprises. Benchmarks for changes to the capacity of VET to deliver to livestock producers would include:

- Increase in enrolments of livestock managers in VET programs;
- Evidence of changes to offerings and funding models;
- Evidence of wider collaboration/integration of VET delivery into management change models;
- Evidence of increased capacity for better fit with learning supplied through the extension system;
- Improved feedback processes from producers as VET participants.

Recommendations

VET appears to be meeting the needs for management level training of career establishers and new entrants in the livestock industry. But only a small number of RTOs are doing a good job (evidenced by attracting ongoing market share) with the existing workforce.

There is considerable government investment in the VET sector, but outcomes of investment in management level training in the livestock sector are limited by what many RTOs perceive as a lack of demand. Industry is an important partner in the VET system, which has been predicated on strong links with industries since its inception⁵. MLA and AWI, as high profile producer-owned companies committed to driving research, development and innovation in the livestock industries, have a role here in disseminating the findings of this report. Distribution of the report could occur through organisations such the Australasia Pacific Extension Network, the primary industry VET association and VETNetwork, including at their conferences. State Training Authorities and the Agri-food Industry Skills Council should be advised of its findings.

Recommendation 1

MLA and AWI should disseminate the report to livestock industry and VET sector stakeholders.

The current VET system overall is not meeting the needs of current producers. Industry therefore should work with government to consider different models of funding, particularly as there appears to still be a role for government-subsidised training. Funding needs to be flexible enough to accommodate short courses delivered by VET providers as well as full qualification ones. The funding system should be reviewed before the end of FarmBis 3.

⁵ ANTA 1998, *A bridge to the future: Australia's national strategy for vocational education and training 1998-2003*, Brisbane, Australian National Training Authority. <http://antapubs.dest.gov.au/publications/images/publications/bridge-to-the-future.PDF> [Accessed October 2005].

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Recommendation 2

The VET sector, government and the Agri-food Industry Skills Council should work together to consider different models of funding for management level training.

There may be an important role for training brokers to work with providers in identifying courses that would be appropriate for producers and recommending and referring clients to appropriate courses. Training brokers consider the whole suite of present and potential training opportunities and actively match needs to training, acting in the best interests of clients. There is a need to facilitate better coordination in management skill development in the livestock industry at a regional level. Structures and processes that encourage cooperation and coordination in training are needed. Training brokers could be of assistance here, and also with customisation of courses. Industry bodies and other farmer organisations are well placed to invest in training brokerage, for example by funding existing organisations that work with producers to add a brokerage function. Returns to the industry from better matching of training and needs could be expected to justify investment. Broking activity yields a range of economic and other benefits for participants, industries and rural communities⁶.

Recommendation 3

Training brokerage should be evaluated to determine if producers see value in it and are prepared to pay for it. Training brokers would work with VET (and other) providers to identify courses appropriate for producers, refer clients to these, assist in customisation and coordination of training efforts.

The findings of this project suggest that many training providers have not been able to develop or market a training product that large numbers of producers are interested in purchasing. While the VET system in theory encourages customisation to meet learners' needs, 27% of other stakeholders said that RTOs were not customising sufficiently for the industry. Content may not be sufficiently up to date. The programmed learning model which is the basis of VET training products could be strengthened pedagogically if complemented by other models of capacity building, such as an ongoing process of support as in Prograze, where trainees form a training network over a period of time, or BeefCheque and other such groups. This degree of customisation and quality control of courses could be expected to benefit the industry, but putting it into effect would require collaboration.

⁶ Kilpatrick, S, Fulton, A, Johns, S & Weatherley, J (forthcoming). A responsive training market: The role of brokers. Canberra, RIRDC.

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Recommendation 4

RTOs, the Agri-food Industry Skills Council and farmer organisations should collaborate in reviewing VET courses to ensure that they are up to date and can be customised to meet industry needs (for example, by including industry representatives on RTO course advisory boards).

VET providers' feedback from clients regarding their perceptions of their training experience may lack the sort of detail that would enable RTOs to respond effectively to target market criticisms. Good quantitative data about producers' attitudes towards VET, their experience of it, and outcomes of attending VET courses (along the lines of the 2003 Roy Morgan Research into FarmBis) would be useful.

Recommendation 5

Quantitative data on producers' attitudes towards VET and outcomes of VET training should be collected by ABARE, NCVET, or an independent organisation.

VET's lack of high quality, credible trainers with up-to-date technical expertise, industry background and ongoing professional development was commented on by large numbers of our interviewees, especially from the RTOs themselves.

Recommendation 6

RTOs should look to employing credible industry people as trainers and upskill these as trainers. Training organisations, including the VET sector, should encourage people to become trainers through raising the profile of trainers, e.g., by scholarships, awards and promotion in industry newsletters.

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1 Introduction

The Management Skill Development and VET in the Livestock Industry project provides a detailed analysis of current VET (vocational and education training) activity for the livestock industries. It has examined national data collected by both the FarmBis Program and the National Council for Vocational Educational Research (NCVER), and surveyed Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) to add to that data. The project has conducted interviews with VET and livestock industry stakeholders to assess the perceptions of VET's role and effectiveness in achieving improved management practices through uptake of research and development information. Case studies of four RTOs provide examples of good practice in delivery of VET management training to livestock producers.

The objective of this scoping study has been to provide recommendations to Meat and Livestock Australia and Australian Wool Innovation on strategies for the development and funding of training programs to improve the management skills of producers.

Interim Reports containing data from surveys of RTOs and other stakeholders were provided in September and November 2005. Tables from these surveys are included in Appendices A and B of this Final Report. The case studies, also provided in November 2005, are included in Appendix C.

2 Methodology

2.1 Reference Group

A Project Reference Group of funding body and industry representatives was established in May 2005. The Group met by telephone on June 30, September 29, December 9 and January 23 2006, and also exchanged email messages.

2.2 Surveys

Information was obtained from the National Training Information Service (NTIS), National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) statistics and FarmBis database, with regard to accredited management training (i.e., Certificate IV, Diploma and Advance Diploma levels) available to primary producers in the livestock and related industries, in terms of:

- Organisations accredited to deliver
- Client profile (demographics, industries, location)
- Qualifications and levels of training delivered
- Delivery mode

We identified Training Organisations in all States and Territories that are registered to deliver management qualifications, and established through email and telephone contact whether each was in fact delivering. Arrangements were then made to re-contact the 39 RTOs delivering in order to undertake a survey which would give us more information

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about client profile, qualifications and levels of training delivered, and delivery mode, and which would investigate issues that enhance and inhibit effective delivery to primary producers in the livestock industry. This survey, taking up to half an hour on the telephone, was carried out between May and September 2005. Further information about the survey of RTOs may be found in Appendix A.

We then interviewed twenty-two representatives of stakeholder organisations. Seven of these were national organisations, and the rest spread across the states and Northern Territory. They included relevant Commonwealth and State Government Departments, research and development organisations, key farmer and industry advisory and support groups, government and industry training advice and support organisations, and research and extension services. Interviews took up to half an hour on the telephone, and were based on a variant of the questionnaire used for the RTO survey. Further information about the other stakeholders survey may be found in Appendix B.

2.3 Case Studies

The next stage of the project consisted of case studies of four RTOs that are examples of good practice in the delivery of VET management training to livestock producers. In consultation with the Reference Group the following four RTOs were selected:

1. CB Alexander College (NSW),
2. New England Institute of TAFE (NSW),
3. Rural Industries Skill Training (RIST) (Vic) and
4. Curtin University VTE Centre (WA).

The criteria used for selection were:

- spread of states;
- different kinds of institution/enterprise;
- successful, including good numbers;
- spread of delivery models;
- mix of livestock industries.

A framework for the case studies as examples of good practice was developed on the basis of key characteristics identified in the literature. Each RTO is discussed as an example of good practice under the following headings:

- Meeting needs of trainees/participants.
- Delivery modes: Innovative response to training challenges.
- Completion rates.
- Collaboration with industry and other networks.

The case studies are included in Appendix C of this Final Report.

3 Findings and Discussion

Numbers of people doing qualification-level training at management skills level in this industry sector have declined. Although 2005 subsidised training statistics (i.e., for FarmBis) are not yet available, it would appear that decline in VET delivery has not been matched by a decline in attendance at short courses.

It is clear that these traditional industries have not yet embraced participation in education and training courses leading to qualifications as a key means of learning about innovative business practices necessary for sustainable futures. Historically, in the primary industries sector overall, there has been a relatively low uptake of training⁷. The literature identifies a number of barriers to participation in learning activities by primary producers. Some of these relate to the nature of the industry, while others are attributed to shortcomings in service providers.

Industry-related barriers to education and training include structural barriers to participation for rural Australians⁸, attitudinal ones, formal education qualifications being traditionally not highly valued by farmers^{9 10}, and economic ones, such as lower returns from beef and wool and the effects of drought. There has also been a general decline in farm numbers in recent years, with sheep and cattle producers being among the most affected, and this has resulted in a corresponding decline in numbers of producers from this sector undertaking management skill level training. Producers are time-poor, with many unwilling to commit to extended periods of training. Preliminary results from a recent ABARE survey¹¹ shows that 30% of sheep/beef producers are not prepared to spend any time on any one training course in farm management and technical skills; 27% are prepared to spend two days; only 17% are prepared to spend five or more days. The average was two days. Nevertheless, the Solutions Survey¹² shows that in the last four years there has been a significant increase in the adoption of a 'culture of continuous learning' in the farm sector. This includes both participation in training, and willingness to consult (and pay for) expert advice. FarmBis 2 data (see *Figure 5, below*) confirm that there is a willingness by producers to engage in training at this level.

⁷ ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) (2001) Census of Population and Housing. Canberra.

⁸ Kelly, L. (1994) *The Future Needs of Rural Training for Tasmania*. Tasmanian Rural Industry Training Board. Launceston.

⁹ Bell, J & Pandey, U (1987). Post secondary farmer education: Past neglect and future prospects. *Forum of Education*, 46, (1), 26.

¹⁰ Johnson, B, Bone, Z & Knight, C (1996). *Farmers and learning: Attitudes to learning, tertiary education and recognition of prior learning*. Orange Agricultural College, University of Sydney.

¹¹ ABARE (2006). *Op. cit.*

¹² DAFF (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry) (2004). *Review of the Agriculture – Advancing Australia Package 2000–04. Summary of Findings and Issues*, p. 20. http://www.daff.gov.au/corporate_docs/publications/word/innovation/aaa/aaareviewsommaryFeb2004.doc [accessed December 2005].

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Why, then, are enrolments in VET not more robust? The main focus of this report will be on non-industry related issues involved in this question.

Non-industry barriers to training may arise from perceived shortcomings in service providers¹³, including underlying tensions between the needs of industry and the delivery of relevant training packages in a flexible and work-ready format¹⁴. While the VET system in theory encourages customisation to meet learners' needs, and with 58% of the RTOs we interviewed saying that customisation was a positive influence on the training they delivered, the findings of this project nevertheless suggest that many training providers have not been able to develop or market a training product that large numbers of producers are interested in purchasing. The quality of trainers has also been criticised. Inadequate technical expertise and lack of industry background are foremost among comments on trainers made by both RTO interviewees and other stakeholders.

The tensions between costs and funding are one reason for the relative lack of success experienced by many providers in the marketplace for management training for the livestock industries. These issues require innovative and flexible solutions to be found by training providers, colleges and the interrelated development agencies which support them.

Roy Morgan Research¹⁵ shows that people who have had a positive training experience are more likely to have an increased interest in further learning activities (p. 68). Just over half the respondents expected to spend around the same amount of time in the next year attending farming related learning activities, and 65% of these had spent between 36 and 70 hours participating in farm-related learning activities in 2002 (p. 72). The fact is, however, that large numbers of producers are not turning to VET for these learning activities.

VET providers' feedback from clients regarding their perceptions of their training experience may lack the sort of detail that would enable RTOs to respond effectively to market criticisms. Our survey of RTOs found that student/client feedback forms are routinely collected at the end of courses. Some RTOs also survey after each unit. A few interview employers of students after the student's training has been completed. Many indicated that evaluation was part of the routine quality assurance process they had in place. However, some of the feedback forms made available to us were very brief (for

¹³ Vanclay, F & Lawrence, G (1994). *The environmental imperative: eco-social concerns for Australian Agriculture*. Rockhampton: Central Queensland University Press.

¹⁴ Agri-food Industry Skills Council (2005). *Industry Skills Report*. http://www.agrifoodskills.net.au/files/Industry_Skills_Report_Final_June_05.pdf [Accessed December 2005].

¹⁵ Roy Morgan Research (2003). *Survey of FarmBis Participants who had undertaken a learning activity in 2002*. Report prepared for Farm Business Management Unit, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Canberra. http://www.daff.gov.au/corporate_docs/publications/word/industry_dev/aaa/farmbis/FarmBis_2002_Final_Report.doc [accessed December 2005].

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example, one form has a section, Candidate's Feedback on Assessment Process, with four lines available to students, on which some students have written only a few words or none). Good quantitative data about producers' attitudes towards VET would clearly be useful.

3.1 Demand and delivery

The training market in this industry is a thin one, with low demand in any one location coupled with limited choice of providers in most locations.

Our survey of RTOs found that, of the 68 organisations registered to deliver training to livestock producers at management skill levels, twenty-four were not delivering. The reasons they gave were that there was no demand, even though they were in livestock production regions, or that there were funding constraints, training in agriculture being a relatively high-cost area.

Statistics on 2005 enrolments were not yet available at the time of this report's development. We therefore estimated numbers on the basis of our information from RTO interviewees. Not all of these were able to give exact figures, particularly as we were asking about students who would have a beef/sheep focus. The results of our estimates are in Figure 1 below:

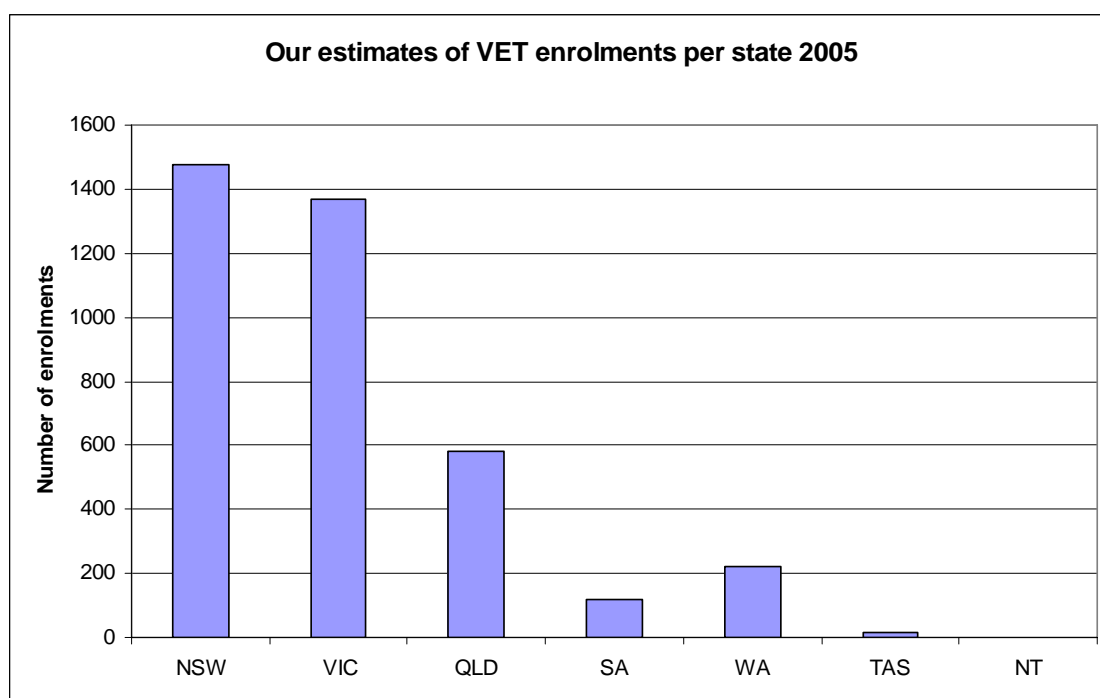


Fig. 1. Our estimates of enrolments in management skill level qualification courses, per state, in 2005 (from estimates supplied during interviews with RTOs).

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We found that more than half of the 39 RTOs delivering the training had 20 students or fewer, with six of these having 5 students or fewer.

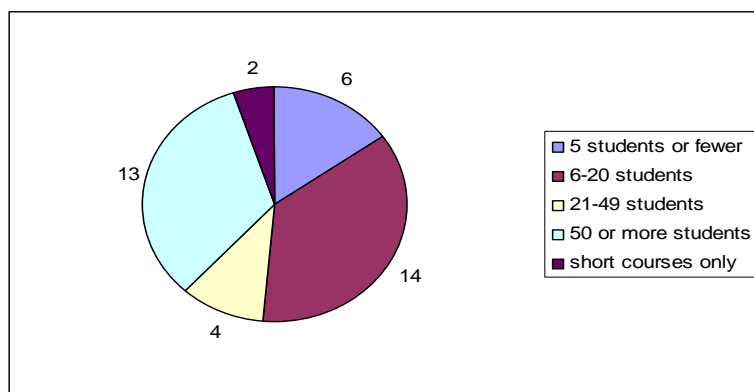


Fig. 2. Enrolments in RTOs delivering training at management skill level.

About 43% of these enrolments are in agricultural colleges and university VET centres. Despite the large amount of government infrastructure in TAFEs, with around 14% of these enrolments they are a relatively small part of the market. In Tasmania, TAFE is the only provider of recognised management skill level training in the livestock sector. In South Australia, TAFE is one of two providers to the sector. In Queensland only one TAFE is providing to the sector. In Western Australia there are three TAFEs providing, but their numbers are small. In Victoria there are four TAFEs delivering, but with small numbers. This will change as a result of a Victorian university's decision to discontinue VET programs, as TAFEs will be delivering some of those courses. In 2005 New South Wales has been the state with the most TAFE activity in management level training for the livestock industry, with six TAFEs having half the Australia-wide total of TAFE enrolments for this sector.

The figures we obtained were estimations by our interviewees of beef and sheep producers in the relevant courses. Overall figures need to be treated with some caution, as enrolments do not always been quite the same thing. One private enterprise-based RTO, for example, had 1059 clients doing training at AQF levels 4 and 5 in 2005, but not all were doing full qualification courses.

RTOs attribute decline in VET management level training to lack of demand in the industry, to costs to clients, to uncertainty resulting from the restructuring of RTOs, and to RTOs' lack of ability to offer some courses due to their own costs.

Numbers of enrolments in agricultural colleges are generally down. In Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria, these colleges and university VET campuses are in transition as a result of restructuring in the sectors. The Queensland Agricultural Colleges recently amalgamated under one umbrella group. Current enrolments are lower than in the past. A former NSW agricultural college merged in turn with two universities. It is now in the process of becoming part of a third university. An interviewee from the former college saw these moves as very damaging to enrolments in the short term.

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A small number of providers have been successful in attracting and retaining students in courses. The profile of these providers includes access to practical on-site farming, or industry placement, this package appealing to mostly younger students; or access to training from an industry worksite through RPL and training, this package appealing to mature people in work. In other words, these RTOs offer a tailored combination of the two worlds of training and on-the-job experience. Their experience suggests that demand may be stimulated through marketing and through innovative adaptation of delivery to better match industry and regional needs.

Best practice elements identified in four case studies of RTOs (see *Appendix C*) included:

- Provision of professional development for trainers/teachers
- Collaboration and networks
- Mix of capacity building models
- Identifying needs of clients (through surveys etc)
- On-farm, in-workplace delivery
- Promotion of training
- An effective skills recognition process

There is an important role for training brokers to work with providers in identifying courses that would be appropriate for producers and recommending and referring clients to appropriate courses. Training brokers consider the whole suite of present and potential training opportunities and actively match needs to training, acting in the best interests of clients. A report and manual on training brokerage by Kilpatrick et al.¹⁶ provides more information on training brokerage. Broking activity yields a range of economic and other benefits for participants, industries and rural communities.

3.2 Issues

Funding, numbers in courses and quality of trainers are the biggest issues for RTOs, with the latter two being in large part a consequence of the former. Other stakeholders perceived RTO flexibility and accessibility, customisation of training and cost of training to be the most important issues in management skill development and VET in these industries.

3.2.1 Funding

Eighty-one per cent of RTOs and 86% of the other stakeholders surveyed saw issues around funding as a negative influence on training. Half the RTOs said their funding was decreasing while costs were increasing. 28% of RTOs said that costs to clients were impacting negatively on enrolments, which in turn affected their ability to offer courses.

32% of other stakeholders appreciated that RTOs were having difficulty making ends meet. 41% said that costs to clients were a negative influence on the training that producers were prepared to do.

¹⁶ Kilpatrick, S, et al. (forthcoming). Op. cit.

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Funding constraints are impacting negatively on training – on whether it is offered at all, and if it is, on the range of units and of delivery methods. The cost of training includes the need to develop learning resources in the Rural Production training package. This cost can be prohibitive unless good numbers of students enrol. Where numbers are small, as in more remote areas, it is particularly difficult to offer good programs. The beef and sheep industries are spread across vast areas that can be called remote. For example, around 6,000 pastoral enterprises are in remote Rangelands areas, which occupy over 75% of the Australian land mass¹⁷. If these producers are to have access to educational opportunities some funding consideration needs to be available to allow for increased costs of distance. Some of this funding may need to be directed to improvement of information and communications technology networks in remote areas, and to RTO strategies to make the use of the technology more appealing to remote producers. The research literature notes that, in general, the livestock industry has shown a poor uptake of electronic communication¹⁸. Our case study of Curtin University of Technology's VTE Centre at Esperance, WA (see *Appendix C*), shows that while remote students may use the Internet to access information, the trainer believes they would not be receptive to e-learning. Nevertheless, online learning has the potential to extend the range of options available to regional and rural Australians¹⁹. Strategies to make online learning more user-friendly for farmers may need to be developed (for example, development of interactive chat sites). Once again, funding is an issue: institutions require adequate funding and resources to ensure high quality learning experiences and appropriate resources for students and staff.

Subsidies

Government subsidy is a determining factor in much farmer participation in learning activities. In the past three years, the subsidised FarmBis program – functioning through partnerships between Commonwealth and State governments – has seen some 69,000 engagements with management level training by beef and sheep producers acquiring skills in areas such as business planning, quality assurance, risk management, marketing and natural resource management (see *Fig. 3, below*) – a yearly average of 23,000 engagements with training.

¹⁷ Rangelands Australia: Program and Course Information (2005), p. 5. Accessed November 2005 at www.rangelands-australia.com.au

¹⁸ Stone, G (2005). Agribusiness role in extension, education and training: A case study. P. 110. Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation. Barton, ACT. <http://www.rirdc.gov.au/reports/HCC/05-086.pdf> [Accessed November 2005].

¹⁹ Kilpatrick, S & Bound, H. (2003). Online delivery and learning in regional Australia. In H. Guthrie (Ed.), *Online learning: Research Readings*, NCVER, Leabrook.

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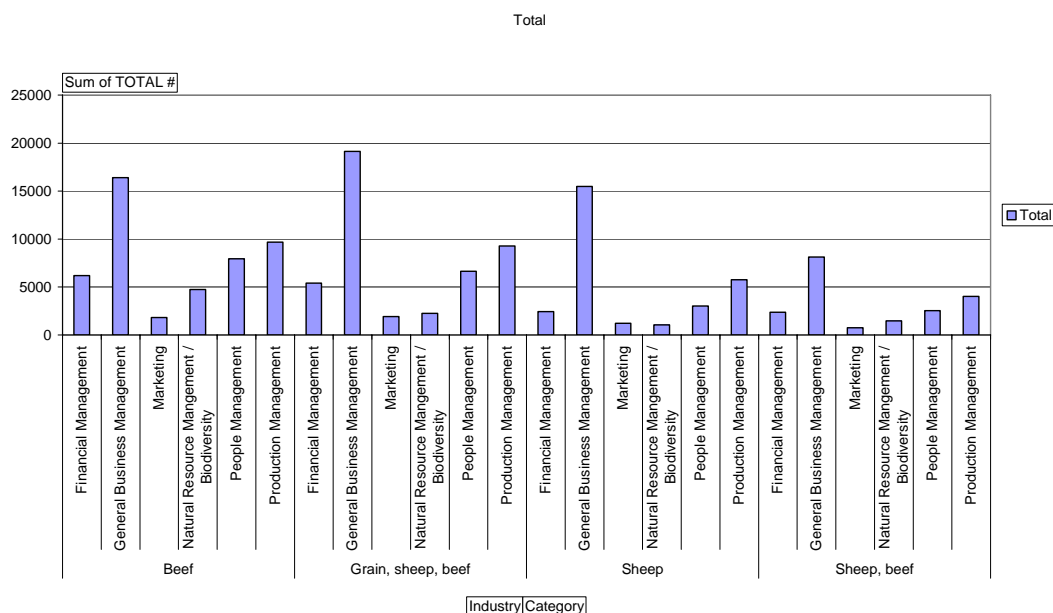


Fig. 3. Participation in FarmBis subsidised training by beef and sheep producers (From FarmBis2 database tables supplied by the Department of Agriculture, Forests & Fisheries)

33.3% of RTOs interviewed, and 40.9% of other stakeholder interviewees, said either that subsidies had a positive effect on training, or that the absence of subsidies had a negative effect. In New South Wales, FarmBis has been discontinued due to issues between the Commonwealth and State government. 27% of our NSW RTO interviewees and 23% of our other stakeholders specifically commented on the negative influence of the absence of FarmBis on training in New South Wales. It is too soon to say how effectively the NSW Department of Primary Industries' new PROfarm accredited short course program will meet needs formerly met by FarmBis programs.

On the other hand, one of the other stakeholders pointed out that in South Australia during a period of lower FarmBis subsidy, training had begun to pick up before the rate of subsidy was increased. Roy Morgan Research²⁰ surveys of FarmBis participants show that only 11% of people gave the subsidy for the course as the most important factor (p. 76). The most important factor in deciding whether or not to undertake the learning activity was that the 'course content suited their needs' (43%).

However 18% of other stakeholders we interviewed made the point that subsidies created a negative attitude towards paying and budgeting for training. One of these said government-funded free training had a negative impact on private fee-for-service extension trainers.

²⁰ Roy Morgan Research (2003), op.cit.

3.2.2 Customisation

What RTOs mean by 'customisation' varies. In many cases it is a case of making the best of what is available in the work contexts of part-time students. Training and assessment are customised to suit what is available on site. There is a negative side to this, as availability of context and cost-effective delivery of training can mean that courses are 'customised' in the sense of somewhat curtailed or limited.

58% of RTOs interviewed thought that customisation was a positive influence on the training they delivered. 68% of other stakeholders said that customisation was a positive influence. But 27% of other stakeholders said that RTOs were not customising sufficiently for the industry.

With many time-poor producers unwilling to take on extended periods on any one course or training activity, VET training products at AQF4 – 6 (management skill level) are much larger than many producers are able to commit to. One alternative would be for VET to deliver a smaller package of training as a short course, and then to cover the rest of the competency requirements by the RPL process. The case studies in Appendix C of this report show that RPL can be a valuable, accessible and appealing way for producers to have their skills recognised.

The EDGENetwork courses developed by MLA combine short courses into a program that allows the awarding of competencies and the option of working towards a qualification. The model allows for training to be run as individual short informal sessions, including assessment and accreditation, which can then be combined with accreditation from other short EDGENetwork courses towards a national qualification. The VET sector could look to successful models such as this as an example of effective customisation.

Customisation is another issue where training brokers could be of assistance²¹. Training also needs to include a mix of capacity building models. 'Best practice need[s] to flow through to the interactivity of the models'²². A typical VET training product is constructed on a programmed learning model and stands alone. But to maintain motivation and a framework for development and on-farm change, training workshops need to be backed up with supporting information in an ongoing process or cycle of support. The programmed learning model is complemented²³ by, for example, the group facilitation or empowerment model²⁴, which is the basis for Prograze, where trainees form a training

²¹ Kilpatrick, S. et al. (forthcoming), op.cit.

²² Coutts, J & Roberts, K (2003). Models and Best Practice in Extension, p. 3. Paper presented at the 2003 APEN National Forum, 26 - 28 November 2003, Hobart. http://www.couttsjr.com.au/attachments/uploads/030504apen2003_couttsja.pdf [Accessed December 2005].

²³ Macadam, R, Drinan, J, Inall, N & McKenzie, B (2004). Growing the capital of rural Australia: The task of capacity building, p. 36. Report for the Co-operative Venture for Capacity Building for Innovation in Rural Industries. RIRDC Publication No 04-034. <http://www.rirdc.gov.au/reports/HCC/04-034.pdf> [Accessed December 2005].

²⁴ Coutts, J & Roberts, K (2003) op.cit.

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network over a period of time, or Victoria's BeefCheque groups, or BestWOOL 2010. This applies to short extension courses as well.

The case studies in Appendix C provide examples of the strengthening effect of complementary models. Tocal students learn to collaborate with industry organisations and networks as an important part of their training: '[Our students] feel part of a wider community rather than just being trained in a mechanistic activity. The training fits together well with the broad sociology of farming.' Similarly, the TAFE NEI Cattlecare training involved interactivity between models of capacity building: a series of specifically designed training workshops to increase understanding of quality assurance procedures was strengthened by including elements of a self-support model whereby participants could work together to increase their own capacity for on-farm change.

The issue of the need for continuity and ongoing support was mentioned by 18% of our other stakeholder interviewees. However, only one RTO raised the issue, and that was a Northern Territory RTO not presently delivering to this sector because of local lack of demand.

Consultants come up and offer two-day sessions, but when the expert goes away, what does the new knowledge mean to the individual farmer? It needs follow-up. At the moment there's no outcome, no on-farm change.

An effective ongoing learning support framework opens out pathways for the producer, encourages the farmer to envision himself as embarked on a learning journey. Customisation and a blending of capacity building models will not achieve this by themselves, however. An indispensable linchpin in the process is effectiveness of trainers.

3.2.3 Quality of trainers

The literature has been reporting on deficiencies in teacher/trainer quality for some years. In 2001, Harris et al.²⁵ wrote:

Slightly less than half the current VET teachers/trainers were considered to possess the attributes, skills and knowledge required to improve the quality of VET provision (p. vii) . . . Staff development provisions appear to be inadequate to meet demands at the present time. This is especially true for non-permanent staff who deliver the majority of training programs in many training providers (p. ix).

In 2004 a key message of another NCVER report was that, although 'significant professional development' had taken place, this had not met all individual or organisational needs. Funding models were identified as one of the barriers to new approaches to work, 'because they have not kept pace with the new ways practitioners are working, particularly in public VET providers'²⁶. When funding is available for staff

²⁵ Harris, R, et al. (2001). The changing role of staff development for teachers and trainers in vocational education and training. NCVER, Leabrook.

²⁶ NCVER (2004). The vocational education and training workforce: New roles and ways of working, p. 1. NCVER, Adelaide. <http://www.ncver.edu.au/research/proj/nd2102f.pdf> [Accessed December 2005].

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development, a 2003 study found that managers were likely to give permanent and full-time staff priority over the casual staff who are increasingly delivering much of the training.²⁷

Not much has changed. 61% of the RTOs we interviewed and 45% of other stakeholders thought that the quality of trainers was a negative influence on training. 36% of other stakeholders commented specifically to VET providers' lack of high quality trainers. Their criticism of trainers included inadequacy of technical expertise, lack of industry background, lack of professional development, lack of empathy and ability to communicate with producers, and being uncomfortable with the workplace training and assessment model.

RTO interviewees spoke of their difficulty getting staff with the right blend of theoretical and practical skills, of their difficulty finding good sessional staff as funding did not permit full-time employment for all staff, and of the ageing profile of the workforce. Staffing impacts on the courses they are able to offer, and the number of enrolments affects their ability to maintain staffing levels and their credibility as a training provider. In the end, much of the problem comes back to the funding issue. As one other stakeholder said: 'RTOs often don't have the money to employ experts, but producers are looking for experts.'

One of our case studies, Rural Industries Skill Training (RIST), one of Australia's largest independent training organisations, retains all presenters on a contractual basis, accessing these industry experts from across Australia for all its training programs: 'We select people with the technical and practical skills to be able to deliver the training and work with them to become best facilitators.' 9% of the other stakeholders suggested a similar arrangement for RTOs generally. One said: 'The RTO needs to cut back on full-time staff [and] pull in experts from the district it is training in.' These experts should first be trained as trainers or facilitators.

3.2.4 Coordination of effort

Because the training market in this industry is a thin one, competition alone is less effective than coordination would be. There is a need to facilitate better coordination at a regional level so that organisations are not at odds with each other. 14% of other stakeholders spoke, unprompted, of this need. They were from three states and included interviewees from industry and extension sectors. One interviewee said: 'AWI, for example, is one of this organisation's biggest competitors. There should be more coordination in delivery of services to clients.' Another said:

"There is often a lack of coordination between the range of organisations involved in extension. There is a gamut of these organisations, and insufficient cooperation between them. There needs

²⁷ Stehlik, T, Simons, M, Kerkham, L, Pearce, R & Gronold, J (2003). Getting connected: Professional development of contract and casual staff providing flexible Learning. NCVER, Adelaide.

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to be a top-down approach, including government direction, to increasing coordination between stakeholder organisations. “

Another interviewee said: “This [farmers’] organisation has registered as an RTO to try and get some cohesion and collaboration going on in training in the state.”

The need for coordination of effort is recognised in the literature. Five years ago, Marsh and Pannell²⁸ recommended that structures and processes that encourage cooperation and coordination in a commercialised environment were needed. Coordination is another issue where training brokers could be of assistance²⁹. A network of existing organisations, such as state and commodity farmer organisations and private extension providers, could be funded as training brokers. They would identify training needs in their areas and negotiate with training providers to meet these needs. The Cooperative Venture for Capacity Building funded project by Kilpatrick et al produced a workshop manual which assists organisations determine the most appropriate way to go about brokerage³⁰. Several workshops could be funded to provide the necessary skills for the training brokers.

4 Conclusions and Recommendations

A more successful VET sector would be delivering content to meet industry’s needs – accessible, attractive, up-to-date content presented with a mix of capacity building models which complement each other as vehicles for teaching and learning and which involve some kind of cycle of support geared towards on-farm change. It would include and benefit from a capacity for better fit with learning supplied through the extension system. As such, the VET sector would have more appeal to existing and potential managers of farm enterprises. Benchmarks for changes to the capacity of VET to deliver to livestock producers would include:

- Increase in enrolments of livestock managers in VET programs;
- Evidence of changes to offerings and funding models;
- Evidence of wider collaboration/integration of VET delivery into management change models;
- Evidence of increased capacity for better fit with learning supplied through the extension system;
- Improved feedback processes from producers as VET participants.

The following recommendations and suggestions for further research emerge from the findings of this study.

VET appears to be meeting the needs for management level training of career establishers and new entrants in the livestock industry. But only a small number of RTOs

²⁸ Marsh, S & Pannell, D. (2000). Agricultural extension in Australia: The changing roles of public and private sector providers. RIRDC Publication No: 00/149. Report to RIRDC, Canberra.

²⁹ Kilpatrick, S, et al. (forthcoming), op.cit.

³⁰ See the temporary location of the manual <http://www.ruralhealth.utas.edu.au/trainingbrokers/>

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are doing a good job (evidenced by attracting ongoing market share) with the existing workforce.

There is considerable government investment in the VET sector, but outcomes of investment in management level training in the livestock sector are limited by what many RTOs perceive as a lack of demand. Industry is an important partner in the VET system, which has been predicated on strong links with industries since its inception³¹. MLA and AWI, as high profile producer-owned companies committed to driving research, development and innovation in the livestock industries, have a role here in disseminating the findings of this report. Distribution of the report could occur through organisations such the Australasia Pacific Extension Network, the primary industry VET association and VETNetwork, including at their conferences. State Training Authorities and the Agri-food Industry Skills Council should be advised of its findings.

Recommendation 1

MLA and AWI should disseminate the findings of the report to livestock industry and VET sector stakeholders.

The current VET system overall is not meeting the needs of producers already managing their own businesses. Industry therefore should work with government to consider different models of funding, particularly as there appears to still be a role for government-subsidised training. Funding needs to be flexible enough to accommodate short courses delivered by VET providers as well as full qualification ones. The funding system should be reviewed before the end of FarmBis 3.

Recommendation 2

The VET sector, government and the Agri-food Industry Skills Council should work together to consider different models of funding for management level training.

There may be an important role for training brokers to work with providers in identifying courses that would be appropriate for producers and recommending and referring clients to appropriate courses. Training brokers consider the whole suite of present and potential training opportunities and actively match needs to training, acting in the best interests of clients.

³¹ ANTA 1998, *A bridge to the future: Australia's national strategy for vocational education and training 1998-2003*, Brisbane, Australian National Training Authority.
<http://antapubs.dest.gov.au/publications/images/publications/bridge-to-the-future.PDF> [Accessed October 2005].

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Brokerage is a collaborative process involving client, broker and provider, and may include a range of other stakeholders such as natural resource management/catchment groups, agribusiness, extension officers, farmer associations, and FarmBis networkers and coordinators, as well as primary producers themselves.³²

There is a need to facilitate better coordination of management skill development in the livestock industry at a regional level. Structures and processes that encourage cooperation and coordination in training are needed. Training brokers could be of assistance here, and also with customisation of courses. Industry bodies and other farmer organisations are well placed to invest in training brokerage. Returns to the industry from better matching of training and needs could be expected to justify investment. Broking activity yields a range of economic and other benefits for participants, industries and rural communities³³.

Recommendation 3

Training brokerage should be evaluated to determine if producers see value in it and are prepared to pay for it. Training brokers would work with VET (and other) providers to identify courses appropriate for producers, refer clients to these, assist in customisation and coordination of training efforts.

The findings of this project suggest that many training providers have not been able to develop or market a training product that large numbers of producers are interested in purchasing. While the VET system in theory encourages customisation to meet learners' needs, 27% of other stakeholders said that RTOs were not customising sufficiently for the industry. Content may not be sufficiently up to date. The programmed learning model which is the basis of VET training products could be strengthened pedagogically if complemented by other models of capacity building, such as an ongoing process of support as in Prograze, where trainees form a training network over a period of time, or BeefCheque and other such groups.

As a large proportion of livestock managers are not prepared to spend extended periods of time on any one course or training activity, VET training products at AQF4 – 6 (management skill level) are much larger than many producers are able to commit to. One alternative would be for VET to deliver a smaller package of training as a short course, and then to cover the rest of the competency requirements by the RPL process. The VET sector could look to successful models such as the EDGENetwork as an example of effective customisation. The EDGENetwork model allows for training to be run as individual short informal sessions, including assessment and accreditation, which can then be combined with accreditation from other short EDGENetwork courses towards a national qualification.

³² Kilpatrick, S, et al. (forthcoming), op.cit., p. xiii.

³³ Kilpatrick, S, et al. (forthcoming), op.cit.

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A greater degree of customisation and quality control of courses could be expected to benefit the industry, but putting it into effect would require collaboration.

Recommendation 4

RTOs, the Agri-food Industry Skills Council and farmer organisations should collaborate in reviewing VET courses to ensure that they are up to date and can be customised to meet industry needs (for example, by including industry representatives on RTO course advisory boards).

VET providers' feedback from clients regarding their perceptions of their training experience may lack the sort of detail that would enable RTOs to respond effectively to target market criticisms. Good quantitative data about producers' attitudes towards VET, their experience of it, and outcomes of attending VET courses (along the lines of the 2003 Roy Morgan Research into FarmBis) would be useful.

Recommendation 5

Quantitative data on producers' attitudes towards VET and outcomes of VET training should be collected by ABARE, NCVET, or an independent organisation.

VET's lack of high quality, credible trainers with up-to-date technical expertise, industry background and ongoing professional development was commented on by large numbers of our interviewees, especially from the RTOs themselves.

Recommendation 6

RTOs should look to employing credible industry people as trainers and upskill these as trainers. Training organisations, including the VET sector, should encourage people to become trainers through raising the profile of trainers, e.g., by scholarships, awards and promotion in industry newsletters.

5 Appendices

5.1 Appendix A

Findings from the RTO survey:

Note: This is a comprehensive version of the findings. Many of the points made here are repeated in the body of the report.

RTOs and the relevant training

We found that four of the 68 are not delivering to livestock producers because their areas are more oriented to fruit or grain production. One other had suspended delivery of agricultural qualifications because of a conflict of interest. Twenty-four more were not delivering to livestock producers, either because there was no demand, even though they were in livestock production regions, or because of funding constraints, training in agriculture being a relatively high-cost area.

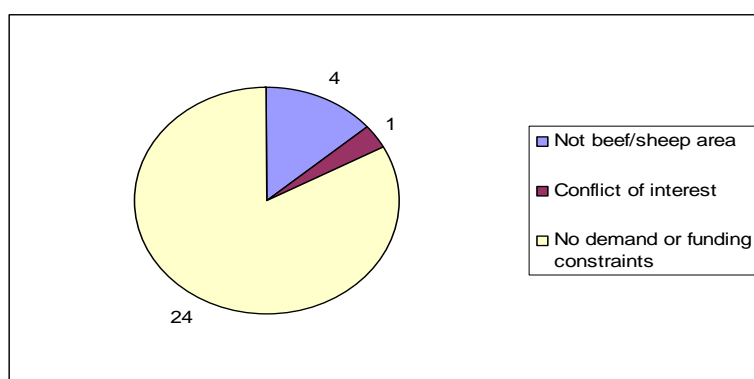


Fig. 4. RTO reasons for not delivering training.

Of the 39 RTOs which are delivering the training, six have 5 students or fewer and fourteen more have between 6 and 20 students. In the remaining 19 RTOs, numbers of students are healthier, but within a wide range. Two – Agforce Training (Qld) and Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture (NSW) – offer short courses only. Thirteen of the remaining 17 have student enrolments of 50 or more.

Summary of numbers of students

The total number of students in AQF 4, 5 and 6 courses, or agricultural college style courses, which we have arrived at from estimates by interviewees is around 3,700. However, in 2004, statistics selected for their relevance to beef and sheep producers show there were 4,600 enrolments in these levels (see Fig. 5, below).

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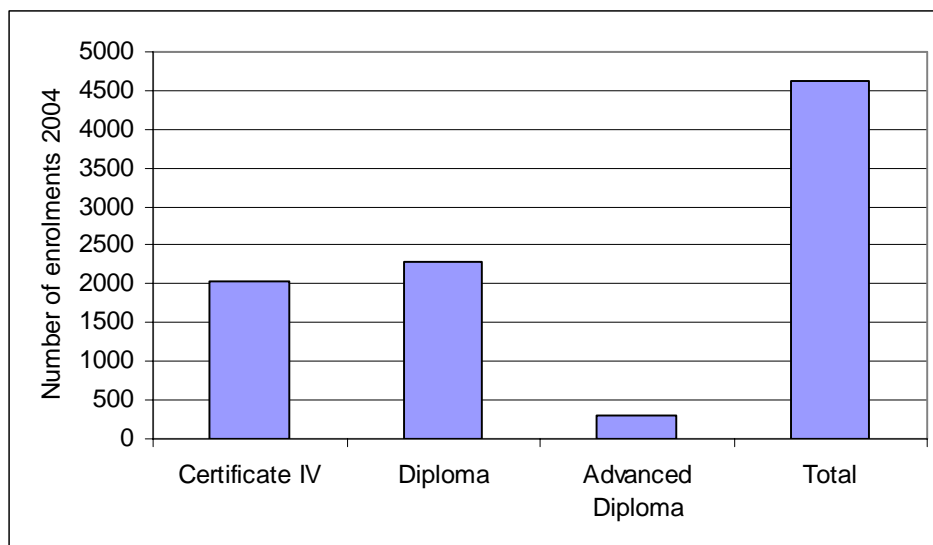


Fig. 5: Enrolments in RUA98 and RTE03, selected for their relevance to beef and sheep producers, 2004. (From tables supplied by NCVET)

Between the 2004 figures and the estimates we have arrived at for 2005, there is a gap of some 900 students. However the 2004 figures contain a so far unexplained bulge for Victoria, which impacts on the total for that year. According to the statistics, Victorian enrolments were four times those of the next state, New South Wales. While doubts have been expressed as to the accuracy of the figures, including by the Victorian office of Rural Skills Australia, they have been checked by NCVET and are deemed to be correct, as reported to NCVET by the various state training authorities.

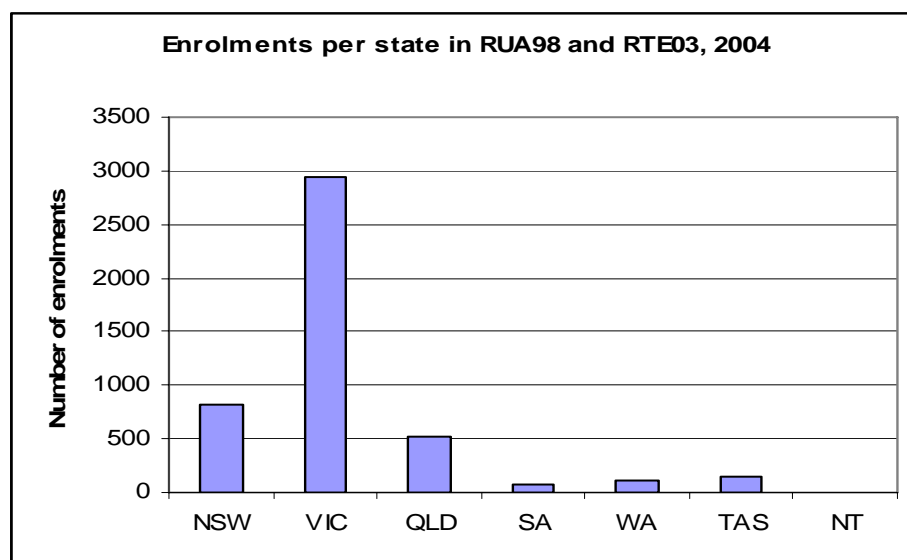


Fig. 6: Enrolments per state in RUA98 and RTE03, selected for their relevance to beef and sheep producers, 2004. (From tables supplied by NCVET)

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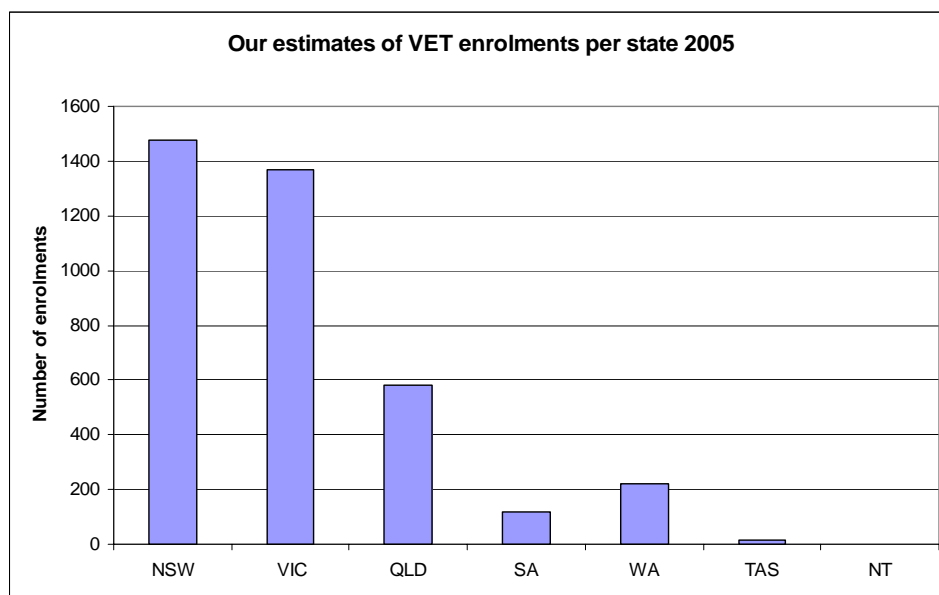


Fig. 7: Our estimates of enrolments per state in 2005 (from estimates supplied during interviews with RTOs)

Mode of delivery

Around 20% of students enrolled at AQF levels 4, 5 and 6, or in agricultural college type courses, are full-time. Among the full-time residential Queensland agricultural colleges, only one said that numbers of students were consistent with those of previous years. Another felt that country parents were disillusioned about the value of training. A third attributed their lighter numbers to uncertainty resulting from the restructuring of agricultural colleges in Queensland into one organisation. Numbers at the fourth have declined over the past three years. They said that young people were interested only in lower-level qualifications. In New South Wales, one college of agriculture has been closed to full-time residential enrolments, with these being referred to another college. Another former New South Wales agricultural college has been through three periods of restructuring, each bringing it into affiliation with a different university. They say their numbers of students are half what they used to be.

Part-time can mean a number of things:

- coming on campus for a three-hour session once a week;
- a mix of face-to-face, assignments, case studies, practical workshops;
- 'distance education' and workshops;
- workshops of cohorts of 3-10 students in country centres;
- 'external';
- 'flexible delivery';
- on the job, one on one;
- on-farm/workplace training with mentors/supervisors and monitoring/tutorial visits from the RTO;
- a mobile classroom travelling to shearing sheds;

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- online training kits for students; modules of one to three day sessions;
- 'paper-based';
- one on one within enterprises.

Some interviewees used 'external', 'distance education' and 'flexible delivery' interchangeably.

Client profile

We surveyed RTOs delivering to students with an interest in beef and/or sheep. Five said their students' interest was mainly sheep, and eight mainly beef. The rest estimated that the students they spoke about were interested in one or the other, or both, or in one or both of those plus grain.

Many students come from or live in widely dispersed areas. Agricultural colleges attract students from all over their states, and from other states. A private Victorian college gets 60% of its students from other states. A regional enterprise-based private provider and a university VET campus, both in Victoria, get clients/students all over the state. Another Victorian university VET campus gets one-third from the Wimmera area, and the rest from all over the state. In South Australia a regional private provider, enterprise based, gets its clients in south-eastern South Australia and all over southern Australia. One of the Queensland agricultural colleges gets 40% of its enrolment from interstate. The Western Australian specialist institute, a WA regional TAFE, and a WA university VET centre have enrolments from across the state.

Some providers, including some relatively small ones, are delivering to students who study part-time in remote areas. A regional NSW TAFE has students all over the western part of the state. A WA university VET centre's students are all over the southern part of Western Australia. A WA regional TAFE has students spread over a huge area near and far beyond its campus. A private provider in inland North Queensland delivers to students in Cloncurry, Normanton and Longreach. A NSW private provider's students are scattered from Hay to Walgett.

Ages of students range from school-leavers, who represent the bulk of the full-time students, across the spectrum. Thirty-three of the thirty-nine RTOs delivering this training said that the majority of their students were aged from 17 to 30. However twenty-six RTOs said there was a range of ages, with five having students of 50 or older. These last were in the greater Sydney area, regional NSW, a Victorian regional university campus, a Queensland regional specialist university centre and a WA regional TAFE.

The gender balance is estimated by many interviewees to be 60/40 male/female. Two said they had more women than men (the Queensland regional specialist university centre, which had advertised through the Country Women's Association, and a greater Melbourne area TAFE), and two (in western NSW and regional Victoria) had equal numbers.

The children of farming families are well represented in enrolments at the agricultural colleges. Most part-time students were already working on farms or in agencies

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supporting farming. Four interviewees said some of their students were already managing farms. RTOs delivering to students close to big metropolitan centres (e.g., Sydney) said their students were predominantly people interested in developing their own properties.

Funding

Eighty-one per cent of RTOs surveyed saw issues around funding as a negative influence on the training they delivered.

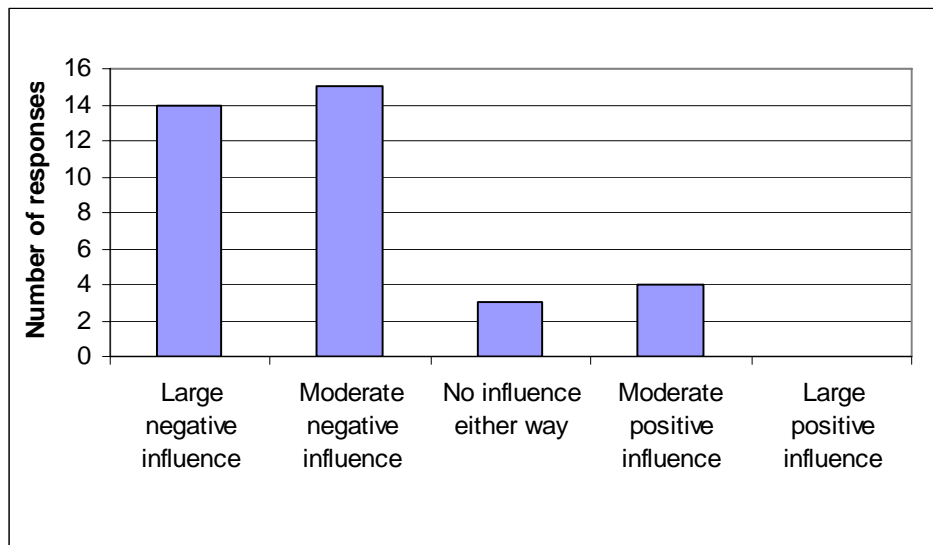


Fig. 8. RTO perceptions on the influence of funding on the courses they deliver.

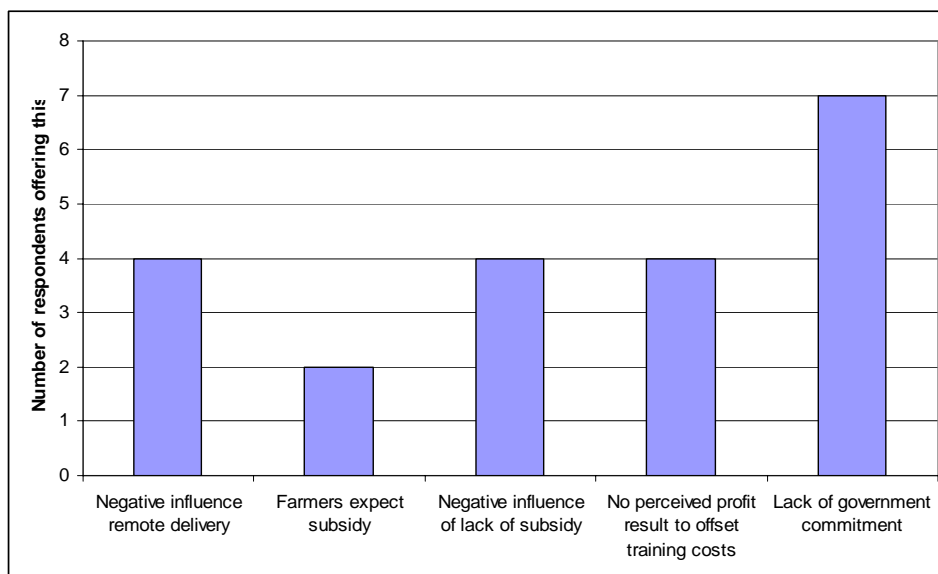


Fig.9. RTOs' reasons given for negative influence of funding. 36 RTOs were surveyed.

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State Training Authority Requirements

Most RTOs who completed our survey did not think State Training Authority requirements influenced their delivery in either a positive or negative way.

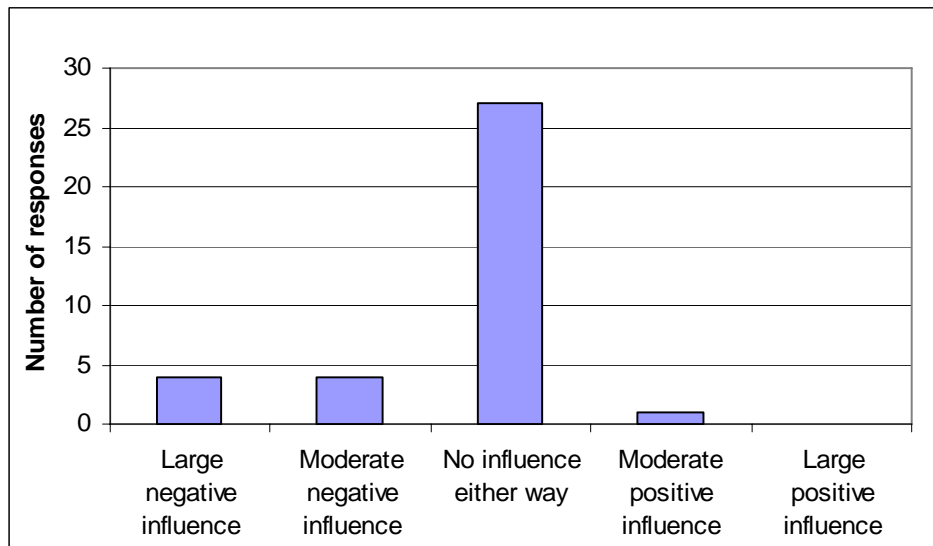


Fig. 10. RTO perceptions on the influence of State Training Authority requirements on the training they deliver.

Numbers in courses

58% of interviewees thought that low course numbers had a negative influence on the training they delivered.

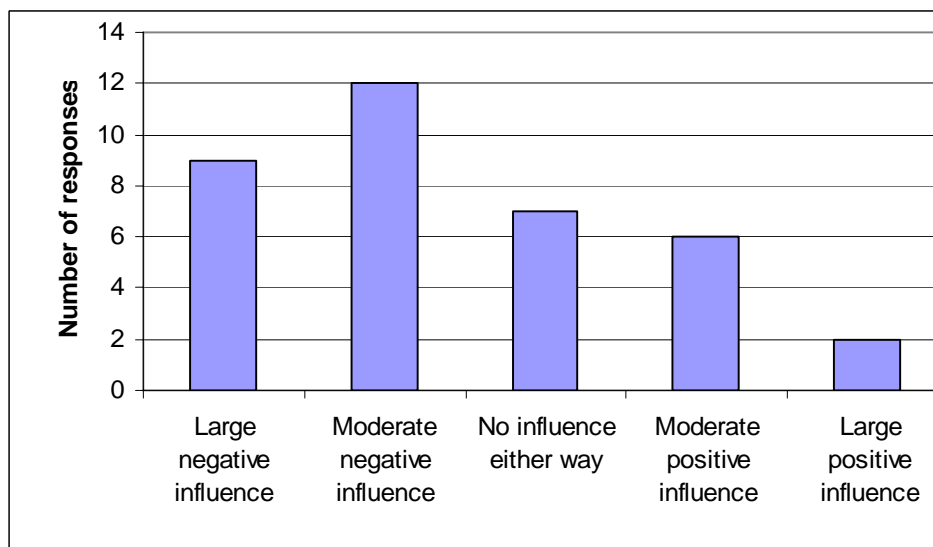


Fig. 11. RTO perceptions on the influence of low numbers in courses on the training they delivered.

Customisation

58% of interviewees thought that customisation was a positive influence on the training they delivered.

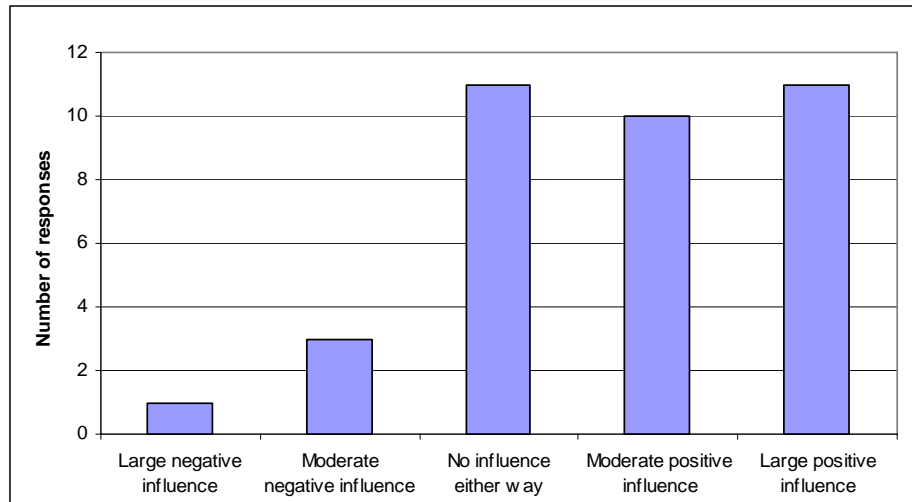


Fig. 12. RTO perceptions on the influence of customisation on the training they delivered.

Quality of trainers

61% of interviewees thought that the quality of trainers was a negative influence on the training they delivered.

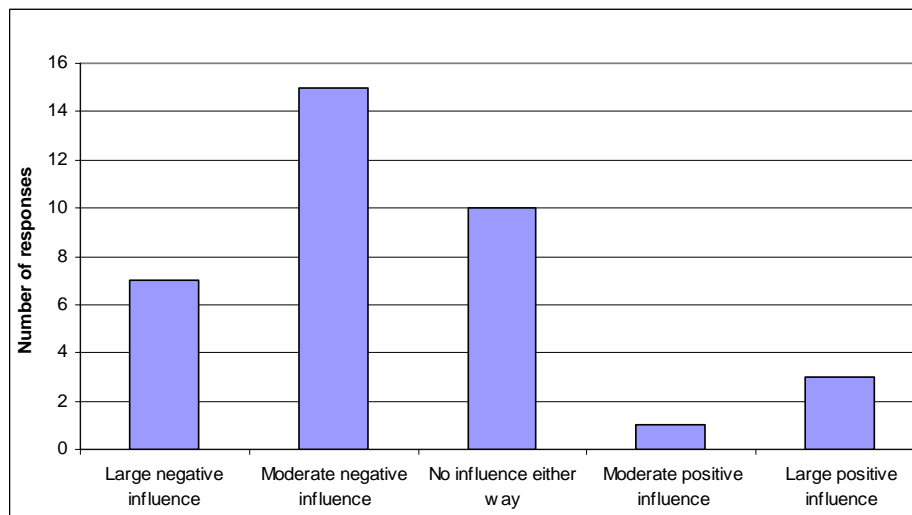


Fig. 13. RTO perceptions on the influence of quality of trainers on the training they delivered.

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Evaluation

Student/client feedback forms are routinely collected at the end of courses. Some RTOs also survey after each unit. Moderation with peers in other RTOs occurs in some cases. A few interview employers of students after the student's training has been completed.

Many indicated that evaluation was part of the routine quality assurance process they had in place.

RTO Survey Instrument

Section one

1. Client profile

- industries
- location
- age

2. Topics and levels of training delivered and undertaken

3. Delivery mode

Section two

a. To what extent to each of the following influence the training you deliver?

4. funding

- A. Large negative influence
- B. Moderate negative influence
- C. No influence either way
- D. Moderate positive influence
- E. Large positive influence

5. State Training Authority requirements

- A. Large negative influence
- B. Moderate negative influence
- C. No influence either way
- D. Moderate positive influence
- E. Large positive influence

6. numbers in courses

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- A. Large negative influence
- B. Moderate negative influence
- C. No influence either way
- D. Moderate positive influence
- E. Large positive influence

7. customisation for clients

- A. Large negative influence
- B. Moderate negative influence
- C. No influence either way
- D. Moderate positive influence
- E. Large positive influence

8. quality of trainers

- A. Large negative influence
- B. Moderate negative influence
- C. No influence either way
- D. Moderate positive influence
- E. Large positive influence

b. Are there any other influencing factors?

c. Do you conduct evaluations of your training program? If so, describe the nature and timing of these.

How have the results of the evaluations been used in designing and reviewing training?

5.2 Appendix B

Survey of other stakeholders

Note: This is a comprehensive version of the findings. Many of the points made here are repeated in the body of the report.

Main issues

Main issues included:

- RTOs lack the flexibility and accessibility necessary to suit producers;
- Cost of training;
- Producers have a negative attitude to training;
- Producers have difficulty choosing appropriately from the many training products available;
- Producers have limited time available for training;
- Negative impact on private fee-for-service extension trainers of government-funded free training;

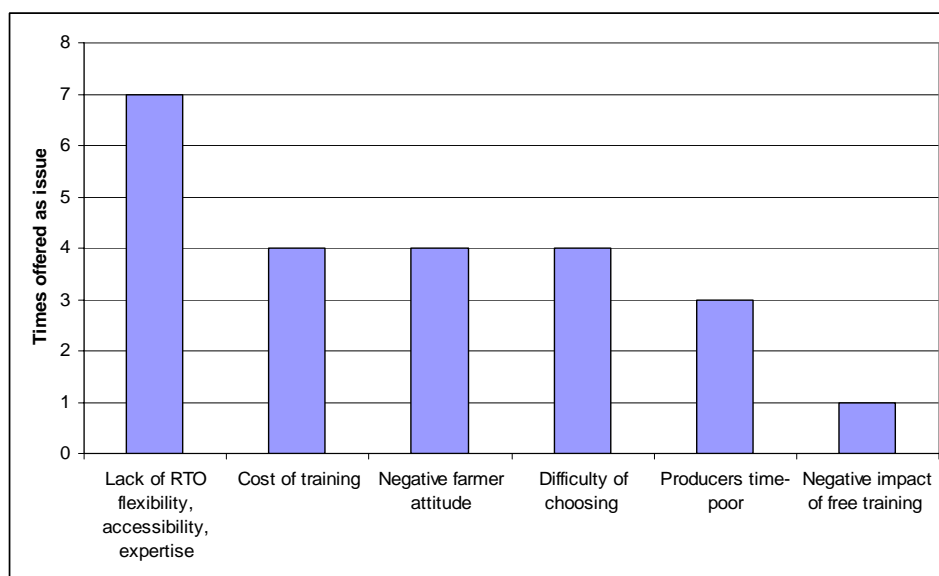


Fig. 14. Other stakeholders' views of main issues

Funding

86% of the other stakeholders saw issues around funding as a negative influence on training.

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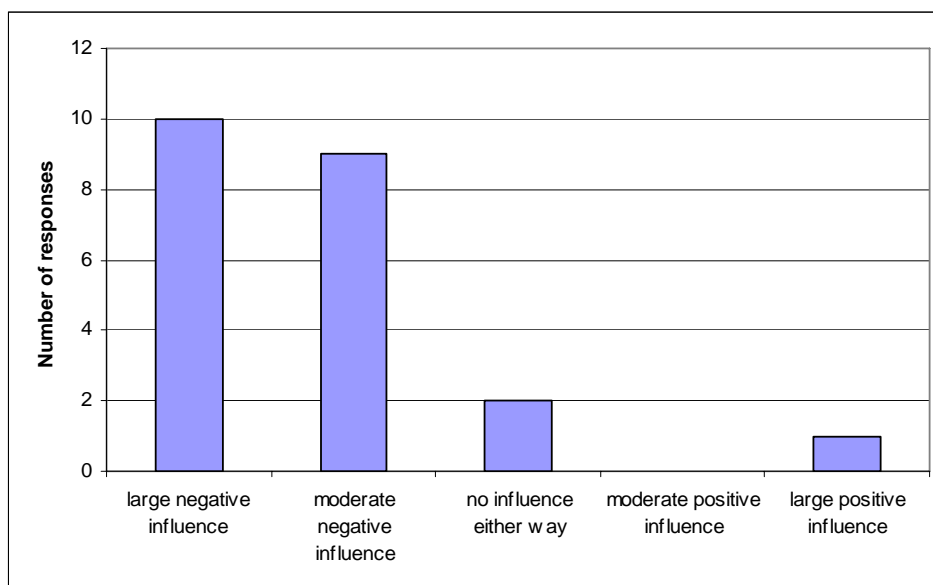


Fig. 15. Other stakeholders' perception of the influence of funding on training

Figure 16 (below) breaks the other stakeholders' response down further.

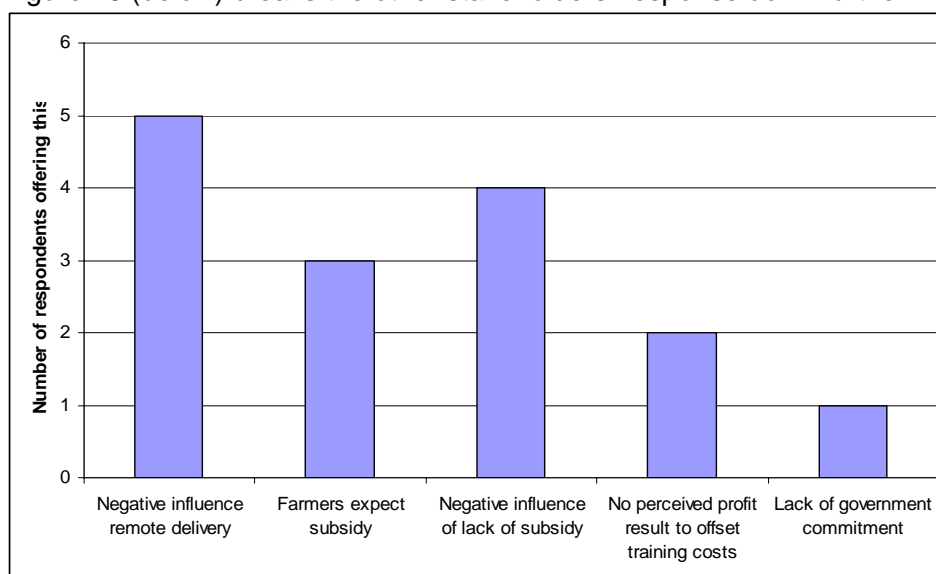


Fig. 16. Reasons given for negative influence of funding

Funding issue: Remote delivery

Other stakeholders from more remote areas raised the issue of the high and increasing cost of delivering agriculture training.

- '[This] is an issue for regional providers of VET.'
- 'Most training providers have to travel from interstate, which makes it costly.'

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- 'Distance is a big problem. Funding barely covers the cost of delivering to this huge area.'
- 'Because of vast distances and the small population of the Northern Territory, costs are very high.'
- 'In remote areas, costs to deliverer and client are higher. There should be more use of technology in those areas, video conferencing etc. Deliverers need to skill these remote people to use the technology.'

This issue had also been raised by four people in our RTO survey, where interviewees said:

- 'The college gets the same funding per hour as those delivering to far less remote students. If the lecturer can cover two or three students in a day's trip, this is good, but it sometimes takes a whole day to see one student.'
- 'There's no bonus for accessing rural/remote clients at this [management skill development] level.'
- 'This is an isolated campus with low population [in the area]. Travelling to short course venues can be very expensive.'
- 'Costs to RTOs are increasing (for example, fuel).'

Funding issue: Subsidies

33.3% of RTOs had said either that subsidies had a positive effect on training, or that the absence of subsidies had a negative effect. 40.9% of other stakeholder interviewees said the same. However, four of the other stakeholders raised the issue of farmers being conditioned to subsidies. One said: 'Subsidies create a negative attitude towards paying and budgeting for training. There is less extension now coming from Departments of Agriculture, but before you can have a proper user-pay system you need to develop a culture. All courses should have at least a minimal charge to help this along.' Two of the RTOs had also mentioned the issue of farmers expecting subsidies. Reliance on subsidised training by this industry sector has also been noted in the research literature³⁴.

Funding issues: Other factors in negative influence of funding

Two industry interviewees (one a producer, the other a Farmers' Federation representative) said that unless farmers believed that training would translate into increased profits, many would not be interested. While the research literature suggests that farm profitability does increase for managers who participate in education and training³⁵, many farmers are yet to be convinced. Another stakeholder said that governments were not putting back into education the money students paid in fees for service. The latter comment was similar to some raised in the RTO survey, where seven interviewees said that lack of sufficient government commitment to training was resulting in less funding.

³⁴ Stone, G (2005), p. 110.

³⁵ For example, Kilpatrick, S (1997). Education and training: Impacts on profitability in agriculture. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Vocational Education Research, 5, 2, pp.11-36.

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State Training Authority Requirements

Most other stakeholders interviewed did not know much about State Training Authority requirements. Six made informed comments:

- 'There's too much administration, it takes away from delivery of training. And it is getting more complex.'
- 'These, plus requirements of FarmBis and other subsidies, often lock training into a very bureaucratic system, which pushes the cost up and frustrates both providers and participants. Clients are not always interested in being assessed after training. There is not always a need to assess every bit of training. But organisations, to remain accredited, have to include assessment in training.' (This organisation's RTO accreditation was discontinued because it declined to include assessment in all its training. It still trains, but not subsidised courses.)
- 'These need to be flexible. Different levels of skills in groups need to be allowed for. The combination of lower level competencies with higher level ones sometimes helps. Red tape can be a disincentive to training.'
- 'It is frustrating that private RTOs are sometimes deregistered for breaches, but [public provider] gets away with a lot.'
- All information on training/extension needs to be recorded, in order to build competencies so that if required a student has the clear pathway towards qualifications. EDGENetwork program needs linking to elements of competency.
- These are too tied up in codes, funding, models, etc. But some are really good, trying to improve, for example Tasmania.

Numbers in courses

41% of other stakeholders said that low numbers in courses could affect training delivery.

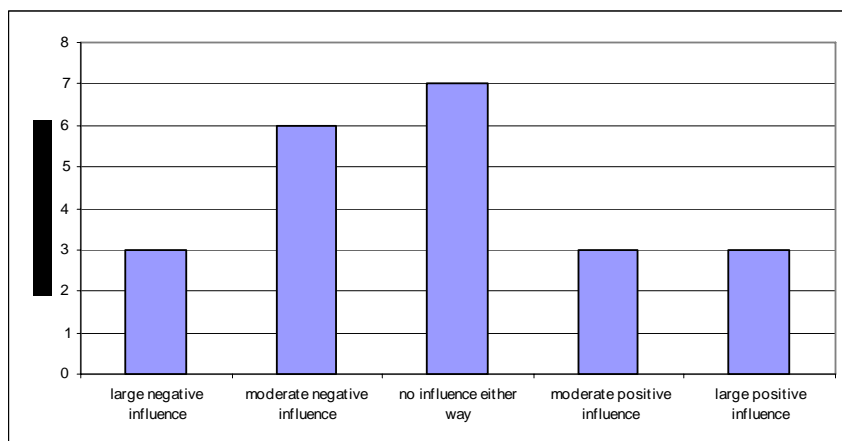


Fig. 17. Influence of numbers in courses

Customisation

68% of other stakeholders said that customisation had a positive influence on training available.

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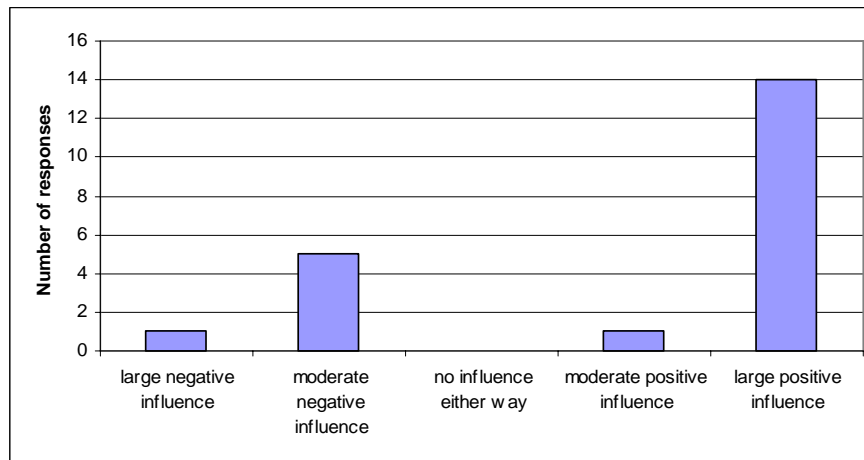


Fig. 18. Influence of customisation

Quality of trainers

45% of other stakeholders said that quality of trainers had a negative influence on the training delivered.

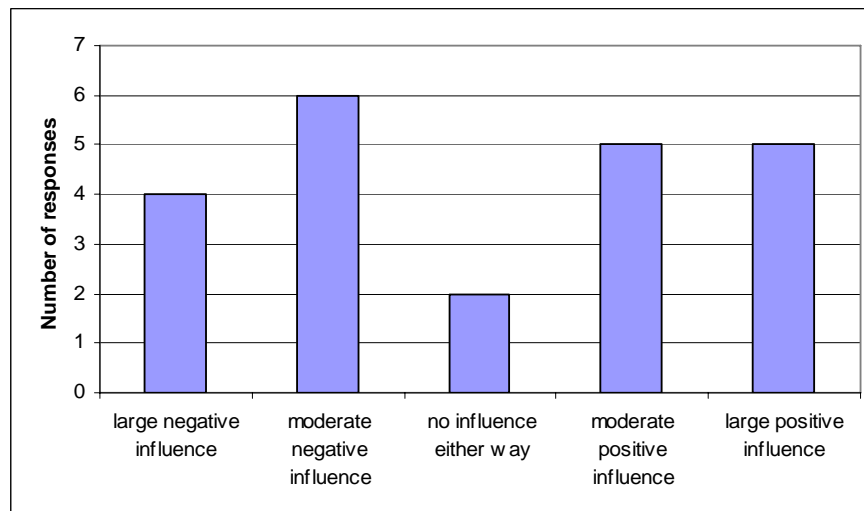


Fig. 19. Influence of quality of trainers

Organisations interviewed for Other Stakeholders Survey

National:

1. Meat and Livestock Australia
2. Australian Wool Innovations
3. Rural Skills Australia
4. Australian Government, Dept of Agriculture, Fisheries & Forestry.
5. Angus Australia
6. Sheep Meat Council of Australia

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7. Agri-food Industry Skills Council

Vic:

8. Department of Primary Industries (Grains Industry Training Network officer)
9. Rural Skills Australia, Vic/Tas branch
10. Victorian Farmers Federation

Tas:

11. Office of Post Compulsory Education and Training
12. Rural Development Services (private business providing research, project management and extension services across Australia)

Qld:

13. Tropical Beef Technology Services
14. Qld Rural Industry Training Council Inc.

NSW:

15. Producer 1
16. Producer 2
17. NSW Department of Primary Industries

WA:

18. Kondinin Group (EDGEnetwork program deliverers WA)
19. WA Farmers Federation

SA:

20. Dept of Primary Industries & Resources (FarmBis Networker)

NT:

21. Dept of Primary Industries, Fisheries & Mines, NT. (FarmBis Coordinator, Katherine Region)
22. Dept of Primary Industries, Fisheries & Mines, NT. (Pastoral Extension Officer, Katherine Region, and EDGEnetwork Coordinator NT.)

Other Stakeholders Survey Instrument

A. Is there a main issue you wish to talk about first?

B. Are there any other issues you think important?

C. To what extent to each of the following influence the training available to those you represent/support?

1. funding

- F. Large negative influence
- G. Moderate negative influence
- H. No influence either way
- I. Moderate positive influence
- J. Large positive influence

2. State Training Authority requirements

- F. Large negative influence
- G. Moderate negative influence
- H. No influence either way
- I. Moderate positive influence
- J. Large positive influence

3. numbers in courses

- B. Large negative influence
- B. Moderate negative influence
- F. No influence either way
- G. Moderate positive influence
- H. Large positive influence

4. customisation for clients

- F. Large negative influence
- G. Moderate negative influence
- H. No influence either way
- I. Moderate positive influence
- J. Large positive influence

5. quality of trainers

- F. Large negative influence
- G. Moderate negative influence
- H. No influence either way
- I. Moderate positive influence
- J. Large positive influence

5.3 Appendix C

Case Studies

Stage 4 of the project consists of case studies of four RTOs that are examples of good practice in the delivery of VET management training to livestock producers. In consultation with the Reference Group the following four RTOs were selected:

1. CB Alexander College (NSW),
2. New England Institute of TAFE (NSW),
3. Rural Industries Skill Training (RIST) (Vic) and
4. Curtin University VTE Centre (WA).

The criteria used for selection were:

- spread of states;
- different kinds of institution/enterprise;
- successful, including good numbers;
- spread of delivery models;
- mix of livestock industries.

Studies of good practice in VET organisations identify the following key characteristics³⁶
^{37 38.}

- training that meets the needs of individuals in terms of desired outcomes; is flexible and adaptable to meet needs of trainees; includes adequate support and consideration of the cultural, language and social context of trainees;
- retention of students/trainees;
- innovative response to training challenges, including 'on the job' components;
- development of collaborative arrangements with industry;
- structures that facilitate ongoing learning (these may include partnerships and networks that can be tapped into).

A framework for the case studies as examples of good practice was developed on the basis of these key characteristics. Each RTO is discussed as an example of good practice under the following headings:

- Meeting needs of trainees/participants.
- Delivery modes: Innovative response to training challenges.
- Completion rates.
- Collaboration with industry and other networks.

³⁶ Mitchell, J & Wood, S (2001). Evidence of high-skilled VET practitioners and high-performing VET organisations. Findings from an evaluation of the long-term impacts of Framing the Future projects conducted in 1999-2000. ANTA, Melbourne.

³⁷ Maxwell, G, Noonan, P, Bahr, M & Hardy, I (2004). Managing better Measuring institutional health and effectiveness in vocational education and training. Adelaide: NCVER.

³⁸ Guenther, J (2005). Pathways to effective training outcomes: lessons from northern Australia, AVETRA.

CB Alexander College (Tocal), NSW

Case summary

- Successful agricultural college.
- A history of proactive education and training to suit the changing needs of industry.
- Good numbers of part-time and external Diploma students.
- Extensive and rigorous RPL system.
- Accredited and non-accredited short course training on site and across much of the state.

Background

C B Alexander Agricultural College, Tocal, is part of the New South Wales Department of Primary Industries. The college, 180 kilometres north of Sydney, delivers full and part-time agricultural courses, short courses and distance education. Full-time students come from throughout New South Wales, and some from interstate. Tocal has large commercial farms that offer practical training for students. Among other livestock, the farms run up to 1,500 beef cattle and 300 sheep for prime lamb and wool production.

Enrolments in 2005 are the highest for 13 years and applications for 2006 suggest the college courses will also be oversubscribed next year. There are a total of 120 full-time and residential students on campus. These are mostly young career establishers, interviewed prior to entry. About a quarter of these come from family farms. The rest are from rural and urban centres large and small. As well there are 60 part-time students and 300 externals. Another 2000 participate annually in short courses.

Methodology

The Principal of the college was telephone-interviewed in May 2005, with a number of follow-up telephone calls and emails in June – November. The Deputy Principal was telephone-interviewed in October 2005, again with follow-up telephone calls and emails. Members of Tocal's Advisory Council were approached and we subsequently interviewed four of these by telephone. Relevant documentation, including de-identified student feedback forms, was provided by the Deputy Principal. We also accessed the college website and the Ex-Students Association website.

Good practice

Tocal has a history of proactive response to existing and perceived future needs in farming. In 2003 the NSW Minister for Primary Industries stated that Tocal was performing admirably³⁹. A broad marketing program is an important part of this performance. Tocal people visit schools and promote the college's courses throughout an extensive network of industry and community organisations and groups.

³⁹ Moyes, G (2004). Agricultural colleges. Comment from Christian Democratic Party. Accessed November 2005 from <http://www.cdp.org.au/fed/xbcomm/040831.asp>

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Meeting needs of trainees

Tocal's Principal says the college has no trouble getting good trainers. Regular professional development of staff is seen as an important means of meeting the needs of students. Staff participate in State departmental and other courses relating to course development, computer training, project management and external AQTF audits.

Full-time students each have a staff tutor who monitors their progress. Other strategies to meet the needs of students include financial – more than half Tocal's students receive scholarship support through the college – and learning support. If required, language, literacy and numeracy assistance is provided. Tutors are made available to guide with preparation of assignments, readers are provided if necessary for exams and there is the option of verbal assessments where possible. Tocal has found that students prefer to be helped by people they know, rather than specialist tutors.

Tocal's external Diploma of Agriculture course and Diploma of Agriculture (Rural Business Management) are aimed at people with experience in agriculture and farm management. Some of the people enrolling for these courses are from industries servicing the agriculture sector, for example irrigation services or chemical suppliers. A flexible approach is offered to external students in these courses. They can enrol at any time of the year and study modules at their own pace. They are allocated a college education officer who provides support by telephone, email and mail. E-learning provisions include Tocal's e-farm website, giving students online access to extensive information including climatic data, and the production of electronic education resources on CD-ROM. Skills recognition may be integrated into this training.

Tocal has an outreach program with education officers stationed in Gosford, Camden and Tamworth. Skills recognition plays a major role in Tocal's provision of education services to rural communities across New South Wales. A Sustainable Farming Training Centre in Tamworth is also the base for expansion of short courses in this northern region. Property Management Planning courses feature strongly in the outputs of Tocal's Continuing Education program. These are delivered in a series of workshops to farmer groups in a broad area around the college.

Delivery modes: Innovative response to training challenges

The challenge to RTOs like Tocal is to promote agricultural careers at a time when skills shortages are beginning to bite. An industry interviewee says that the education and training sector 'can't supply enough graduates to fill the positions.' Specific skills shortages in the beef and sheep/wool industries include the business management skills and leadership skills⁴⁰ which Tocal's training responses emphasise.

The college has committed itself to proactive development of courses and assessment since the 1980s. It adopted problem-based learning twenty years ago, in order to heighten student engagement with courses, and in recent years has adapted this to competency-based training. The problem-based model is student centred. The approach

⁴⁰ Agrifood Industry Skills Council (2005). Industry skills report. Accessed November 2005 from http://www.agrifoodskills.net.au/files/Industry_Skills_Report_Final_June_05.pdf

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develops competencies through modules presented as case studies, which form the theoretical part of the course. Students are given a realistic farm problem and find solutions for it, in collaboration with a team and with assistance from college staff and experts in the field. Examples of such problems in the Certificate IV course include: Analyse and Interpret Production Data, Cost a Project, Select animals for Breeding, and Develop a Whole Farm Plan. A staff member says: 'The power of problem-based learning is its ability to encourage new ways of thinking'. It promotes initiative and team-building, and requires the development of communication skills as well as technical understanding. The process, guided by staff who assist with group dynamics, teaches students the networking skills they will draw on in their agricultural careers. It also develops in students an appreciation of the complex, cross-disciplinary nature of most agricultural issues and problems.

Tocal regards personal development and attitudes as important aspects of education and training. The college's feedback from industry regularly emphasises the issue of attitudinal development. Inclusion of this in Tocal's courses pre-dated much of the research literature on the importance of key competencies and generic or transferable skills (e.g.^{41 42}) for ensuring that graduates are employable and job ready. Units in Tocal's course format include a Learning Outcome related to attitudinal development, using a profile adapted from the Lees, Da Roza and Carey⁴³ and Tocal's own farmer surveys as standards.

The full-time one-year Certificate IV course prepares students for roles in business and farm management. Many units involve tours to study the operation of commercial farms in the central west and northwest of the state. Students spend two four-week periods working on properties or agribusinesses in New South Wales or Queensland. The Diploma of Agriculture can be completed full-time while studying for Certificate IV and includes additional units on farm planning and management, cattle breeding and marketing.

Skills recognition is a rigorous process. Tocal assessors travel to properties to help trainees collate their documentation, using ASSESS, a tool developed by the DNR Group/Hortus Australia in South Australia. ASSESS won a University of Melbourne (Assessment Research Centre) National Assessment Award for VET in 2000. Tocal's Principal says contracting with the DNR Group to use this assessment program means Tocal saves itself the expense of writing one for itself, and also is in line with the college's belief in collaboration between RTOs because of the cross-fertilisation that occurs and the consistency of standards that is enhanced. It assists workplace assessors and applicants for assessment to better understand the type and extent of evidence required for RPL. Each tool relates to a particular unit of competency and can

⁴¹ Mayer, E (1992). Putting general education to work: The key competencies report. AEC/MOVEET, Melbourne.

⁴² Kearns, P. (2001). Review of research: Generic skills for the new economy, National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), Leabrook, S.A.

⁴³ Lees, J, Da Roza, G & Carey, E (1982). Competence and curriculum: A study of the National Agriculture Education System. Australian Rural Adjustment Unit, University of New England, Armidale.

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be modified to suit particular contexts. Farmers like RPL because it saves them time and because it accommodates their preferred learning styles – hands-on and on-the-job, rather than in a classroom. One industry interviewee says that RPL leads to increased self-confidence and professional credibility for the trainee, and promotes a culture that puts value on learning and qualifications for the industry.

Although funding is secure through the Department of Primary Industries, costs are an ongoing challenge. The Principal says: 'It's very expensive getting people out and about on properties and the funding is inadequate, particularly for traineeship programs.'

Completion rates

2005 has seen 45 full-time students complete Certificate IV, most of these having an interest in beef cattle. Around 180 students are working through the Diploma of Agriculture (RBM) in continuing education, with 5 external students, again most with an interest in beef. There are currently two students doing Advanced Diploma by skills recognition.

Total graduates get jobs. Those with a Diploma of Agriculture receive credit towards a degree at most NSW universities offering agriculture or related courses. Four or five Total students go on to university studies each year, and others do so after being in the workforce for a period.

Short courses designed for professional and part-time farmers play a key role in Total's adult education outputs, with an attendance of 2,267 people at these during 2004. Figures for 2005 will be similar.

New South Wales Agriculture advisory officers, college staff and external trainers conduct the following short courses, and others, at Total and other venues:

- Beef Assessment and Marketing
- Cattle care
- Cattle Stud Management
- Environmental Farm Management Planning
- Environmental Management Systems in Agriculture
- Managing Improved Pastures
- Property Management Planning
- SMARTtrain AQF4 Managing Chemical Use

Competency based agricultural training is also provided for NSW Department of Primary Industries staff under the Professional Officer Training Program.

Collaboration with industry and other networks

Total collaborates with a large number of organisations from industry and the education sector, state and local government sectors, environmental organisations, community groups and non-profit organisations. Total's Advisory Council, consisting of industry people and including some former students, meets four or five times a year. A member says the college is extremely receptive to ideas put forward by the Council. A long list of farmers and agricultural organisations is available to take students for off-campus experience over several weeks per year. A combination of commercial, education and

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community group elements occurs in delivery of Field Days, assisted by students and supported by local sponsors and partners. Collaboration with the Hunter-Central Rivers Catchment Management Authority provides environmental management training in workshops to farmer groups in the area. Tocal has run similar courses in collaboration with the Gwydir-Border Rivers Catchment Management Authority for farmers in the north of the state. Both Authorities have used Tocal's Property Management Planning training as pilot schemes to evaluate further provision of land management training to their landholders. In 2004 Tocal entered into a collaborative pilot arrangement with Animal Health Australia (AHA), whereby Tocal provided RTO services to AHA to accredit the delivery of its Australian Veterinary Reserve training program as part of national preparedness for outbreaks of significant animal diseases.

Workshops at Tocal bring in other RTOs and stakeholders in training, for example the 2003 workshop Skills Recognition: Agricultural Education's Best Kept Secret, which focused on RPL but covered a range of associated issues dealing with accreditation and the benefits to learners.

Tocal's role in all these organisations and networks is an important backdrop to its teaching: '[Our students] feel part of a wider community rather than just being trained in a mechanistic activity. The training fits together well with the broad sociology of farming.'

What makes this RTO a model of good practice?

Tocal is an important means by which the NSW State Government implements and sustains an agricultural training policy which is a significant part of the state's economic base. The college evidences good practice particularly in the following areas:

- improving the traditional agricultural college model through updated teaching techniques, staff professional development, and activity that extends to farming communities across much of the state;
- promotion of training through extensive networks of industry and other groups;
- collaboration with other RTOs, promoting cross-fertilisation and consistency of standards generally;
- flexibility to suit individual needs of part-time and external clients;
- a concept of RPL involving a rigorous process using a trade-marked award-winning assessment tool developed by another RTO.

New England Institute of TAFE, NSW

Case summary

- One of TAFE NSW's 10 Institutes: a large regional provider with 11 campuses in north-eastern NSW.
- Increasing numbers of agriculture students.
- Innovative skills recognition programs.
- Accredited and non-accredited short course training on site and across the north-east of the state.

Background

TAFE NSW is Australia's biggest vocational education and training provider, and is one of the largest in the world. Each year it trains over 400,000 people, on campus, in the workplace, online or through distance education. The numbers of people studying at the ten Institutes of TAFE NSW have been increasing strongly each year⁴⁴.

The New England Institute of TAFE (TAFE NEI) services an area of more than 100,000 square kilometres in north-eastern NSW. There are 11 campuses in the Institute, through four faculties. The campuses range in size and diversity and are located in a range of environments, from major regional centres to small rural townships. Several of these campuses offer agricultural courses. Armidale is a major campus specialising in agriculture and as such it is the main focus of this case study. Whereas many RTOs have reported a diminishing demand for agricultural training, TAFE NEI's numbers in this area are consistently growing by around 10-20% a year.

Methodology

The Head Teacher, Agriculture, Armidale Rural Skills Centre, New England Institute of TAFE was telephone-interviewed in July 2005, with a number of follow-up telephone calls and emails in August – November. We also spoke to the Program Manager, Extensive Agriculture, at the Primary Industries Curriculum Centre. Two participants in the Credit Where Credit's Due pilot program were approached and we subsequently interviewed them by telephone. We also interviewed a producer who was a link in the network that developed the program. Documentation about TAFE NEI, including a Student Satisfaction Report and enrolments data, was provided by the Head Teacher, Agriculture. We also accessed the Institute's website.

Good practice

The TAFE sector prides itself on being industry focused: '[TAFE] reshapes its profile annually to ensure it is focusing on provision that leads to or supports initial employment, as well as career change opportunities and re-skilling'⁴⁵. The following sections examine these foci at TAFE NEI.

Meeting needs of trainees

TAFE NEI uses innovative methods, including web-enhanced learning, mixed mode and flexible delivery systems, to deliver vocational education and training to sparsely populated areas. Agriculture students range from school leavers to people in their 60s or older, some of whom have moved on to farms in their retirement. Students are given options on study methods and

⁴⁴ TAFE Directors Australia (2002). Higher education review. Submission 322. Accessed November 2005 at <http://www.backingaustraliasfuture.gov.au/submissions/crossroads/pdf/322.pdf>

⁴⁵ TAFE Directors Australia (2002), p. i.

specialist student support services are provided throughout the Institute. The Open Training and Education Network (OTEN) offers distance education programs. OTEN courses are delivered by a range of media, such as printed lesson notes, online, satellite broadcasts, videos, audio cassettes and email. Flexilink is the Institute's 'virtual campus'.

An annually increasing number of agriculture students means that TAFE NEI is able to deliver to cohorts of students it might not have been able to afford in the past, because development of resources would have been uneconomical. An interviewee said that this means TAFE NEI can be far more responsive to the needs of trainees.

An interviewee at TAFE NEI's Rural Skills Centre said that while some campuses have difficulty getting staff with the right level of expertise and teaching skills, with full-time employment not always available, Armidale has an advantage here. Sessional staff are usually able to find supplementary employment, as Armidale is a large regional centre.

The Armidale region is a superfine wool area, and TAFE NEI's Armidale campus is the key one for this. Superfine shedhand courses have been run to train workers in specific skills. Superfine woolclassing training has been offered several times, but there have not been sufficient applicants to run the program. The Head Teacher, Agriculture, thinks this may be due to the depressed financial context of recent years. The program has been run in another Institute of TAFE and there is considerable support for it from sectors of the wool industry.

Beef production and marketing is also an important focus of the Armidale region.

Delivery modes: Innovative response to training challenges

Students choose the delivery pattern that suits them. Mixed mode delivery includes workshops, Internet, teleconferencing and face to face classes.

The challenge of providing a broadly based course profile to a dispersed population base with only small class sizes has resulted in regional TAFE institutes being at the forefront in developing and adopting innovative and flexible delivery methods, although the sometimes limited availability of IT infrastructure continues to be a constraint.⁴⁶

A TAFE NEI's Rural Skills Centre spokesman said state government funding is slowly contracting, with pressure to divert money to trade areas of training. As a result it can be more difficult for publicly funded RTOs to afford to offer a range of programs in agriculture. TAFE NEI has less of a problem here because of its size. A recent restructuring of the institute is expected to free up more money for delivery of programs.

Certificate IV and Diploma courses are delivered full-time and part-time internally and also externally through flexible delivery. As well, numbers of short courses with specialised training are offered.

A more detailed look at two of TAFE NEI's programs gives an example of its flexible response to training challenges.

1 Credit Where Credit's Due

The Credit Where Credit's Due program was designed to recognise the skills of farming women in the management of their farms. It began with an idea from a farm woman in the central west of NSW. She believed many women involved in farm businesses would be better placed to

⁴⁶ TAFE Directors Australia (2002), p. 17

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contribute to supporting their family if they undertook training. The result was a joint initiative between TAFE NSW Access and Primary Industries and Natural Resources Divisions, the Primary Industries Training Advisory Board, and NSW Agriculture's Rural Women's Network.

The Department of Primary Industries had been running a program called CROP – Certificate in Rural Office Practice – which hundreds of predominantly farm wives had participated in but very few had ever completed. Given the fact that many of the women are responsible for the business management of their farms, TAFE NEI decided that these women should be able to demonstrate competence in most units either from prior studies or by providing evidence from business documents and records. TAFE NEI was funded to develop an assessment/evidence based pathway for rural women to complete a Certificate IV in Rural Business Management. This was identified as the most applicable course because it targeted both employment needs and business management.

The pilot program was offered to farming women through Gunnedah Campus of New England Institute of TAFE. FarmBis funding, available through the Rural Assistance Authority, paid 75% of student costs. The women were from a diverse range of enterprises including beef cattle and sheep breeding, broad-area cropping, cotton and organic cropping. They welcomed the opportunity for networking, exchanging ideas and support from other women doing similar things, particularly amid the difficulties of the prevailing drought.

The program was based on a series of nine one-day workshops and individual on-farm visits. Flexibility was essential, to accommodate participants' needs. As well as the recognition of current skills process, some training took place using group work situations where the students worked collaboratively and problem-solved. TAFE Primary Industries and Natural Resources teachers delivered technical content and assessment, while TAFE Access Division teachers provided support to allow students to complete work and compile a portfolio of evidence. This maintained group cohesiveness and student support, as well as providing the specialist teaching and assessment required. Group dynamics was considered a vital part of the program. The sharing of ideas and methods was very strong, providing an extension to the learning experience. During evaluation doubts were expressed as to whether the program would succeed without a group dynamic, for instance as print-based distance learning. It was thought that satellite delivery could work with the support of the print-based learning guides and CD with sample documents and templates but the program would need to be delivered from a rural location and to small groups – not individuals – to maximise group dynamics.

Each participant was provided with a Learning Guide containing a tabulated summary of the module purpose, learning outcomes and assessment criteria for each module in the course. There was also a facilitator's guide prepared by TAFE Access Division to encourage self esteem activities for the participants. Learning guides for Rural Law, Chemical Application, and Rural Safety Management were available. Workshop activities enabled participants to identify from these appropriate evidence to demonstrate the competencies for the module. They then obtained the documents or materials that they thought demonstrated the competence and compared these with the learning outcomes and assessment criteria. If they felt the evidence was sufficient, they presented it to the course presenter for assessment. The submitted evidence was then assessed by the course presenter and feedback provided to the student. If participants felt the evidence did not entirely satisfy the outcomes and criteria, they had a framework to further develop their evidence so that it did. Training needs were identified from the areas where evidence was lacking, and gap training was provided over the remaining workshops.

Given the clear success of the pilot, New England TAFE then secured funding to deliver facilitators' workshops around the state, in Armidale, Orange, Richmond and Wagga. The

program was extended to other rural and regional TAFE NSW Institutes, including Western, North Coast and Riverina. Fourteen courses were run, each with about twelve participants. The course is not operating at this time, however, due to lack of funding.

2 Cattlecare

Cattlecare is a training program to assist producers to comply with quality assurance requirements. Uptake in New South Wales had been slow, and Meat and Livestock Australia funded a project through the cattle compensation fund in order to enhance uptake. TAFE NEI was one of three providers contracted to deliver training.

Delivery took place over four workshops. The rate of accreditation of producers doing the courses through TAFE NEI was greater than through other providers, and an Institute interviewee said: 'We think this is because of the way the course was offered and delivered, which demonstrates our flexibility in delivery format achieves better outcomes.' TAFE NEI arranged for venues for the workshops at sites within 100 kms of all participants. Apart from accessibility, this meant that participants were grouped with neighbours and colleagues, making them feel more comfortable and supported. Training sessions were a blend of information and practical work. A four-hour introductory session was followed by a six-hour session in which participants did an audit to their own requirements according to Meat Standards Australia specifications. A six-hour session followed, facilitated by an accredited auditor. Finally there was a three-hour group problem solving session with audit preparation. Individual tutoring by telephone also occurred.

The TAFE NEI training involved interactivity between models of capacity building: a series of specifically designed training workshops to increase understanding of quality assurance procedures was strengthened by including elements of a self-support model whereby participants could work together to increase their own capacity for on-farm change.

Feedback from industry on the Cattlecare training was very positive.

Completion rates

In 2005 the Armidale campus had 16 Diploma of Agriculture students enrolled, 6 Certificate IV Ag, and 35 Certificate IV Wool Classing. Other students studying the Certificate IV and Diploma level units were enrolled in a subset of the competencies required for the full qualification.

There are 539 students enrolled in all programs in Armidale Rural section, with 304 students currently enrolled in Agriculture programs that have a sheep or cattle component.

A group of thirteen women completed the Credit Where Credit's Due pilot program recognition process for Certificate IV in Agriculture (Business Management) and completed the Statement of Attainment in Work Opportunities for Women in December 2002. Some expressed interest in doing a Diploma course.

TAFE NEI achieved 80% accreditation rate in enterprises that completed the Cattlecare training.

An articulation agreement with the University of New England allows for Diploma students to proceed to a degree. A proposal has been submitted to the Regional Development Board for a purpose-built wool facility at UNE which will allow more short course programs to be offered to livestock producers at both VET and university level.

Collaboration with industry and other networks

TAFE NEI makes a strong contribution to regional development. It contributes to regional economic and social viability both through skills formation and upgrading, and through partnerships with industry and other stakeholders in the community. These include the Beef and Sheep Cooperative Research Centres, International Livestock Resources and Information Centre, cattle breed societies, Australian Lot Feeders Association, commercial companies associated with the livestock industries, Super Fine Wool Growers Association, Australian Wool Innovations, Shearing Contractors Association, Elders, Landmark, CSIRO, Australian Wool Network, Australian Wool Expo., and various job network providers.

Delivery of many short courses over the years has brought it into contact with many farmers to form a mutually energising network. It collaborates with other organisations to improve services provided to regional areas. It has worked with the University of New England to put in UNE Access centres in nine communities across the New England and North West of NSW, with centre including technology links to UNE via the internet.

TAFE NEI recently signed a memorandum of understanding with Australian Lot Feeders Association (ALFA) to provide nationwide delivery of their production level training. Trainees now doing Certificates II and III will be able to go on to Diploma courses in the future. In the meantime they do a highly customised course which gives them competencies underpinning management skills.

What makes this RTO a model of good practice?

Student Satisfaction Surveys conducted by TAFE NSW show a high level of satisfaction, with 95% of students indicating good, high or very high levels of satisfaction. The New England Institute evidences good practice particularly in the following areas:

- seeking and obtaining new training markets through extensive industry networks;
- increased numbers of agricultural students;
- customised and carefully designed delivery strategies that deliver training to livestock producers on farm (as per Credit Where Credit's Due and Cattlecare);
- flexibility to suit individual needs of part-time and external clients.

Rural Industries Skill Training (RIST), Vic.

Case summary

- Private RTO in regional Victoria.
- Non-traditional delivery to agriculture students across Australia.
- Contracts agriculture experts to deliver training.
- Part-time Diploma course.
- Accredited and non-accredited short course training.
- Pre- and post-course surveys identify needs of participants, assist in delivery evaluation and in refining training provision.

Background

Based in Hamilton, Victoria, Rural Industries Skill Training (RIST) is one of Australia's largest independent training organisations specialising in the delivery of rural-based short course training across Australia. It is Victoria's largest provider of training to the rural community. Founded in 1992 in response to the perception that there was inadequate quality training suitable for Victoria's wool producers, RIST won a contract in 1995 to deliver training in Wool and Sheep Classing throughout the South East of Australia. An independent evaluation of the program by Melbourne University indicated that it was successful and effective by prevailing industry standards, as measured by the number of people who changed their breeding, selection and classing activities as a result of attending a RIST training session.

RIST has since expanded the training it offers to encompass a wide range of agricultural issues and as a result has established a nationwide network within the agricultural industry. RIST provides training opportunities for people in rural communities that covers topics such as beef and sheep breeding, pasture husbandry, animal nutrition, cropping, marketing, risk management, occupational health and safety, wool and sheep classing, shearing, animal health, and training in natural resource management. Support for these programs is sourced from Victorian state educational funding and through individual state FarmBis schemes. RIST is retained by Meat and Livestock Australia to manage and deliver programs from the EDGENetwork in Victoria.

Methodology

The Training Manager at RIST was telephone-interviewed in May 2005, with a number of follow-up telephone calls and emails in June – November. Three course participants were approached and we subsequently interviewed them by telephone. We also interviewed a consultant who had delivered RIST training on a contractual basis. Documentation about RIST was provided by the Training Manager. We also accessed RIST's website.

Good practice

In recent years RIST has increased the number of workshop types it offers and generally enjoys above-budget producer numbers at these workshops.

Meeting needs of course participants

Half of RIST's students are under 30 years of age, with many of the rest much older. Their industry background includes beef, wool growing and prime lamb production.

RIST believes there is increasing awareness of the advantages of accredited training. Many of its short courses are aligned against training package competencies, so that students who successfully complete an accredited course have the opportunity to obtain competencies that can go towards building recognised qualifications. There is now also an opportunity through RIST

to obtain a nationally recognised Diploma of Agriculture by participation in a range of short course training activities. A feature of the Diploma is that many of the course participants still work full time in agriculture.

In order to better meet the needs of trainees, RIST surveys the students both pre- and post-course. The pre-course survey asks trainees about their industry and training background. As part of a needs-analysis section, it asks about physical requirements, learning needs and access barriers, computer literacy and literacy and numeracy. The Training Manager says: 'If for instance there are literacy and numeracy issues, the deliverer needs to know about them in advance.' Where students indicate they have difficulties RIST provides support or ensures the training program is altered to reflect and meet these needs. It is also important to gain an understanding of course participants' existing skills to ensure that the training is tailored to the individual and group needs and that underpinning knowledge requirements of the training are recognised, where applicable. Skill-based questions for the Prograze course are shown in Figure 20 below.

Please circle appropriate response according to your current level of understanding.
(A rating of 1 indicates a low level of understanding and 5 indicates a high level of understanding).

Criteria

Implement feeding plans (e.g. feed budgeting)	1	2	3	4	5
Develop feeding plans(e.g. animal requirements and pasture availability)	1	2	3	4	5
Animal assessment (e.g. fat scoring)	1	2	3	4	5
Pasture assessment(e.g. quality and quantity)	1	2	3	4	5
Fodder conservation (e.g. quality of hay)	1	2	3	4	5
Soil type	1	2	3	4	5
Grazing management (e.g. rotational grazing)	1	2	3	4	5
Animal Nutrition (e.g. animals requirements)	1	2	3	4	5
Animal health	1	2	3	4	5

Fig. 20. Example from RIST Prograze pre-course survey.

A post-course survey is completed by course participants at the conclusion of the training. The post-course survey aims to compare the course participants' level of understanding against pre-determined topic areas, and look for evidence of improvement occurring as a result of participation in the training. It also evaluates the effectiveness of the delivery and provides course participants with opportunities to identify where improvements to the course can be made (see Fig. 21 below).

RIST believes subsidised targeted funding assists in easing the cost of training to course participants, thus addressing the skills shortage in agriculture. In Victoria RIST has access to training funds enabling it to offer training at reduced costs to the course participant. It also has strong support from FarmBis and is able to use this to provide subsidised training to eligible farmers on approved courses.

Delivery modes: Innovative response to training challenges

RIST has an innovative delivery system by which it retains all presenters on a contractual basis, accessing these industry experts from across Australia for all its training programs. Training is focused on being up to date and delivered in locations (usually on farm) where sufficient demand exists. It takes training to where there is need. The Training Manager says RIST has a process in place to select good trainers: 'We select people with the technical and practical skills to be able to deliver the training and work with them to become best facilitators.' One training deliverer said evaluating the learning was one area where RIST's interactive process with deliverers was useful to her: 'RIST will work with you, one on one or in groups of deliverers, and we talk through the competencies until we all get a good grasp on evaluation.'

RIST has about 60 contracted deliverers. Delivery, sometimes conducted in teams, takes place on-farm, in the workplace. RIST students also have access to facilities on a 1000-hectare research farm owned and operated by the Department of Primary Industries.

The Training Manager says that group size is an issue. He is trying to reduce this to groups of 6 – 15 like-minded participants to ensure that the training provides an opportunity for all to learn whilst maintaining a diversity of ideas.

RIST's 2004 review of training programs suggested that no single factor results in the adoption of on-farm change, but that the solution would lie 'in a series of incremental measures drawn from the feedback provided by the key stakeholders'⁴⁷.

An important part of this outcome being achieved was through the development of the pre- and post-course surveys, the retention of group facilitators who have the capacity to manage the training needs of the individual course participants, and through the capping of group sizes.

An abbreviated example of the post-course survey (again from Prograze training) is given in Figure 21 (below).

Section 2. Skill Based Questions

Please circle the appropriate response according to your current level of understanding.

(A rating of 1 indicates a low level of understanding and 5 indicates a high level of understanding).

Criteria

Implement feeding plans (e.g. feed budgeting)	1	2	3	4	5
Develop feeding plans(e.g. animal requirements and pasture availability)	1	2	3	4	5
Animal assessment (e.g. fat scoring)	1	2	3	4	5

⁴⁷ RIST (2004). Annual Report, p. 5. Hamilton, Vic.

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Pasture assessment(e.g. quality and quantity)	1	2	3	4	5
Fodder conservation (e.g. quality of hay)	1	2	3	4	5
Soil type	1	2	3	4	5
Grazing management (e.g. rotational grazing)	1	2	3	4	5
Animal Nutrition (e.g. animals requirements)	1	2	3	4	5
Animal health	1	2	3	4	5
Implement feeding plans (e.g. feed budgeting)	1	2	3	4	5

General questions

Were you able to implement change into your farming enterprises as a result of the training?

- Yes
- No

Were there any barriers associated with the training that limited your ability to implement change?

- Yes
- No

If Yes

Were your expectations met in terms of the training offered?

- Yes
- No

List the three most valuable skills you obtained from the training?

1.
2.
3.

Do you have any suggestions to how this program could be improved in the future?

.....
.....
.....

Please rate the overall delivery of this course. Please circle the appropriate response.

Poor	Below Average	Neutral	Average	Above Average	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5	6

Fig. 21. Example from RIST Prograze post-course survey

The Diploma course, conducted at the RIST Centre in Hamilton, is undertaken over two years on a part time basis with students participating in sessions approximately one day per fortnight. The focus of the course is on industry and flexible learning with a balance of on-farm and off-farm training activities. Students learn the latest skills and management practices with modules such as Prograze. There is strong focus on business management and its application to farm enterprises. Topics covered include pasture management, animal nutrition, stock selection, business planning, financial management, human resources, and marketing and trading. While each module is separate, the course culminates in each student presenting a Farm Production plan to the group. This encourages students not to take each subject as a separate piece but to see it as part of a whole farm planning process.

Completion rates

The past year has seen 1059 students undertaking training at AQF levels 4 and 5 with RIST contractors. Fifteen Diploma of Agriculture students are due to graduate in December 2005.

Most short courses offered by RIST are accredited training activities and as such meet the requirements of the Australian Quality Training Framework. Programs such as BeefCheque, Productive Weaner Management, Sheep Nutrition, Manage Pasture for Livestock Nutrition and Top Fodder program are examples of short course training activities that meet these criteria. Two farmers who participated in the BeefCheque three-year program said that the continuity of the model, the on-farm venues and the extension of networks were positive aspects of the training. Both were implementing improved grazing and pasture management techniques on their own farms as a direct result of the training. One said: 'The delivery was outstanding, stimulating and challenging.' The other said a group of farmers had formed their own project group as a result of the training, in order to increase their own capacity in planning and decision-making.

Non-accredited courses offered by RIST include Selling Options, Time Control and Farm succession planning.

Collaboration with industry and other networks

RIST has support from the Department of Education and Training (Victoria), the Department of Primary Industries (Victoria) and FarmBis. Industry collaboration and consultation is continuous, with farmer and industry organisations such as the BestWOOL 2010, Southern Farming Systems, Meat and Livestock Australia and Dairy Australia. It has networks with an extensive range of deliverers and presenters who are contracted by RIST to deliver or facilitate training. One of these has worked with RIST to develop new courses. She says interaction with producers is an integral part of this. 'People express interest in some sort of course, RIST develops one and pilots it with a group of producers, takes on board their response, makes changes where necessary.'

The Training Manager says that individual State Training Authority requirements have an enormous influence on the training RIST and other RTOs offer:

Compliance has become one of the single biggest issues in vocational training and education. The usefulness of the training packages and the ability of the Registered Training Organisation to interpret and to work with the training packages will in most cases determine how successful they are meeting the needs of their target audience.

Competency based training is about taking training into the workplace and applying and developing skills that improve the organisational effectiveness of the people working within the business.

RIST promotes its training through advertising in the major media and on local radio and community newspapers, newsletter and email lists. It has established strong relationships with people in the local rural community.

What makes this RTO a model of good practice?

Our survey of other stakeholders reveals that industry wants flexibility and customisation from deliverers of training to agricultural producers. RIST's focus is on the provision of both. Good practice elements include:

- building training programs around enterprise needs;
- expert-facilitated delivery of training;
- on-farm in-workplace delivery;
- successful completion of courses by large numbers of participants;
- first intake of Diploma students about to graduate;
- networks of industry collaboration and consultation.

Curtin University VTE Centre, WA

Case summary

- TAFE-style VET centre on a regional/remote campus of a university.
- Agriculture students mainly working on farms and stations, some very remote, seeking flexibility in time-frames & delivery modes. RPL an important factor.
- Collaborations and networks between VTEC and industry people stimulating on-farm training.
- Upskilling of property managers and farmers.

Background

Curtin Vocational Training Education Centre (VTEC) is a nationally accredited provider of vocational training and educational services to over 58,000 people in the Goldfields-Esperance region, which covers almost a quarter of Western Australia. This region is characterised by its homogeneity, its physical remoteness and its perceived sense of isolation. Regional vocational education and training participation is lower than the state average⁴⁸.

There are two VTEC campuses, in Kalgoorlie and Esperance, and students are spread across a vast area covering hundreds of square kilometres. The Esperance centre's area of responsibility extends in an arc 130 kilometres inland from Esperance, and is divided into two regions: the Northern Goldfields pastoral stations on mining properties, and the Esperance farming zone specialising mostly in sheep and wheat. Provision of training delivery in rural communities is influenced by a number of factors^{49 50}, including:

- Small numbers of trainees, sometimes insufficient for 'critical mass';
- Access to qualified trainers due to geographic isolation;
- The problem of thin markets and competition; and
- Access to relevant workplaces.

The main issues for the Esperance VTEC are therefore two-fold – how to provide quality education and training and how to increase access to education and training in the region⁵¹.

In recent years collaborations and partnerships between educational providers have attempted to address 'the economic and perceived tyrannies of size and distance'⁵² by facilitating the sharing

⁴⁸ Curtin University of Technology (n.d.). Submission to the Standing Committee on Primary Industries and Regional Services: Inquiry into infrastructure and the development of Australia's regional areas. Accessed October 2005 from <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/primind/rdinq/sub78-e.pdf>

⁴⁹ Clayton, B, Blom, K, Bateman A & Carden P (2004). What works where you are? The implementation of training packages in rural Australia. Adelaide: NCVER.

⁵⁰ CRLRA (2001). Learning communities in education and training. Vol 1 and 2. Report on the Role of VET in Regional Australia project for ANTA. Launceston: Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia, University of Tasmania.

⁵¹ Curtin University of Technology (1998). Submission to the Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations: Inquiry into the role of Institutes of TAFE. Accessed October 2005 from <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/edt/tafes/subs/SUB67-1.htm>

⁵² Curtin University of Technology (n.d.). Submission to the Standing Committee on Primary Industries and Regional Services: Inquiry into infrastructure and the development of Australia's regional areas. P. 5. Accessed October 2005 from <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/primind/rdinq/sub78-e.pdf>

of resources and greater articulation between educational sectors. Intersectoral cooperation arrangements have tended to be relatively informal. However, recent links between the sectors have been institutionalised⁵³, assisted in Esperance by the joint housing of post compulsory education (higher education, vocational education and training, and the Education Department of Western Australia) in a purpose-built facility along with offices of the Shire and the community.

Methodology

The Agricultural Lecturer at VTEC, Esperance, was telephone-interviewed in May 2005, with a number of follow-up telephone calls and emails in June – November. Six former students and short course participants were approached and we subsequently interviewed them by telephone. We also interviewed a producer who employs VTEC trainees. Documentation about VTEC, including student feedback forms and course data, was provided by the Agricultural Lecturer. We also accessed the Centre's website.

Good practice

Among other vocational training VTEC offers courses in agriculture from Certificate to Advanced Diploma level. VTEC in Esperance is a relatively small provider in terms of numbers of students: consistently 30 agriculture students per year, with backgrounds in the sheep and cattle industries, study in courses from Certificate II through to Advanced Diploma, with the 17 of these currently doing Certificate IV to Advanced Diploma. It is however a good example of how one provider has come to terms with the challenges of training in the more remote parts of Australia. It is also a useful study as an example of a university VET centre functioning well at a time when some Australian universities are discontinuing their involvement in VET (e.g., University of Melbourne), or not delivering VET courses in agriculture due to lack of demand (e.g., Charles Darwin University, NT, see Draft Interim Report p. 19).

Meeting needs of trainees

As one of the interviewees in this project's Other Stakeholders Survey commented, the time available for extension training in a producer's year may be no more than ten days. Many would therefore opt for short courses. VTEC recognises this need, and regularly organises for clients of comparable skill levels to converge on Esperance for short courses. Examples of such courses include a two-day Farm Business Planning course, Agrimaster software, Farm Welding and Chemical courses. These are offered on a fee for service basis.

The elements that motivate people in agriculture to do accredited training are varied, but within a fairly narrow range. Job prospects are often central to the decision. One station hand did some searching on the Internet and came upon the VTE Centre. He saw a Diploma qualification as a pathway to a better job. As a result of his Rural Business Management training, he is now managing a number of large properties. He says he got the job because he could do business plans. Another man undertook Diploma studies because at the time physical problems indicated that he might not be able to continue with the farming life; he thought it might be a pathway to a job with the Department of Agriculture or something similar.

Certificate IV units for study usually include Implement and Monitor a Property Improvement Plan, Administer Finance, Insurance and Legal Requirements, Prepare and Monitor Budgets and Financial Reports, Operate within a Budget Framework, Implement and Monitor Quality Assurance Procedures. Diploma units include Develop & Review a Business Plan, Develop a

⁵³ Office of Higher Education (WA) website (2005). <http://www.des.wa.gov.au/offices/highedu/content2.htm> [Accessed November 2005].

Whole Farm Plan, Manage Livestock Production, Develop and Implement a Breeding Strategy, and Arrange Marketing of Livestock.

For a Diploma of Agriculture student in the Esperance farming zone flexibility of delivery was critical. Time constraints were the hardest part of the training. At the time, she was looking after the business aspects of her farm as well as teaching at the local school. She was a part-time student who never came on campus. She worked from home, using a Rural Training Council of Australia learning guide, and sometimes used the Internet for research. She says visits from the lecturer were important in providing continued guidance.

One Diploma of Agriculture graduate began his studies with no support from his employers, a mining company with – at that time – little interest in pastoral outcomes. He especially wanted to develop RBM skills, and because the job he had at the time did not include such skill levels there was a moment when he almost gave up on the idea of study. However he had previously participated in an 8-day Grazing for Profit workshop, and this, together with the assistance of his VTEC trainer, helped him do a Business Plan as part of the Diploma course. His employer of the time has since put this into effect.

VTEC believes that meeting the needs of students is crucial. Given their remoteness and working commitments, it is unlikely these people would continue their training if their needs were not met effectively. However funding issues present a considerable difficulty. Recent cuts in the maximum nominal hours for RTOs mean less money coming in.

Skills Recognition, recommended by the WA Department of Agriculture, is an important part of VTEC's courses. Clients already have important skills, but most are time-poor and would not be interested in enrolling for training in skills they already have. Although the flexibility to RPL is built into the VET system, in practice credit is not always easy to obtain, because of the lack of documentation or because of institutional pressures on registered training organisations to supply training⁵⁴. VTEC offers a process for people to use experience gained in the workplace or through prior participation in unaccredited short courses towards a recognised national qualification.

In the Esperance farming zone, a farmer's wife was able to get substantial credit towards a Diploma of Agriculture through RPL. She had 'done the books' on the farm for over 25 years, and had also attended a number of short courses on farm budgeting. A young man working on a family farm was able to get RPL towards a Diploma, with partners on the farm signing off on competencies he could demonstrate. A station hand in the Northern Goldfields region was able to compile a folder of documentation of the skills he had developed from working in agriculture for twenty years.

RPL, one Advanced Diploma graduate says, 'is an action thing' requiring the active participation of the student and allowing him/her to reflect constructively on the detail in the units of competency and how this relates to their currently held experience and skills. But the agriculture lecturer at VTEC says that with the new Rural Production Training Package, unlike the superseded one, it can be difficult to build more basic skills into a level 5 competency program.

⁵⁴ Coutts, J & Roberts, J (2005). Capacity building for innovation. Phase 2. Milestone 1: Better aligning VET and extension. Report prepared for the Cooperative Venture for Human Capacity Building for Innovation in Rural Industries.

There are also no supporting learning guides with new training package, or assessment tools. This adds to costs for the RTO. The VTEC agriculture lecturer asks: 'When they generate a new training package, why aren't assessment tools developed nationally as well?' The inclusion of learning guides and assessment tools would promote consistency in delivery across Australia.

Clients want tailoring of work programs to their individual needs. For some students, the hardest thing about the training is getting started. They have usually worked in agriculture all their lives, but may have done no formal learning since schooldays. Selection of units requires care and a supportive trainer. At VTEC they can start their training at any time of the year. Both training and assessment can occur entirely in the workplace.

Delivery modes: Innovative response to training challenges

Short courses and flexible on farm/station delivery are the two main modes of delivery. VTEC assists students to select appropriate units to match any mentoring available on worksites. Customisation is important to clients. One Esperance region farmer found this invaluable: 'Using real background stuff towards a qualification benefited the farm at the same time.'

A VTEC lecturer visits every 8-10 weeks for periods of up to three hours. Students see these visits as very important. They talk, look at students' course books, and discuss units. They also speak on the phone. Students like the personal contact. Much of the learning is paper-based. Some students have email access and do some research online, but online learning does not play a major role in their training. The lecturer says online access is a useful tool, but his students would not be receptive to 100% E-delivery. He says his visits 'keep them on track'. He also makes use of these occasions to market training to non-trainees.

VTEC's delivery of training is facilitated and enhanced through links with industry people.

Completion rates

VTEC completion rates in Agriculture are around 97%.

Recent Diploma students are enthusiastic about the value of study. Some may do more. They say that their training continues to pay off. One recent student now has an innovative approach to his job managing a number of pastoral stations in the Northern Goldfields region: he has in hand a project to introduce new breeds of sheep, good for meat as well as wool, faster growing and hardier, on the properties he manages. As part of his studies he prepared a 5 year business plan which he is now putting into practice. He believes that producers who do not upgrade their skills will get left behind. He gives managers working under him opportunities to train, and encouragement. He also acts as supervisor for station hands doing Certificates II and III. He says training is '100% important . . . It gives a young bloke a mission.' He believes that turning the work into a learning exercise also improves the way it is done.

Doing a farm physical plan gave another student a better understanding of soil types and paddock uses. She says there is a core group of farmers in her area who are very aware of the benefits of training and who are keen to improve their skills, either through interacting at Top Crop meetings dealing with crop production and pasture management, or through accredited training.

Collaboration with industry and other networks

Curtin VTEC has embraced the concept of networks collaborating actively to form linkages with the potential market for training delivery. It has working relationships with industry and with agencies supporting industry. It collaborates with community, local and regional business, and other educational providers. Its Agriculture Lecturer, with a background in the industry and in the

WA Department of Agriculture, embodies the concept of collaborative networking. These collaborative factors enable VTEC to connect with the varied elements that motivate clients to train.

VTEC collaborates with local producer groups. Industry leadership in the area is interested in management skill development. A Human Resources In Agriculture Forum is being planned for 2006. VTEC has informal partnerships with general managers of mining company owned pastoral properties across the Northern Goldfields area. A good number of these now have Diploma qualifications through VTEC and are keen to promote training among their employees. The offer of on-the-job training is frequently made in their job vacancy advertisements. In this way they perform the unofficial role of training brokers. Station hands are offered the chance to do Certificates II and III through the New Apprenticeship program, with RPL and new skills development which offers them a career pathway in agriculture. Units are selected by the student, employer and the VTEC lecturer in line with the capability of the property and the mentoring available. VTEC has a supervisor suitability checklist, and it targets top producers to ensure that mentoring will be good. The training consists of on-station supervised work, with bi-monthly monitoring visits from the lecturer. Different forms of assessment are used to assess each student: oral exam, demonstration, written and third party. Oral assessment can be useful for Certificate 2 students with literacy problems.

The VTEC campus in Esperance is part of a complex including the high school, community college and library. This enables sharing of resources and promotes greater articulation between sectors; it also offers VTEC opportunity to access potential students, and vice versa. VTEC's collaboration with local business has resulted in useful short courses being provided to agriculture clients, for example, an Esperance IT business runs regular 8-hour training sessions at the Community College in the AgriMaster software, covering financial management and payroll, GST, insurance, paddock records, rainfall recording, and R & D records. The training is significantly subsidised through the Smart Business funding program and also through FarmBis. One person who undertook it says many small business owners 'would tend not to do training without a subsidy'. One farming couple came from 300 km away to participate in the session. Many participants expressed interest in advanced courses.

Our survey of RTOs found that 61% of interviewees thought that the quality of trainers was a negative influence on the training they delivered. Many RTOs said that there is not a big pool of people with the right blend of practical and academic experience, or with good technical understanding of management issues – particularly in the regions. Curtin VTEC's agriculture lecturer would appear to have these qualities. One of his former students says simply: 'He was brilliant.' Others said: 'He's always willing to help out where needed', and 'on-station visits were excellent'.

He is also an energetic marketer of training. One former student began his Diploma of Agriculture training after coming upon the lecturer's information booth at a Rural Youth Group's succession planning day. He had known the lecturer before, as an officer in the Department of Agriculture, and went over to talk to him. The lecturer later came out to the farm and they planned a course. He travels regularly through his area and is at all times alert to opportunities to discuss training. VTEC connections include community groups such as the Rural, Regional, Remote Women's Network, Esperance Regional Forum (ERF), South Coast Regional Initiative Planning Team (SCRIPT), Top Crop Groups, and Agricultural Department Advisory Groups.

What makes this RTO a model of good practice?

The training context of south-eastern Western Australia is as good an example of the challenges of remoteness and isolation as will be found anywhere in Australia where the beef cattle and sheep and wool industries are to be found. VTEC's story evidences good practice particularly in the following areas:

- its energetic promotion of training through networks of industry and other groups;
- its commitment to flexibility and customisation of its training product to suit individual needs of clients;
- its use of RPL: clients' existing skills are recognised and accredited; clients are guided to more confident and fuller understanding of their existing competencies and underpinning skills; and clients are encouraged to build on these and engage with the potential of further training;
- quality of trainer: up-to-date expert industry skills, good industry networks, highly developed training and interpersonal skills.