

Inquiry into Rural Skills Training and Research

Please find comments put forward by the National Conservation and Land Management Training Providers Network. This network is the peak representative body for vocational trainers, educators and assessors in the conservation and land management discipline. Members are drawn from all states and territories, with some teaching across both the Conservation and Land Management and Rural Production Training Packages.

This paper presents some issues for consideration in the education and training field and attempts to answer some key questions raised in the review discussion paper.

1. Adequacy of current agricultural training

The National Conservation and Land Management Training Providers Network (CLM TPN) believes the current national vocational education and training agenda in rural production and agriculture needs a stronger emphasis on conservation land management and sustainable land and water use. Two key issues that are central to sustainable landuse in Australia are managing salinity and maintaining and improving biodiversity, yet neither are adequately reflected in the national rural production training package.

Gaps or inadequacies in the national rural production training package and current training provision include:

- Salinity
- Biodiversity
- Vegetation management (AQF 4 and above)
- Fire awareness and management
- Water monitoring and management
- Erosion prevention and management
- Soil health and biology
- Maintenance and restoration of riparian zones
- Mapping using GPS and GIS technology
- Precision agriculture for targeting and minimising agricultural inputs
- Organic production systems (currently under development with the Rural Training Council of Australia)
- Wetland management
- Development of fertiliser strategies or programs
- Fodder conservation and management
- Assessment of natural resource status
- Preventing or minimising herbicide resistance
- Development and assessment of farm hygiene and quarantine procedures
- Assessing the value of GM technology in farming systems
- A structured approach to Environmental Management Systems in agriculture.

2. Future industry training needs

The training gaps identified above can be addressed largely through the development of new national competency standards or the revision of existing units of competency in the rural production training package (RTE03).

The CLM TPN believes the current Rural Training Package and, in particular the agricultural stream, needs to be updated and reviewed. This includes changing the current qualification packaging rules to allow for greater flexibility in training and the use of appropriate import units from other training packages.

The current system in place for revising and modifying components of the training package is onerous, slow and time and resource intensive. Minor modifications to existing units of competency as required by industry are discouraged due to the bureaucratic process involved. This means vocational training can be slow to react to emerging industry needs and be in the position of 'catch-up' with industry and improving training and assessment outcomes. It is unsatisfactory that the turn around time to respond to changed industry needs is realistically in the order of two to three years (more likely three). Our network believes a change to the ANTA rules for continuous improvement is needed.

At higher Australian Qualification Training Framework (AQTF) levels (certificate 4 and above) there is a focus on generic management skills while there is a lack of higher level technical skills. To improve training outcomes, ANTA needs to abandon its commitment to more generic units and provide more detail in its competencies. Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) rely on training packages for their training specifications (their intended purpose). More and more generic units provide RTOs with less and less in the way of training and assessment specifications, which will lead to poorer training outcomes where generic units of competency are used in technical skill areas. Generic units are acceptable and are best used in business and communication fields.

The Conservation and Land Management Training Providers Network sees that future training needs in agriculture will be influenced mainly by technology change, diversification and change of land use, emerging niche markets and the provision of environmental services by private landholders.

3. Links and coordination between education, research and extension

The merging of traditional extension services and vocational education and training has been raised as a desirable development for Australian agriculture (Falvey and Matthews 1999).

The CLM TPN believes there is considerable scope to improve links between agricultural advisory services, vocational training and research organisations. Research and development corporations and Cooperative Research Centres should be encouraged to engage with vocational training providers and recognise the benefits of not only developing relationships with universities in the Higher Education sector, but

also in developing relationships with appropriate Registered Training Organisations who focus on practical skills based programs. Our network has seen the benefits of working with the CRC for Australian Weed Management in identifying and developing appropriate technical resources for training.

Vocational training providers can assist both primary producers and land and environmental management professionals by ensuring quality, consistency and access to training and extension activities, and by providing administrative support services in documentation, recording and evaluating and extending learning.

The merging of traditional extension services and vocational education and training will provide more opportunities for producers to gain recognition from activities and informal learning they would generally take part in.

4. The role of the Australian government in supporting education, research and advisory programs

The CLM TPN suggests the Australian government can support improved outcomes from education, research and advisory programs by:

- Providing resources for the development of quality support and resource material, especially in technical areas that relate to specific units of competency. Quality resources are critical to the delivery of external/distance education and the provision of remote learning opportunities.
- Promoting vocational training and its value and role in promoting change towards sustainable landuse.
- Improving the flexibility and currency of existing training packages for vocational education and training in agriculture. This will improve industry partnerships and encourage a wider skill set for students.
- Encouraging research and development corporations and cooperative research centres to include national vocational education and training outcomes in their programs.

Conclusion

Sustainable and competitive agricultural industries rely on the skills and abilities of farm managers and their staff. Targeted, industry-based training that conforms to robust national standards can develop these skills and is a critical component of continual improvement in farm management.

Reference

Falvey L. & Matthews B. (1999). *Revitalising Agricultural Extension*. A report for the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation. RIRDC Publication 99/172.