

**RESPONSE TO  
INQUIRY INTO RURAL SKILLS TRAINING AND RESEARCH  
conducted by  
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON  
AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FORESTRY**

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**Response to Terms of Reference No 1**

*The availability and adequacy of education and research services in the agriculture sector, including access to vocational training and pathways from vocational education and training to tertiary education and work.*

Accredited vocational training within the agriculture industry is driven by the industry sector through the implementation of the endorsed RTE03 Rural Production Training Package. Registered training organisations (RTOs) are granted the right to deliver whole or partial qualifications comprised of industry competency standards documented in the National Training Package, subject to RTO compliance with the provisions of the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) administered by the State Training Authority in each state and/or territory.

The Southern Queensland Institute of TAFE (SQIT) is a public training provider within the TAFE Queensland organisation and reports to the Queensland Department of Employment and Training. The Institute has previously contributed submissions to the review of individual Training Packages and also to the ANTA High Level Review of Training Packages.

SQIT's training activities predominantly occur in the southwest region of Queensland, which is approximately one third of the state in area. However, the Institute also conducts training in other regional and remote communities throughout Queensland and also operates international programs – eg, wool classing to students in the Falklands Islands.

SQIT is registered to deliver whole or partial programs relevant to the following rural sectors:

- beef production
- grain production
- cotton production
- dairy
- sheep and wool
- fruit and vegetable production

- nursery, parks and gardens, and landscaping
- conservation and land management.

SQIT recognises industry as the ‘owner’ of the training agenda for the rural sector and, given the diverse nature of the relevant industries (as listed above), attempts to respond to geographically dispersed and vocationally specific client groups by offering a range of delivery options that attempt to meet enterprise and individual training needs.

This responsiveness includes:

- active promotion to the industry for uptake of Traineeships and New Apprenticeships;
- provision of entry-level training to encourage new workers to the industry;
- tailoring of training programs to suit personal requirements of the individual student as well as the enterprise/employer;
- extended provision of training, often to a class of one, at the actual worksite;
- recognition of existing workers’ skill-sets (ie, Recognition of Prior Learning/ Recognition of Current Competency) enabling the attainment of AQF competencies or full qualifications;
- fostering a culture of life-long learning and encouraging operatives to pursue a viable career path and remain within the industry.

SQIT additionally supports regional Queensland through the provision of training to industries allied to the agricultural industry, including:

- engineering and construction trades
- automotive trades including light and heavy vehicle, diesel fitting
- transport and distribution
- business management, administration and accounting
- food and meat processing
- community services including childcare, age care and nursing
- information technology
- hospitality
- tourism
- visual arts including graphic design, multi media and photography
- learning support services, including literacy, numeracy and other special needs.

*Further details regarding the training of target groups/industry cohorts are provided in the Appendix to this submission.*

There are many factors affecting the delivery, availability and uptake of training in the rural, agricultural and business sectors that SQIT caters to. These include:

- Small and dispersed populations are a characteristic of regional districts, and travelling long distances to training venues is difficult for many students. Programs tend to be conducted in the Southwest Queensland region at locations (regional campuses) centrally placed to cater to target markets. However travel and accommodation expenses are often prohibitive for many prospective students. Institute staff provide a large proportion of rural training via off campus mode – typically for traineeship students – however student numbers in remote and isolated areas are consistently low. The Institute’s efforts to provide flexibility in training are often not adequate,

appropriate or cost effective in meeting the diversity of individual needs that exist ... for example, blended approaches utilising e-learning technology, web-based applications, etc, have not proved highly successful with rural based students.

- The continuing drought has placed ongoing financial pressure on rural communities. Rural enterprises and individuals are affected by a reduction in disposable income. Instances have occurred where Institute staff have developed training programs which are subsequently not taken up due to consumer inability or disinclination to meet the fees and charges associated with the delivery. Training offered through funded initiatives by the Queensland Department of Employment and Training – resulting in no cost or a high level of subsidy to the student – tends to attract higher enrolment numbers. All of this indicates that, in general, training is valued but that fees and charges (even if fairly ‘reasonable’) are a disincentive.
- Seasonal production demands add to the difficulty of scheduling appropriate training. Often programs are developed, with dates and durations pre-determined, only to have students withdrawn from the activity by their employers due to seasonal conditions which require labour at critical times. Training processes cannot always be aligned with production processes because of the issues associated with production timeframes. Institute staff try to make allowances for these contingencies, however if the program is continued it usually results in a reduced student cohort, lack of continuity and consequently becomes an unviable venture. Further training often has to be additionally timetabled to deliver the training outcomes for those who were forced to withdraw from the original timeframe. Extra pressure is thus placed on the Institute in trying to meet the industry’s training expectations within a funding base that struggles to cater to these factors.

While RTOs can provide opportunities for training entry level workers and upskilling of existing workers, and can offer higher-level programs for farm/business management by accessing various government funding sources, the reality is that most public funding is assigned to the entry-level or lower occupational categories. As stated earlier, this Institute devotes a majority of its resources to providing quality training to apprentices and trainees.

Entry or lower level training does have the benefit of contributing to the pool of skilled workers for the rural/agriculture sector. However it does not address other prevailing issues such as the high turnover of employees and the lack of long-term career aspirations by many younger people in rural communities.

A decline in the uptake of employment or training by school leavers has been experienced during recent years. Many school leavers are opting for career paths which lead them away from the land. Within the school sector, university pathways have tended to be promoted to a greater degree than vocational education and training pathways.

The promotion of a seamless pathway from school to the vocational education and training sector, and on to tertiary level - underpinned by viable and sustainable employment opportunities in the agricultural industry - is critical to the industry’s survival. Present arrangements offer students some limited credits between each educational sector, but not to an extent where seamless relationships are clearly evident (in the eyes of consumers).

## **Response to Terms of Reference No 2**

*The skills needs of agricultural industries in Australia, including the expertise and capacity of industries to specify the skills-sets required for training, and the extent to which vocational training meets the needs of rural industries.*

Identifying specific industry requirements and determining training demand is often difficult to administer, due to the specialised nature of employment across the rural sector. Operations in Southwest Queensland range from poultry and egg production through to beef, dairy, pork, sheep and wool, grain and cotton production, and amenity and production horticulture. The variations in production processes, skills and industry knowledge require an equally diverse range of teaching personnel. The mix of industrial expertise and training qualifications necessary to provide a variety of quality training products to the rural sector is a limiting factor and often results in a restricted range of products/courses on offer by the Institute.

As indicated in the previous section, SQIT tends to cater to the lower end of the skill continuum for the rural/agriculture sector. This situation is generally in response to requests from clients to provide training to ‘industry newcomers’ in an attempt to overcome chronic skills shortages.

Associated with this, there is a low level of understanding by some employers of the intent of vocational training and the various levels that exist in the national qualifications framework. For example, there are instances where employers have an expectation that entry-level workers have a fully developed range of well established skills and that the employee “can hit the ground running” with little or no supervision or further training within the workplace.

The fact that most of the rural-related training is in the lower qualification/competency brackets, but that skills shortages continue to grow, suggests that many trained workers are not remaining in the industry, or transition in and out of the industry due to unappealing employment prospects or conditions. It is also notable that much of the lower-level training is catering to a transient workforce whose skill needs are continually changing subject to the specialisations of employers, seasonal demands, regional influences and product variations.

Aside from programs that are separately funded by initiatives such as ‘FarmBis’, there has not been a highly evident industry demand for management related training, or higher-level VET programs such as Diploma or Advanced Diploma, in the Southwest Queensland region.

## **Response to Terms of Reference No 3**

*The provision of extension and advisory services to agricultural industries, including links and coordination between education, research and extension.*

Since the rural sector is characterised by a highly decentralised environment and a diverse product range, this Institute considers it imperative that strong connections are maintained with a wide range of key stakeholders to ensure that industry’s training needs are

accurately identified and training resources are correctly employed. Methods utilised by SQIT to maintain this collaborative approach include:

- The establishment of Industry Advisory Committees to provide advice to the Institute with regard to local training needs;
- Maintaining a strong relationship with the (state) Industry Training Advisory Body;
- Maintaining strong links with specialist client groups, local enterprises, industry representative associations and relevant government agencies;
- Participating in formal and informal networks with other TAFE Queensland institutes that conduct rural-related training;
- Networking intrastate and interstate with other training providers, higher education institutions and educational research agencies (such as Cooperative Research Centres).

#### **Response to Terms of Reference No 4**

*The role of the Australian government in supporting education, research and advisory programs to support the viability and sustainability of Australian agriculture.*

The Southern Queensland Institute of TAFE is a state government agency and considers it inappropriate to comment on Commonwealth Government policy and strategic directions.

## Appendix

### Target Groups

**New Entrants** to the agricultural industry are offered training through the Traineeship system. Partnerships can be formed with New Apprenticeship Centres and Group Training agencies to establish and promote traineeships through school careers markets and agricultural science departments of local schools. Repeat business, word of mouth and cold canvassing directly to producers are sound promotional strategies for rural communities.

**Existing Workers** in the industry are able to access traineeships, recognition of prior learning (RPL) and short-duration programs to fill identifiable skills gaps within the enterprise. Institute staff plan and deliver training and provide support to the farm/workplace. Workshops at locations convenient to the students are also offered to existing workers.

**School Students** are considered an important target market by Institute staff. The future rural workforce will grow if the programs conducted within the secondary school system are relevant to the industry and articulate to post-secondary programs. Currently, school based traineeships are the predominant offering to school students. However many school age student attend workshops offered by the Institute across the region. The Queensland Government's current Education and Training Reforms for the Future (ETRF) initiative has promoted closer relationships between schools and TAFE Queensland institutes, prompting the Southern Queensland Institute to increase offerings in entry level certificate pre-employment programs for 2006.

**Enterprise Training** is promoted via workshops and traineeship programs. Institute officers conduct a training needs analysis where necessary and develop a training strategy to assist the producer in upskilling their workforce. Producers are also provided with information about Commonwealth Government training incentives and State Government training funds available to facilitate training. Group Training schemes and New Apprenticeship Centres are also involved in these processes in an attempt to keep producers well informed.