
The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia

Skills: Rural Australia's Need

Inquiry into rural skills training and research

House of Representatives

Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

February 2007
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Foreword

A highly skilled rural workforce is vital to the economic future of Australia. Maintaining and enhancing those skills in a dynamic and highly competitive international environment requires investment in world class training, extension and research services. Only by making such investment will our rural industries remain at the forefront of agriculture and forestry internationally.

Despite this, the evidence received by the committee during the course of its inquiry indicated that there are severe skills shortages in rural industries and significant gaps in our capacity to respond to those shortages.

First and foremost are the negative perceptions surrounding agriculture and forestry. Although these are dynamic industries with strong prospects, they are widely perceived as sunset industries with little to offer ambitious and capable people. In truth, Australia's rural industries offer a wide diversity of career options, ranging from farm hands with the freedom to move within and between industries, through machine operators with specialised skills, to business managers and research scientists. Agriculture is not just farming and forestry is not just cutting down trees. The community needs to be educated as to the role agriculture and forestry play in our society and the diverse career prospects open to those who seek them.

A more coherent approach needs to be taken to the provision of rural skills training and education. The committee recommends the development of a national strategy on rural skills training, encompassing the school, vocational education and training, and higher education sectors. The strategy would rationalise providers, focus limited resources, and provide for greater articulation between the various sectors.

The committee also identified a need to reform the regulatory framework governing vocational education and training, at least as applied to rural skills training. The current framework is inflexible and unresponsive, and fails to take into account the particular needs of rural skills training in terms of costs, volumes and the informality of rural expertise. The framework has also failed to meet the

specific needs of individual rural industries leading some to take control of their own training needs. The very success of these initiatives demonstrates the need for change.

The need for increased investment in research and the dissemination of research outcomes through extension is a matter of priority. While Australian research in agriculture and forestry is world class, there is a concern that much of the research being done is not reaching farmers. The links between research and extension must therefore be enhanced. There is also concern that the research skill base is being undermined by an emphasis on short-term funding mechanisms and an ageing researcher population. The committee recommends a greater emphasis on long term research and greater stability of funding and employment for researchers.

The provision of rural extension services has undergone enormous change in recent times as State Governments move out of this field and private operators move in. There is a concern that this process of transition has created gaps in the availability of services and a loss of corporate memory and career opportunities amongst extension professionals. The committee has called for the development of a national extension framework to address these issues. The provision of high quality extension and advisory services is essential to the progress of rural and regional Australia.

My colleagues and I would like to thank all those who contributed to this inquiry. The submissions and evidence taken were of a particularly high standard, reflecting the knowledge and passion of participants for rural skills education and training.

Alby Schultz MP
Chair



Membership of the Committee

Chair Mr Alby Schultz MP

Deputy Chair The Hon Dick Adams MP

Members Mr Martin Ferguson MP Mr Gavan O'Connor MP

 Mr Michael Ferguson MP Mr Patrick Secker MP

 Mr John Forrest MP The Hon Wilson Tuckey MP

 Mr Peter Lindsay MP (to 14 Feb 2007) Mr Tony Windsor MP

 Mrs Sophie Mirabella MP
 (from 14 Feb 2007)

Committee Secretariat

Secretary	Mr Ian Dundas (to 11 Dec 2006)
	Ms Janet Holmes (from 12 Dec 2006)
Inquiry Secretary	Ms Jenny Cochran (Mar–Aug 2005; Dec 2005–Oct 2006)
	Mr Robert Little (Aug–Dec 2005)
	Dr Bill Pender (from 6 Oct 2006)
Research Officer	Dr Cathryn Ollif (June–Sept 2006)
Administrative Officers	Mrs Marlene Dundas
	Ms Gemma Baron
	Ms Jazmine De Roza



Terms of reference

The committee is to inquire into and report on:

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.
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.
3. The provision of extension and advisory services to agricultural industries, including links and coordination between education, research and extension.
4. The role of the Australian government in supporting education, research and advisory programs to support the viability and sustainability of Australian agriculture.



List of abbreviations

AACC	Australian Agricultural College Corporation
AAPTN	Australian Agriculture Training Providers Network
ABIF	Australian Beef Industry Foundation
ABRI	Agricultural Business Research Institute
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACC	Area Consultative Committee
AFISC	Agri-Food Industry Skills Council
ANTA	Australian National Training Authority
ANZSIC	Australia New Zealand Standard Industry Classification
APEN	Australasia-Pacific Extension Network
AQF	Australian Qualifications Framework
AQIS	Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service
AQTF	Australian Quality Training Framework
ARWA	Agricultural Research Western Australia
ATC	Australian Technical College
AWI	Australian Wool Innovation Ltd

CCA	Cattle Council of Australia
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CFI	Conservation Farmers Inc.
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
CRC	Cooperative Research Centre
CRDC	Cotton Research and Development Corporation
CSIRO	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
DAFF	Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
DCITA	Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts
DEST	Department of Education, Science and Training
DEWR	Department of Employment and Workplace Relations
DPI	Department of Primary Industries NSW
DPI&F	Department of Primary Industries & Fisheries, Queensland
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GITN	Grains Industry Training Network
GOTAFE	Goulburn Ovens Institute of TAFE
GRDC	Grains Research and Development Corporation
GVP	Gross Value of Production
IAA	Irrigation Association of Australia
ICT	Information and communications technology
MLA	Meat and Livestock Australia
NAC	New Apprenticeships Centre
NFF	National Farmers' Federation

NMIT	Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE
NRM	Natural resource management
OH&S	Occupational Health and Safety
P&C	Parents and Citizens' Association
QA	Quality assurance
QRITC	Queensland Rural Industry Training Council
RAC	Research Advisory Committee
R&D	Research and Development
RCC	Recognition of Current Competencies
RDB	Regional Development Board
RDC	Research and Development Corporation
RIRDC	Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation
RIST	Rural Industries Skill Training
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
RPTP	Rural Production Training Package
RTCA	Rural Training Council of Australia
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
RTP	Rural Industry Training Package
SBNA	School-Based New Apprenticeship
STA	State Training Authority
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
VCAH	Victorian College of Agriculture and Horticulture
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VETAB	VET Accreditation Board

VETiS	VET in Schools
VFF	Victorian Farmers Federation
VRD	Victoria River District
WAFarmers	Western Australian Farmers Federation



List of recommendations

1 Rural Skills—A Critical Issue

Recommendation 1

The committee recommends that the Australian Government consult with the states, territories and industry bodies to review and revise its Skills in Demand List survey so that it more accurately and comprehensively identifies the labour and skills needs at all levels in all sectors of agriculture and forestry, and that the Skills in Demand List be subject to annual review.

Recommendation 2

The committee recommends that the Australian Government, in conjunction with State and Territory Governments and industry, formulate a national strategy for promoting the role of agriculture and forestry within Australian society, and the diverse career opportunities available within those industries.

Recommendation 3

The committee recommends that the Australian Government, in conjunction with State and Territory Governments and industry, develop a national strategy for promoting agriculture and forestry in both primary and secondary schools.

Recommendation 4

The committee recommends that the Australian Government coordinate programs with State and Territory Governments and industry aimed at enhancing the contribution of women to Australian agriculture and to facilitate their participation in rural skills training.

Recommendation 5

The committee recommends that the Australian Government, in conjunction with State and Territory Governments and industry, develop a strategy for utilising the knowledge and skills of older workers in rural industries – including training, extension and research services – and facilitate the transfer of knowledge and skills to younger generations.

Recommendation 6

The committee acknowledges the critical role of information and communications technology services to skill formation in rural areas and recommends that the Australian Government pays particular attention to the further development of information and communications technology services to rural and regional Australia, that includes access to high-speed broadband services to rural and remote communities.

2 Rural Skills Education and Training**Recommendation 7**

The committee recommends that the Australian Government, in cooperation with State and Territory Governments, develop a national program for rural skills training in schools, with a view to ensuring:

- Stable and sustained funding of schools-based rural skills programs;
- Funding and incentives for the training and upgrading of agriculture teachers; and
- The creation of effective mechanisms for industry and community involvement in school-based rural skills training.

Recommendation 8

The committee recommends that the Australian Government, in conjunction with State and Territory Governments, develop a national framework for the reinvigoration of Australia's agricultural colleges, including:

- Stable and sustained funding for agricultural colleges in each state;
- Funding and incentives for national coordination of programs between colleges; and
- The creation of effective mechanisms for industry and community involvement in the development of curricula.

Recommendation 9

The committee recommends that the Australian Government undertake a review of the Australian Apprenticeship scheme with a view to:

- Specifically allocating training funds and places to New Apprenticeships in rural skills;
- Altering funding arrangements to properly reflect the cost of providing training and supervision in rural skills;
- Extending funding and incentive payments to cover a broader range of qualifications; and
- Ensuring that there is rigorous quality control over training outcomes.

Recommendation 10

The committee recommends that the Australian Government give urgent consideration to establishing agriculture courses at Australian Technical Colleges, and expanding the number of Colleges to cover regions principally associated with primary production.

Recommendation 11

The committee recommends that the Australian Government give an immediate undertaking to continue FarmBis beyond its current expiry date in 2008.

Recommendation 12

The committee recommends that the Australian Government, in conjunction with State and Territory Governments, achieve a nationally consistent approach to FarmBis funding, including:

- Extending FarmBis funding to rural employees;
- Extending FarmBis funding to Certificate III level courses; and
- Resuming FarmBis funding of ChemCert training.

Recommendation 13

The committee recommends that the Australian Government develop a national strategy for facilitating industry initiatives in rural skills training, including a coordinating body and funding mechanism for industry initiatives, and the removal of bureaucratic impediments.

Recommendation 14

The committee recommends that the Australian Government review higher education in agriculture and forestry, with a view to:

- Increasing student numbers through scholarships and/or HECS exemptions;
- Rationalising the number of institutions providing courses in agriculture and forestry, and facilitating inter-campus cooperation and coordination; and
- Increasing the overall level of funding for courses in agriculture and forestry, and placing it on a sustained basis.

Recommendation 15

The committee recommends that the Australian Government, in conjunction with State and Territory Governments, universities and the VET sector, develop consistent and comprehensive pathways for the articulation of VET to university in rural skills training and education.

3 The Regulatory Framework for VET**Recommendation 16**

The committee recommends that the Australian Government, in conjunction with State and Territory Governments, provides funding for VET training in rural skills to provide:

- Funding targeted specifically at rural skills training;
- A funding formula that takes into account the high cost/low volume nature of rural skills training; and
- A relaxation of competition policy as applied to organisations providing rural skills training.

Recommendation 17

The committee recommends that the Australian Government revise the Australian Quality Training Framework in order to allow greater flexibility in the appointment and accreditation of teachers and instructors in rural skills training courses, including appropriate prior recognition of skills and competencies.

Recommendation 18

The committee recommends that the Australian Government revise the Australian Quality Training Framework with a view to making the adoption of new training packages and competencies in rural skills faster and easier.

Recommendation 19

The committee recommends that the Australian Government revise the funding of the Agri-Food Industry Skills Council with a view to increasing funding and staffing to a level commensurate with its role.

Recommendation 20

The committee recommends that the Australian Government, in conjunction with State and Territory Governments, revises VET training in rural skills to provide:

- A training framework based on the attainment of individual competencies as well as formal qualifications;
- A funding formula that takes into account training in individual competencies as well as whole qualifications; and
- A reformulation of individual competencies to provide for courses more specifically targeted at particular skills and industries and of shorter duration.

Recommendation 21

The committee recommends that the Australian Government direct the Agri-Food Industry Skills Council to revise the Rural Production Training Package to allow for the nesting of competencies and qualifications.

Recommendation 22

The committee recommends that the Australian Government, in consultation with industry, develop a skills passport system for the recognition and transfer of skills in rural industries, and that reciprocal arrangements be undertaken with other countries to allow skills passport recognition across international borders.

Recommendation 23

The committee recommends that the Australian Government review rural skills training by the VET sector, in conjunction with its review of higher education in agriculture and forestry, with a view to:

- Reducing the number of organisations providing courses in rural skills training; and
- Increasing the overall level of funding for rural skills training, and placing it on a sustained basis.

4 Availability and adequacy of research**Recommendation 24**

The committee recommends that the Australian Government substantially increase funding for research in Australia's agriculture and forestry industries, with a view to:

- Addressing long term research needs in the fields of basic and applied research;
- Providing stability and security for individuals and institutions involved in scientific research; and
- Providing incentives and career paths for those entering the research field.

Recommendation 25

The committee recommends that the Australian Government review its funding of the Cooperative Research Centre Program to provide greater funding certainty and support for those Centres with a proven track record of delivering research and practical outcomes.

Recommendation 26

The committee recommends that the Australian Government formally recognises the contribution of the beekeeping industry to Australian agriculture and horticulture by providing funding for the establishment of a CRC-style entity for beekeeping and pollination, including development costs in the areas of research, education and bee breeding.

Recommendation 27

The committee recommends that the Australian Government guarantees the long-term future of the honey bee quarantine facility currently housed in the Eastern Creek Quarantine Facility or makes alternative arrangements for a permanent site, as a matter of urgency.

5 Provision of extension and advisory services

Recommendation 28

The committee recommends that the Australian Government, in conjunction with State and Territory Governments and industry, develop a national extension framework to coordinate the provision of agriculture extension services nationally, and define the roles and responsibilities of governments, industry and extension providers.

Recommendation 29

The committee recommends that the Australian Government include a specific extension component in all funding arrangements for agricultural research organisations in receipt of federal funding, including rural Research and Development Corporations and Cooperative Research Centres. This funding should be provided in addition to, not at the expense of, research funding.

