



## **Submission**

### **Rural and regional access to secondary and tertiary education opportunities**

## **Recommendations**

**AgriFood Skills Australia is pleased to make this submission to the Senate Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities. The following recommendations are highlighted for consideration:**

- **That the government provide a clear vision for regional and rural Australia to provide equivalent educational opportunities to those accessed by students in metropolitan areas through the development of a National Rural Education Strategy**
- **That Regional schools, VET providers and universities provide the necessary core skills and foundation education to equip people for further education and career opportunities.**
- **That skill and workforce priority and funding decision making needs to be aligned with the actual higher level skills needs of economically important industries, such as agrifood. Industry is then able to access funding that builds enterprise and skill capability.**
- **That opportunity for regional Australia to access appropriate skills is addressed and resourced appropriately as part of an integrated regional solution.**

## **AgriFood Skills Australia Overview**

AgriFood Skills Australia (AgriFood), as one of 11 national Industry Skills Councils, leads the skills and workforce development for the Australian agrifood industry (agriculture, horticulture, conservation, food, pharmaceutical, beverage, meat, seafood and racing sectors). AgriFood is an important conduit between industry, government and education providers and covers school, vocational education and training (VET) and higher education. A consideration of education opportunities must include the continuum of education from primary to further adult education as skills and knowledge are built over a person's life experience and all contribute to the individuals abilities.

## **Our Industry**

The agrifood industry in Australia is vibrant, experiencing growth and is crucial for the long-term security and competitiveness of the country. The industry accounts for over 800,000 jobs, and is the lifeblood of regional and rural Australia. The industry generates more than \$200 billion per year and accounts for 20% of Australia's exports.

The sector has the capacity to provide food for 60 million people globally. The industry has strong potential into the future to meet global population growth, income expansion and food security demands.

## **Improving Skilling Opportunities for Regional People**

Since 2005 AgriFood has undertaken annual national consultations to determine the actual and emerging skill and workforce development needs of the industry. AgriFood uses this information, along with other published materials, to produce an annual Scan which discusses the important issues affecting the Australian agrifood industry.

The 2009 Environmental Scan (attached) highlighted two issues of direct relevance to this inquiry:

- Regional development and comparable infrastructure (including social/community) investment including education opportunity is directly linked to the future of the agrifood industry;
- AgriFood is part of a globally competitive environment and to remain competitive the industry requires a workforce with high-level core (language, literacy and numeracy) and technical and business skills to increase productivity and profitability.

AgriFood believes that addressing these two issues is fundamental when considering access and opportunity for regional education and especially industry skill needs.

It is well documented that regional students do not perform as well as their metropolitan equivalents. AgriFood is acutely aware that educational opportunities in regional Australia are limited due to thin markets and distances which add to significant cost

increases in delivery. Traditionally the problems associated with limited opportunity have been hidden as families send children to metropolitan schools or large regional boarding schools and tertiary education institutions in an effort to ensure an equivalent education to that available in large metropolitan areas. Unfortunately many, if not most, never return to the regions which exacerbate the skill drain, particularly at the higher levels.

AgriFood recommends that a greater focus on core skills<sup>1</sup> in regional education institutions at all levels will facilitate improved workforce skills and knowledge of employees in regional Australia. Core skills are the fundamental building block for continuing education which then facilitates innovation, sustainability and better work practices.

Australia should also address the difficulties for those who are from lower SES, including indigenous Australians, who stay in the regional areas where opportunities for educational advancement are limited. This is due to declining numbers of students and limited access to quality skill development. AgriFood recommends a strengthening of regional education that provides equivalent opportunities for students living in rural and regional Australia. This is a fundamental social inclusion issue that needs to be addressed through a coordinated and strategic approach to ensuring that quality education services are available to the regions. The regions are a growth area for Australia, and access to quality education and training are key components to providing the high level and sustainable job skills necessary to underpin this growth. .

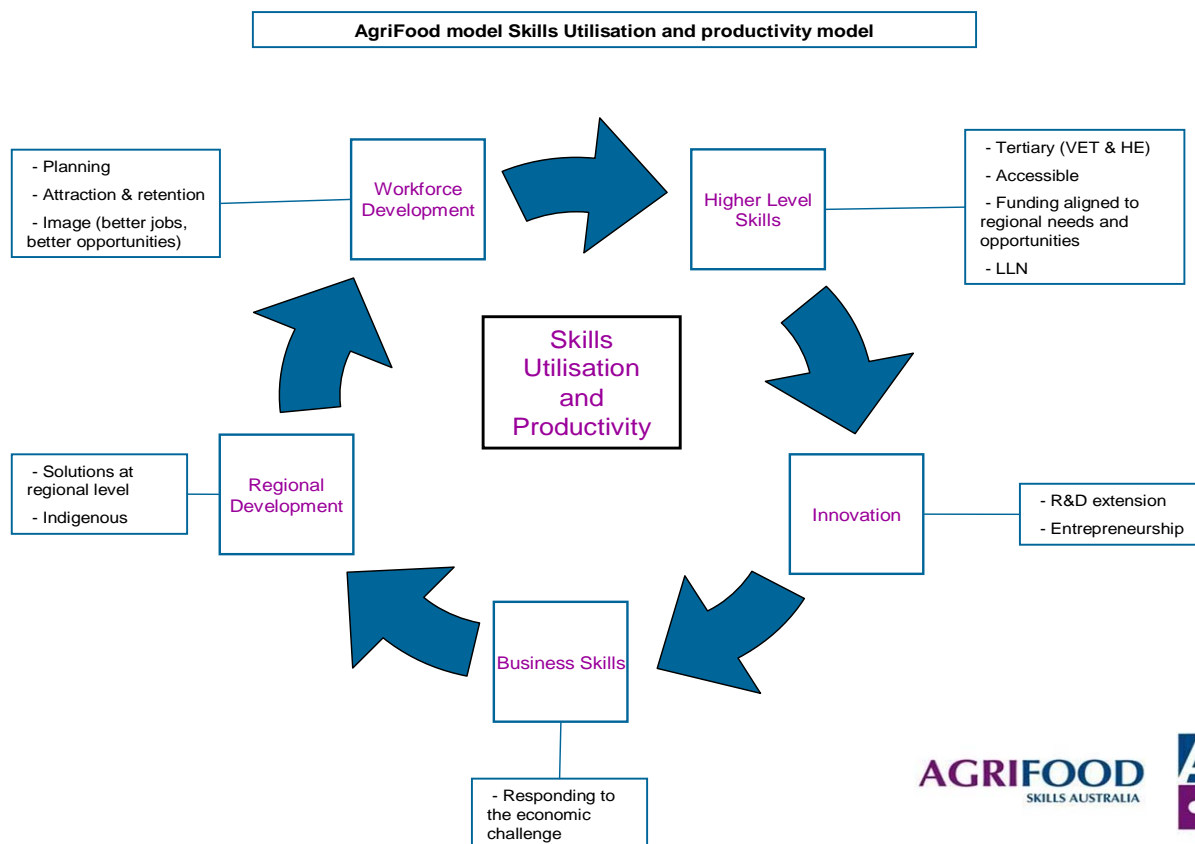
To achieve this, a national rural education strategy is recommended to provide a policy framework that includes early childhood learning to adult education (tertiary) for rural and regional Australians. The framework should actively promote and deliver educational services for all Australians, especially focusing on higher level core and technical skills and knowledge. The strategy should also include adequate resourcing to eliminate the current inequities. This is particularly relevant for the agrifood industry which needs access to higher skills in order to remain globally competitive.

AgriFood Skills Australia applauds the recent government announcements indicating a commitment to raise targets for educational achievement for those classified as disadvantaged (which includes regional Australians). AgriFood is also encouraged by the terms of reference of this inquiry as this inequity of educational opportunity between metropolitan and regional Australia widens. As indicated above the agrifood industry is critical to Australia's regional future and equivalent educational opportunities are a key to future success. AgriFood Skills Australia seeks to continue to work in partnership with all levels of Government to build skills in regional Australia through VET in-school programs, workforce development programs; skill set pilots and other innovative initiatives. We are also committed to acting as a conduit between CRCs and R&Ds and the tertiary education sector to improve the dissemination and implementation of new research.

By working at regional levels AgriFood believes that greater access to quality regional education services can help achieve government educational attainment targets.

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- <sup>1</sup>AgriFood's list of core skills includes language, literacy and numeracy skills, problem solving, analytical thinking, initiative, team work, technology skills including operating machinery, life-long learning, project management and self management.

However, it is important that regional access is not assessed in isolation from other factors affecting regional development. AgriFood Skills Australia has long advocated the need for an integrated strategy for a sustainable agrifood industry. Figure 1 shows the importance of a number of social and economic factors all being addressed simultaneously.



This figure shows the relationship of factors and issues needing to be addressed concurrently to ensure greater and sustained industry access to quality job skills. AgriFood advocates an integrated approach to sustainable regions where education is critical for regional development. This integrated approach model has been widely accepted during national agrifood industry consultations as a national methodology for ensuring change. Importantly this was reaffirmed during AgriFood’s recent Skills Summit in Narrabi. A detailed assessment of the outcomes from this is attached for Committee’s consideration.

The issues regarding the importance of regional/rural education equity were outlined in detail at the *2020 Summit: Future directions for rural industries and rural communities*. The group highlighted a number of urgent key reforms to ensure rural and regional Australia receives equivalent educational access and opportunity to that enjoyed in the cities. Many of the ideas, which are directly relevant to this inquiry, have already been documented by AgriFood Skills Australia, some further supporting comments follow

- *Address low socio-economic school communities* – a national rural and regional education strategy is required for regional Australia in order to address the current inequity in education. This includes Indigenous Australia.
- *Promote Rural Education* - AgriFood welcomes the establishment of the Primary Industries Education Foundation and will seek opportunities to work in partnership.
- *Digital Education Revolution* - broadband access will improve educational opportunities for regional and rural communities. However, the national Broadband Network needs to include as many regional locations and diverse educational offerings as possible. A digital network can then connect remote satellite education facilities which will reduce distance and thin markets as a key impediment for education access and opportunity.
- *Skills Development* - The government-funded Productivity Placement Program , (PPP) is not adequately reaching regional and disadvantaged communities due to thin markets and a funding formula that tends to focus on large groups of students. Rural and regional skill development requires targeted special funding to be included in the PPP funding agreements. A fundamental review of how skills and training funding is provided and accessed in thin markets in regional Australia needs to be undertaken. AgriFood is working in this area and would welcome the opportunity to work with Government to shape future regional skills, workforce and training funding to better meet these needs.
- *Workforce participation – workforce development* - AgriFood Skills Australia produces an annual Environmental Scan of the agrifood industry which focuses on the workforce development and skills needs of the industry. This Scan is the most current and contemporary assessment of agrifood workforce development needs, and needs to be the core document when prioritising industry workforce development needs for the agrifood industry
- *Education – Rural-Urban migration* - AgriFood has long been a supporter of encouraging movement from urban to rural living. However, skill development to support this movement needs to be aligned to a regional skill need.

## **Conclusion**

This submission has highlighted the value of the agrifood industry to the current and emerging economy of Australia, and the direct link between the industry and sustainable regional development. It has also highlighted the critical need for comparable access to quality education as a key to healthy, growing regions. Importantly, the submission highlights the need of the agrifood industry to access people who display higher level skills and can add value to the industry through high-level skills and capability. .