



1 March 2022

Committee Secretary
The House Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Via email: ee.reps@aph.gov.au

Dear Secretary,

**Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training —
NFF Submission**

The National Farmers' Federation (**NFF**) thanks the the Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, for this opportunity to make a submission on the “Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training”.

The NFF was established in 1979 as the national peak body representing farmers and, more broadly, agriculture across Australia. The NFF’s membership comprises all of Australia’s major agricultural commodities across the breadth and length of the supply chain. Operating as a federated structure, individual farmers join their respective state farm organisation and/or national commodity council. These organisations form the NFF.

While unlikely to be as profitable as last year, 2023 is expected to be another strong year for the agricultural sector and “well above the five-year average”.¹ Nonetheless, there are a number of complex domestic and global issues which our industry must navigate in partnership with government. One of the most significant of those issues is the challenge of securing a reliable, committed and capable workforce. And whilst migration will play a role in sourcing this workforce, the development of a strong and robust domestic workforce will be critical to the long-term sustainability of the industry.

The current agricultural workforce is ageing, and the sector will likely see a high turnover of people over the next decade or so.² To build a robust and sustainable

¹ Rabobank, <https://www.rabobank.com.au/media-releases/2023/230209-rabobank-agribusiness-outlook-2023/>.

² ABARES, <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/products/insights/snapshot-of-australias-agricultural-workforce>

workforce into the future we will need new entrants trained at every level, from ‘ground-level’ vocational skills development to advanced technical and university study. The NFF’s 2030 Roadmap for a \$100 billion industry calls for career pathways for agricultural workers to progress from new entrants to seasoned professionals. To achieve this goal, in addition to addressing workforce shortages, we need to phase in a new generation of workers and develop skillsets in all areas: farmhands, trade professionals, scientific and technical experts, and farm managers. Indeed, while a general shortage of workers will limit the productivity of Australian farms, a lack of skilled workers will stifle the industry’s ability to innovate, adapt to change and grow. It is imperative that we create a positive perception of VET in agriculture, and the opportunities it will create.

When measured against other sectors, there is a comparatively clear bias towards lower levels of education in agriculture. Currently, the percentage of employers with trainees in the agriculture sector is about half the percentage across all industries. 48.1% of the workforce have achieved no higher than high school level qualifications, compared with 31.7% across all industries. Similarly, just 15.2% of the workforce have a degree level qualification as compared to 33.8% across all industries.³ Even within the “higher skilled” positions, the agricultural workforce lags behind national trends. While farm managers, as compared to other agricultural workers, were most likely to have completed longer-term formal training and qualifications, only 13% are degree qualified, compared to 32% of Australian managers overall. Indeed, approximately 60% of farm owners/operators do not possess any post compulsory school qualifications, roughly 15% possess a Certificate III or IV qualification, around 8% possess a diploma or bachelor’s degree, and just 2% of “farmers” hold postgraduate qualifications.⁴

Compare these statistics to the prospects for agricultures’ VET graduates: 81.5% of graduate who achieved a Certificate 3 in agriculture have noted improved employment status after training, and 95.1% indicate that they are satisfied with the training received. These statistics make it clear that work needs to be done highlighting the benefits of formal training, and its impact on careers and opportunities.

³ ABS, Cat 6227.0 – Education and Work Australian, May 2022, Table 31

⁴ Source: Department of Jobs and Small Business, Australian Jobs, 2011, 2013, 2016, 2019

1. information available to students about VET qualifications and related career pathways along a student's journey through secondary schools, vocational education, higher education, and work transitions, with a focus on how this combines with other sources of advice, including informal advice, to influence student choices, and how Commonwealth funded information for students about VET may be improved.

1.1. Increase the quality of information on VET and farm careers

There is a significant volume of information on the nature of farm work available to people looking at careers in agriculture. The Primary Industries Education Foundation Australia (**PIEFA**),⁵ in particular, is a not-for-profit organisation which focuses on increasing primary industry education in Australian schools, groups and Rural Research and Development Corporations⁶. Similar or complementary services are offered by not-for-profit and industry groups⁷, who make resources freely available, provide guides to potential employees on what they can expect when working on a farm,⁸ and provide tools which link into school curriculums.⁹

However, as good as these resources are, they do not provide much practical assistance to those looking to acquire the skills and credentials needed to pursue those careers. Indeed, as a key part of our 2030 Roadmap¹⁰ the NFF called for “a clear career pathway to attract workers and develop their skills, with tailored streams for new entrants through to seasoned professional”.¹¹ We must significantly improve the quality of information linking industry, training options, and employment outcomes, as well as improve the accuracy and usefulness of information on VET options to assist those struggling through the complex information maze.

Ensuring that accurate and accessible information is available to young people as well as those who are mid-career, professionals and job seekers is essential to attracting people into the agricultural workforce.

The National Careers Institute (**NCI**) is developing “career mapping” tool which may help fill this gap by helping (potential) students navigate that VET maze. Developed as part of the AgATTRACT measures, and due to be delivered in mid-2023, the tool will be a digital map of modern career pathways in the agriculture sector to “showcase the diverse career opportunities in agriculture” and will:

⁵ <https://www.piefa.edu.au/about.html>

⁶ <https://cottonaustralia.com.au/lessons-and-units>

⁷ <https://cottonaustralia.com.au/lessons-and-units>

⁸ <https://ausveg.com.au/grow-your-career/>, <https://thepeopleindairy.org.au/get-employed/>
<https://www.peopleinag.com.au/farming/employees/>

⁹ <https://kidstofarms.com.au/>

¹⁰ <https://nff.org.au/policies/roadmap/>

¹¹ Aspiration 4.1

- Demonstrate the breadth of jobs, careers, and education and training pathways available in agriculture to attract more workers;
- Provide a better understanding of career pathways, mobility into the agriculture industries, transferrable skills and experience; and
- Personalise exploration of agricultural careers based on location, and other important choices made by the user.

For the NCI's "career mapping tool" to have the impact we need it must be promoted and supported into the future. Evaluation of such investments and initiatives should also be shared to help inform future investments and government and industry efforts. Government efforts should engage and ideally partner with industry efforts to maximise outcomes.

1.2. Re-establish the Education and Training Advisory Network

With Commonwealth Government assistance and NFF support, from 2000 to 2016 Rural Skills Australia managed a network of Education and Training Advisers (**ETAs**) to support and develop the agricultural workforce.

The ETAs worked with farming bodies, unions, individual producers, prospective employees, and various VET stakeholders to encourage workforce development activities and increase rural and related industry involvement in relevant government programs and initiatives. Across jurisdictions the ETAs informed and increased awareness and understanding of the training system by utilising a variety of communication strategies tailored to meet local requirements, and furnished information and advice to key stakeholders through a variety of mediums and forums. The ETAs provided advice and support to various stakeholders — over the phone, one to one personal contact, at industry forums and other events, etc — to expand their knowledge of how the training system works and options available to them within their individual States and Territories. Clients were provided with:

- information on available rural and related traineeships and apprenticeships across individual jurisdictions;
- information on Australian Government incentives and related assistance measures;
- information on organisations operating Australian Apprenticeship Centres, available to assist employers with the paperwork;
- contact details for registered training organisations who were accredited to deliver these traineeships and apprenticeships within their jurisdictions; and
- some preliminary advice on traineeship wage rates under various industrial instruments and arrangements.

Unfortunately, the network was disbanded in 2016 due to budgetary pressures. Re-establishing the ETA network should be a central consideration to achieve the goals mentioned above. It would be an invaluable resource to promote the opportunities available through VET, encourage participation and opportunities in the industry after. This would be the type of program appropriately funded by the Skilling Australia Fund (**SAF**) to ensure that the levy paid by employers is utilised to benefit the agricultural workforce.

2. Perceptions and status of the VET sector and how this may be impacting student enrolment choices, employer engagement, and recruitment and retention of the VET educator workforce, and how perceptions and status of the VET sector can be improved. International best practices in relation to VET perception and qualifications status should be examined.

2.1 Focus on practical experience over theoretical learning

Traditionally, agriculture has demonstrated a predilection for experiential learning over formal training and credentials. Farmers tend to be hands-on, ‘pragmatic’ people, with much farm ‘training’ occurring on the farm through informal structures. Most farm workers acquire their skills through practice and on-site learning, with short courses supplementing their skillsets.

To some extent this practice may be a consequence of the fact that, more than any other industry, farming is an ‘inherited’ career with the traditional family business structures dominating the sector. That means many farmers and farm workers are introduced to the work at a very young age, consequently finding less utility in formal qualifications both in terms of obtaining employment and the actual performance of their duties.

In addition, agricultural careers often progress along a linear track: the traditional farmhand progresses towards senior farmhand as they grow with experience and, if/when a position becomes available, they may take a position as a farm manager. Skills are thus gathered over the employee’s years of service, often taught or picked up from more senior hands. Responsibilities and tasks are passed on to the employee as the farm needs them, and the employees learn to manage changes to the business as par for the course.

This prioritisation or preference for hands-on — over theoretical — learning may feed what some have described as a “general disdain for qualifications”¹². According to Skills Impact, 80% of graduates have achieved VET qualifications with little or no requirement for workplace activities.¹³ Given the weight which the

¹² Jim Pratley and Cameron Archer, *Evolution of Agricultural Education In Australia*, 2017

¹³ Citing *Prevalence and outcomes of workplace-based delivery in VET*, Kristen Osborne, National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2021.

sector attaches to practical training, a graduate with little experience will not be seen as a realistic prospect. Most farm employers will see their training as incomplete, and will blanch at the notion of completing their education while paying a full wage.

The VET system should be designed in a way which promotes, even requires, practical training as a part of the learning regime.

There can be significant challenges associated with delivering VET in agricultural settings (including strict biosecurity which can limit on-site visits) but we need to continue to look at innovative methods to continue to deliver practical, 'hands on' learning environments for agricultural and regional students. This can be supplemented by supporting or subsidising RTOs with additional resources for example simulated animals, augmented or virtual reality tools, and vehicles for mobilising training resources.

Regarding the VET educator workforce, finding good trainers is also a significant challenge across all agricultural industries and requires its own focused workforce planning and capability building effort.

2.2 Offer a trade-equivalent Ag' Apprenticeship

One of the key actions of the NFF 2030 Roadmap is 'establish[ing] a nationally consistent 'trade-equivalent' job brand for skilled farm workers. Although 'traineeships' are available in agriculture, they are shorter and less intensive/comprehensive than a true, 'trade-equivalent' apprenticeship. They are not seen as feeding the graduate into a career, attract less funding and support (for both trainees and employers), and are generally a less attractive 'half-measure'. Furthermore, most federal and state funding for VET is heavily targeted at full qualifications. There is less overall funding support available for endorsed skill sets, while non-endorsed skill sets do not attract funding at all.

The NFF has called for the introduction of trade level agricultural apprenticeship. At a practical level, an apprenticeship is a more comprehensive credential, ensuring the apprentice learns more than just the basic skills which a trainee acquires, and develops other important skills which may be peripheral but are no less important to core business. In addition, an apprenticeship has greater recognition and 'prestige' in comparison to a traineeship. This is a crucial step toward improving perceptions and status of the agricultural industry, enhancing its attractiveness by providing the apprentice with certainty and recognition.

Apprenticeships would also be beneficial to farm employers. Unlike traineeships, which last for just one production season, an apprenticeship lasts three years. In addition to providing workforce certainty, the three years will provide the

business with greater 'return on investment'¹⁴. For workers, a healthy labour market requires labour mobility, and mobility is a key driver of wage growth. Formal qualifications enable labour mobility for agriculture workers. They allow the market to better identify and promote talented employees, empower farms to make better use of those talents, and enable skilled employees to prove their value and attract higher wages.

3. Successful partnerships between VET providers and employers that have demonstrably created career pathways and secure employment opportunities for students, considering the best practice elements of these successful partnerships, and how more partnering may be encouraged among VET providers and employers.

This inquiry should also consider the work of the Queensland parliamentary inquiry into the delivery of VET in regional, rural and remote Queensland, due to report in 2023¹⁵. There are significant learnings, success factors and challenges shared in submissions e.g. from AgForce Queensland and Country University Centres regarding requisites for successful VET uptake and delivery in rural and regional areas. For example, the success of industry/VET partnerships and wrap around services including mentoring and additional facilities which help lift perception of VET and engagement.

3.1. A national roll-out of the AgSkilled initiative

One recent initiative bolstering the quality and relevance of formal training in the farm sector is the AgSkilled initiative. AgSkilled was established in 2017 in partnership between Cotton Australia, the Grains Research and Development Corporation and the NSW Government. The goal was to develop an education and training system which 'joins the dots' between the farm industry, VET and workers.

In its current iteration, AgSkilled2.0, it offers \$15m over 3 years to 2023 to upskill NSW's plant production industries providing training that targets identified skills gaps. Funding is available to on-farm staff and industry professionals including for subsidised access to nationally recognised full qualifications in agriculture, as well as fee-free part-qualifications for short courses i.e. micro credentials. All units completed through AgSkilled are accredited and can be recognised as prior learning, so that the model complements other training pathways and often serves as an introduction to further skills development. Training responds to the needs of industry, and funding is tailored to demonstrated requirements and can be adjusted to suit students with a range of skills and experience. It is offered in areas

¹⁴ Michael Williams, *Agricultural Extension and Training*, 5 July 2020, p 26

¹⁵ <https://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/Work-of-Committees/Committees/Committee-Details?cid=166&id=4214#:~:text=About%20the%20Inquiry,%2C%20rural%2C%20and%20remote%20Queensland.>

as diverse as precision agriculture, emerging technologies, business management, farm machinery operation and maintenance, and soils and nutrition.

AgSkilled2.0 has had more than 5,300 participants, with over 750 courses delivered at over 237 training locations, and a completion rate of over 85%.

The NAWS spoke to the success of the program, and in response recommended that the government:

Establish multiparty ag labour advisory committees to lead development of demand-driven capability programs across the sector.¹⁶

The NFF's pre-budget submission has sought \$50 million over three years to enable a national roll-out of the AgSkilled initiative. With support of other participants in the 'tripartite' Australian Agricultural Workforce Working Group, the NFF is pressing for a broader, national roll-out of the program.

4. Commonwealth programs which could influence the above, and intersections with state and territory, industry, and philanthropic efforts, including any structural barriers to improvement.

We have described a number of programs/initiatives in these submissions, programs which we believe would greatly boost the reputation and awareness of VET in the agricultural sector: e.g. a national AgSkilled initiative, offering Ag' Apprenticeships, re-establishing the Education and Training Advisor Network. However, as VET is co-managed through a joint commitment by the Commonwealth and State Governments, these programs will require large degree of cross-jurisdictional cooperation — at both the state-to-state and the state-to-federal levels — and will need to be supported with targeted Federal funding. Trade apprenticeships are, for example, a creature of state legislation. As such, an agricultural apprenticeship will have to be implemented and managed by each jurisdiction. However, we would stress that it must be done in close consultation with and oversight by the Commonwealth Government.

For example, the NFF manages AgCAREERSTART on behalf of the Commonwealth Government. AgCAREERSTART is a gap-year program connecting farmers with young people who are interested in working on Australian farms. In addition to matching participants with a full-time paid position, the program offers pastoral support, industry connections, and a training and industry engagement bursary of \$4,500 each which may be spent on VET programs. Participants develop individualised training plans with the project's dedicated Training and Career Development Officer. Past participants have acquired full agricultural

¹⁶ NAWS Recommendation 17.

qualifications¹⁷ along with completing various units of currency which may be stacked on to create full credentials.¹⁸ Of course, through the delivery of the AgCAREERSTART program, participants have identified challenges accessing accredited training:

- Participants who move interstate are not eligible for fee-free places until obtaining a local driver's license.
- Lack of online availability of courses has been an issue for participants, given their regional and remote locations.
- Lack of enrolments has resulted in cancellation of courses which participants have enrolled in.
- Accessibility of information about courses and availability — even within states there is often inconsistent information given by different sources.

AgCAREERSTART has been a huge success at bringing in young people with no prior connection to agriculture. Since its inception, the program has put 100 young people on farms across Australia, and many of those participants have altered their future study plans to embrace agriculture. It is a great advertisement, not just for farm careers, but for VET in agriculture. The VET system should enable that integration, rather than frustrating it.

The unique challenges of VET engagement and delivery in rural and agricultural settings (e.g. thin markets, smaller course size) warrants portability of subsidies and alignment of delivery approaches across jurisdictions. To help drive greater simplicity, stimulate RTO delivery and improved awareness and accessibility for learners. The Commonwealth could play a supporting and coordinating role.

Summary and Conclusion

Our concerns notwithstanding, with over 4 million Australians enrolled and undertaking VET qualifications it cannot be said that the VET sector lacks wider community confidence or is considered ineffective by many of its users. The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) student satisfaction survey results routinely indicate high level of satisfactions with the courses completed even though many may not necessarily give rise to an employment outcome or enhanced an individual's employment and/or career progression prospects.

We are also optimistic about the future of VET, with the establishing of Jobs and Skills Australia, and the renewed engagement with industry via the Jobs and Skills Councils. The broader remit those organisation will enjoy, as compared to their predecessors¹⁹, will give them greater capacity to influence job/career

¹⁷ e.g. a Cert IV in Dairy Production, Rural Operations, and Agriculture.

¹⁸ e.g. in Chemical Handling, Crop Agronomy, and Health and Safety.

¹⁹ i.e. the National Skills Commission and the Industry Reference Committees respectively.

outcomes. There is undoubtedly plenty of opportunities to strengthen industry links with RTOs within the VET sector, and to also improve significantly the quality and volume of information linking training options to employment outcomes, as well as improve the accuracy and usefulness of information on VET options particularly for employers and students who often struggle to find their way through the complex information maze.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a large, sweeping loop that encloses a stylized, angular letter 'A'.

Ben Rogers

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