



Submission to the Productivity Commission
Report on the Education and Training Workforce
Vocational Education & Training

July 2010

About Growcom

Growcom is the peak representative body for the fruit and vegetable growing industry in Queensland, providing a range of advocacy, research and industry development services. We are the only organisation in Australia to deliver services across the entire horticulture industry to businesses and organisations of all commodities, sizes and regions, as well as to associated industries in the supply chain. We are constantly in contact with growers and other horticultural business operators. As a result, we are well aware of the outlook, expectations and practical needs of our industry.

The organisation was established in 1923 as a statutory body to represent and provide services to the fruit and vegetable growing industry. As a voluntary organisation since 2003, Growcom now has grower members throughout the state and works alongside other industry organisations, local producer associations and corporate members. To provide services and networks to growers, Growcom has about thirty-five staff located in Brisbane, Bundaberg, Ayr, Townsville, Toowoomba and Tully. We are a member of a number of state and national industry organisations and use these networks to promote our members' interests and to work on issues of common interest.

Growcom is pleased to provide this contribution to the Productivity Commission's inquiry, in the hope that our experiences in the Queensland fruit and vegetable growing industry will contribute to the Commission's consideration of these issues. Our industry is very reliant on the willingness of workers to travel and train throughout regional Queensland, and is therefore beset by skill shortages and other workforce peculiarities.

The Queensland horticulture workforce

The Queensland fruit & vegetable growing industry employs about 25,000 people at any one time, with peaks and troughs according to sowing and harvesting seasons.

While this workforce sustains many regional communities and economies in the state, the management of this workforce is fraught with difficulties, including:

- Workers need to be available at specific times dictated by seasonal conditions
- Availability of work is generally reliant on good daily weather conditions
- There are distances to be travelled to and between workplaces, so workers need to be unusually mobile and flexible

- There is a need to provide accommodation for many workers, both on the farms and in the towns
- These workers then depart after a few weeks or months
- Language barriers remain high
- The infrastructures and social linkages of township communities are often strained.
- Training programs need to be structured and delivered, often in remote areas

The industry is in ongoing battle with these factors every season, and Growcom has been involved in many projects that attempt to “manage” and train this workforce and deliver productivity benefits to growers. These efforts are routinely hampered however, by a sorry lack of data and workforce trend analysis.

It is sincerely hoped that the Productivity Commission’s current research study will provide much needed data on the demand, supply and structure of horticulture-related vocational education and training.

Growcom – industry education and training

As part of our business advisory service to members, Growcom offers a full range of workplace advocacy products and industry-specific training products such as *Freshcare Food Safety and Quality (Fresh Produce)* code training courses. The Freshcare training suite is an industry owned, quality assurance program that is accepted by many fresh fruit and vegetable packers, wholesalers, processors, and retailers, Australia-wide.

We are also in the process of developing and facilitating specific industry training modules (eg. Fork-lift training) and, as part of our overall industry monitoring role we have also kept abreast of the skills training requirements and other workforce issues for Queensland fruit and vegetable growers over many years.

The horticulture industry is experiencing a period of significant change with the business environment becoming more challenging. The industry is recognising that training in both horticulture and business is becoming ever-more important as markets become more global and competitive, as new business opportunities and ways of improving efficiency become available, and as labour and skill shortages continue to constrain industry productivity and growth.

Farm owners, managers and employees need access to training and services to improve supply chain management, business management and leadership skills. These services will have to meet their requirements – usually be delivered locally - and provide them with the skills to allow their enterprises to remain viable and sustainable.

Growcom therefore supports systems and processes that enable all those involved in the industry to be good business managers and be competitive in the employment market. This means providing people with marketable skills, and developing education and training systems which keep pace with the skill needs of business and with changes in both farm practices and technology.

Growcom is committed to taking a proactive stance in promoting relevant learning and development throughout the industry. We will continue to work with government and other stakeholders to support training and development initiatives that benefit the industry. We are also committed to delivering training and education programs for the horticulture industry that will in turn deliver quality skills acquisition for Queensland growers.

To this end we welcome any government initiative designed to alleviate the skill shortages in regional Australia and the Queensland horticulture industry, including the Productivity Commission's current research study.

Growcom response to Issues Paper

As an industry association heavily involved in the vocational educational needs of our membership we welcome the research study into the VET workforce to be conducted by the Productivity Commission. There is a widely held view that the existing arrangements are not serving us well and that the current VET workforce may not be properly equipped or structured to face the increasingly complex demands of a sustainable Australian horticulture industry.

While we are not necessarily qualified to comment on the entire terms of reference to the research study, we are happy to provide the following general advice to the Commission:

1. Lack of data

As stated in the issues paper there is no information collected, collated and analysed that can provide insight into the skills and efficiencies of the current education providers. Without this information, it is impossible to understand how well equipped (if at all) educational institutions are to meet the demands of the

future, or in fact, whether they are meeting the current demand for a technical and complex education.

The above issue is directly related to the supply and demand approach taken in the Education and Workforce Study presented in the issues paper. Without accurate knowledge of the demand for VET based skills and workplace development, a good understanding of whether the supply is meeting the demand cannot be ascertained.

Further, the skills required for teaching staff and where the gaps in skills exist to address the potential demand is also unknown. Without this information, developing the appropriate actions to deliver direct and effective outcomes is unachievable.

Growcom will be better placed to contribute more to policy development in this area when reliable data becomes available.

2. Training needs matrix

The issues paper talks of matrices to assist in understanding the needs and services available and where the gaps exist. A stocktake of the skills and abilities needed within the agriculture industry to address current and future issues, the skills available within the teaching faculties and the courses offered that address these – and in what locations – would be a good matrix to start to understanding whether the VET industry is in a position to meet future demand and in fact whether it is meeting current demand.

The paper poses numerous questions including ‘What key objectives is the VET workforce seeking to achieve?’ The VET Workforce should be aiming to provide the educational and technical foundations for students from all sectors to apply in current or potential employment/business opportunities. For the agricultural sector this is a complex matrix of skills development that largely depends on the current expertise and where within an agricultural business the individual would like to work. The courses and teaching expertise should provide a forward thinking approach with high levels of technical knowledge throughout the matrix. This demands a high level of technical expertise in staff.

Growcom would be pleased to provide input into the development of these proposed matrices.

3. Training for Innovation

The paper discusses the need to address future issues and speaks of innovation, skills and workplace development as being keys to meeting these challenges.

The agricultural training sector would benefit from a specific investigation into how prepared the VET workforce is to meet the challenges food producers currently face and those they are expected to address in the future. There would be few other sectors moving as rapidly and required to adapt more quickly than the agriculture sector. This will mean educational institutions will need to continually revisit their staff skills and curriculum. In this context it should also be noted that there is currently a long lag-time between the gaining of innovative skills in a VET environment, and the on-farm application of these skills that will improve productivity. Any proposal for workforce planning, development and structure will need to acknowledge and overcome this lag.

There is a shift toward recognition of prior learning (RPL) and for governments to use this to demonstrate they have been successful in investing in education. RPL does not encourage the learning of new skills or provide workforce development and although is greatly needed in most sectors - including agriculture - to demonstrate achievements gained outside of structured learning, it does not address the need for new skills development which is what the industry needs.

To address the multitude of issues facing the agriculture sector educators will need to be up to date with the latest and most appropriate technologies and will need to continually update their teaching resources. Education focused on agricultural production is now a balance of teaching the principles of agriculture, the multitude of pressures facing production viability, understanding and meeting the challenges of regulation, understanding the market place, knowing how to run a business (including staff management) whilst also understanding how natural systems work and how this impacts on long term production.

It is also important that during the course of a formal education or qualification, agricultural producers/workers are provided the opportunity to be innovative and facilitated through to implementation or the testing of their innovation. This increases capacity and encourages independent and innovative thinking.

Most people working in or entering the agriculture industry excel at practical applications and may only require extra knowledge, advice, encouragement, resources or guidance on the implementation of ideas that could lead to on ground outcomes for the industry. It has been proven that given a facilitated approach (eg. Reef Rescue) where farmers are supported to implement ideas and new technologies, real and directly applicable innovations that increase and allow for more sustainable production practices are developed and immediately applied on the ground.

This makes an immediate impact in the field, which addresses the goals of the VET workforce and shifts the direction of education to meet future challenges as well as learning the fundamental principles of agriculture.

It will be important for the educators to be trained and supported to be *facilitators of innovation* which may involve developing their skills and abilities. Educators and educational facilities working in agriculture need to be equipped with the resources and expertise to increase the capacity of agriculture students to be innovative and develop solutions whilst continuing to provide an underlying understanding of sustainable agriculture.

Growcom would be pleased to provide further information on innovative training models for the horticulture sector.