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**SUBMISSION**

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**SKILLING AUSTRALIA**  
**FOR THE FUTURE**  
**NATIONAL FARMERS’**  
**FEDERATION**

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# Executive Summary

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- **The agricultural sector will need an additional 100,000 workers as it emerges from drought and production approaches pre 2002 levels.**
- **Regional development and a comprehensive population strategy should be explored as key solutions to the lack of labour and skills for farm occupations.**
- **Occupations requiring high education levels and experience are prevalent, particularly in the subsectors of grains, sheep and cattle. The horticultural sector's needs are different in this regard, with major demands for entry level workers without training or experience, whilst noting that horticulture offers many good training opportunities for this class of people.**
- **Six of the seven most demanded agricultural occupations require trade-level qualifications or above. The average earnings across all farm managers are reported as \$84,911, with bonuses of between \$500 and \$200,000 per annum. Jackaroos are the most highly paid juniors across all sectors, including mining.**
- **There should be a focus on cooperation between VET stakeholders, and the need to broaden the involvement with other stakeholders to holistically address and respond to the training delivery needs of regional Australia.**
- **There are significant opportunities to engage regional and rural Australia with a new era of education and training delivery, however, there are significant barriers to achieving this without goodwill and recognition by Australian and State Governments.**
- **A demand-driven training delivery system that seeks to provide training flexibility is welcomed contingent on the program recognising the higher costs and difficulties associated with training delivery in regional Australia and to small business owners.**

# 1. INTRODUCTION

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The National Farmers' Federation ("the NFF") is the peak farming lobby group representing producers of all major commodities in relation to issues affecting more than one State or commodity. The NFF's membership comprises State farm and commodity organisations with individual farmer members.

In September 2005, the NFF released its Labour Shortage Action Plan in response to increasingly severe labour shortages in the agricultural sector. The Plan aimed to bring about a better understanding of employment in the industry and consequently, the nature and extent of labour shortages. Based on this, it outlined key measures in a multi-faceted labour sourcing strategy. Importantly, it also identified areas in which the research and development of ideas were needed to more effectively formulate ways in which to resolve regional and rural labour shortages.

In March 2008 the NFF released its second Labour Shortage Action Plan (Attachment A) to review the state of employment in the industry and the efficacy of the measures proposed, as well as to identify further issues, solutions and their implementation.

At the beginning of 2006, the NFF significantly expanded its focus on education and training as a key mechanism to resolve the deficit of core skills in the sector.

In tandem with this, efforts to streamline and improve access to skilled migrants have continued to allow the sourcing of tradespeople, managers, professionals and paraprofessionals for farm occupations. A number of initiatives have also sought to change misconceptions that farming does not demand skilled or professional occupations when in fact they are crucial to the industry – consider commodity traders, farm managers, veterinary surgeons, ecologists, climate change scientists and horticulturalists, to name a few. Although skilled labour shortages continue to represent a major problem for the industry, entry level positions are just as

problematic, but have not received nearly the attention that the skilled occupations have at the levels of both policy and practical initiatives.

The 2008 Plan outlined the NFF's preference to engage local workers in regional Australia or at least from Australia generally. It raised the importance of introducing incentives and concessions for people willing to travel to or remain in areas for the purpose of engaging in on-farm employment.

It focused heavily on education and training as being a way to drive many initiatives to alleviate labour and skill shortages prevalent across all facets of farming and related industries.

## 1.1 LABOUR SHORTAGES IN FARMING

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In 2005, it was estimated that as farm output reapproaches pre-drought levels, around 50,000 additional employees would be needed in the farming sector. A concerning finding in the 2008 Plan was that at the beginning of 2008, the estimate has grown to the need for around 100,000 additional employees. Bearing in mind that the current agricultural workforce represents 3.5 per cent of all employed persons in Australia, the significance of needing one third that number again assumes contextual importance. The extent of the increased demand for labour within agriculture is in the order of numbers equal to over one per cent of Australia's total workforce.

Agricultural labour shortages are pervasive by region, subsector and occupation. When considering the range of occupations that have been affected, the crisis is certainly better framed as both a labour and skills shortage.

Attachment B provides a detailed statistical report showing the methodology behind the 100,000 labour shortage figure.

## 2. DEMAND-DRIVEN TRAINING SYSTEM

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The farming sector has a rather poor perception towards education and training. Whilst some of this can be attributable to the industry and its characteristics as a family business where you are ‘born to farm’, there is a strong link between the poor delivery and service provided by training organisations as a contributing factor.

The training provider market in regional Australia is lacking competition, with a TAFE being the principle provider to large geographical regions.

Due to the thinness of the training market and the dominance of TAFEs as the principal training supplier in regional Australia, there are significant problems with the present delivery of training not fitting the requirements of the labour force or the employer.

As farms become more business orientated, they are recognising the deficiencies in training providers and are electing to do their own training and avoiding structured learning and the AQTF system.

There are exceptions to this rule, with some sections within TAFE who are willing to “work around” the rigid and controlling structures and funding formula’s imposed on them by the educational bureaucracy.

These are the providers who will organise training delivery to occur at a ‘time and place’ suitable to the employer and employee.

Rather than prescribing the apprentice is expected to be at the TAFE campus at 10.00am every Monday, they will holistically conduct training at the employers property at a time that does not conflict with work priorities or issues such as seasonality and production calendars.

Whilst recognising a common skill set to work on a farm, it is highly critical that training provision is able to meet the specific training needs as they vary across commodity groups.

The gradual reduction in real terms of investment by governments and poor enrolments in ‘thin-market’ courses have the inevitable result by training providers of searching for “efficient” ways of provision or a favouring of courses that do not require one-on-one equipment or learning demonstration.

The move to create more generic courses to suit a wider range of industries, thereby expecting to attract a larger number of participants generally results in courses that are no longer relevant to the employer.

TAFEs have also historically put significant amounts of Government funding towards the purchase of their own training equipment and infrastructure. A classic example is of a TAFE that built its own shearing shed, despite the local region having some of the most up-to-date and employee friendly facilities available at employer properties. The TAFE then insisted training delivery occur in its new sheds with the result being a very expensive empty structure.

The inability of TAFEs to respond to the need by employers and apprentices with flexible training delivery is never more apparent than when you review their offerings for online learning. The gulf between what is available from Universities or schools and that provided by TAFE is quite considerable.

Industry is more than likely to vote with its feet and avoid the VET sector rather than scream loudly for training delivery that suits them, thus creating a disaffection leading to even lower uptakes and a spiralling affect.

The move to a ‘demand-driven’ approach to training delivery is therefore welcomed if the delivery costs are reflective of the higher costs for training delivery in regional Australia.

For example, a training provider in a metropolitan environment is easily able to provide training delivery to a group of employers engaging in the training system who are geographically close together. The thinness of the market for farm training

creates an environment in which a training provider may travel all-day just to visit a single employer engaged in the training system.

If the funding to the training provider does not reflect the additional time, travel and complexity of regional and rural training delivery, there will be a substantial disconnect between training delivery and regional Australia.

Rural industry has been proactive in driving TAFEs to being more flexible and timely in their training delivery. This is the antithesis of the structures in places by state and federal bureaucratic funding formulas.

For example, Australian Wool Innovation expends substantial training monies in a very targeted way. They actually seek tenders from TAFEs/RTOs to deliver training in a specified manner reflective of the needs of the wool harvest industry. As a result, they promote excellence and ensure training is delivered in a manner responsive to the needs of industry.

**The NFF submits:**

- **A ‘demand-driven’ training delivery system is welcomed contingent on the funding formula for delivery being reflective of the higher costs of delivery in regional Australia.**
- **Training organisations to be structured firstly by developing desired outcomes and then reviewing the enabling mechanisms to achieve these outcomes. For example, the “language” of education and training needs to be rewritten in plain-English to remove the present disconnect between farmers and training providers.**
- **Consideration of industry bodies managing the funding for their particular industry to ensure training is delivered at a time, place and method suitable to their members.**

## 2.1 COMPLETION RATES

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The NFF notes that the Discussion Paper highlights its concerns over poor completion rates, particularly in traditional training fields and apprenticeships.

The NFF submits that this is simply reflective of the tight labour market and the need of employers for workers with a skill-set rather than the knowledge and experience attained under a full apprenticeship.

As farming moved away from indentured style learning in the 1990's, the industry has been more concerned with recognising skill-sets than the full apprenticeship. For example, a harvester operator is simply interested in whether a worker is skilled enough to operate their multi-million dollar equipment, rather than his knowledge of irrigation or fencing.

Rather than shy away from this occurrence, the NFF advocates openly embracing the funding of skill-sets towards the development of an on-going learning culture.

With a system that delivers skill-set training, there is an opportunity to engage the learner at various points through their employment and career.

As we see more and more evidence that Generation Y will hold over 22 jobs and three careers in life, the out-dated model of indenture three plus years of training needs a significant review.

### **NFF submits:**

- **Education and training funding models to be reviewed to support funding of skill sets and encourage greater flexibility in delivery.**
- **Development of a 'skills passport' that cooperatively works with other industries or commodities to resolve single employment issues. Such a passport could be utilised to match skills, plan work schedules and coordinate labour supply originating domestically or abroad.**

- **Focus on the importance of developing champions of industry supporting Education and Training as the attainment of a skill and not as the completion of a training package.**
- **The “FarmBis” short course/activity is the preferred method of training delivery as it more accurately meets the seasonal and work nature of farm businesses.**

### **3. HIGHER LEVEL SKILLS**

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The agricultural sector is in the midst of pervasive changes in terms of the approach and method in which farming is conducted. Technological and scientific developments have been increasingly pertinent to an industry facing harsher climatic conditions and striving to remain internationally competitive on global markets.

Traditionally, the skills necessary to working in the industry have been hands-on, developed through on-the-job training. For a significant majority of occupations on farms, this continues to be how employees are trained.

It should, however, be noted that the nature of farming has and continues to significantly change. Mechanisation, automation, and technological advancements have made farming a much more highly skilled industry than ever before.

As an export-commodity competing industry, Australian farming boasts the highest productivity improvements of any other outside of Information Technology. Farming has needed to reduce its cost inputs every year in order to remain internationally competitive.

This has resulted in GPS guided tractors, soil moisture profiling, computerised drip irrigation systems, laser levelling and minimum-till farming methods replacing previously manual labour.

The days of hand-cutting grains or cane have ended and in their place are multimillion harvesters. No longer do cows get hand-milked and in their place are 24 hour milking sheds using the highest quality and surgically clean assembly milkharvesting equipment.

With the increased skill requirements to work in farming, the importance of appropriate education and training that can meet the demands of the industry and also prospective employees, has been reinforced.

Further, education and training in the agricultural sector must be wider ranging than simply focusing on employees.

By its very nature, training and education must be broadly handled and encompass all those who work on a farm including the owner/operator of a family farm business.

A sustainable farming industry requires an improvement in the skill capacity of all those who work on a farm. This adjustment in farmers' attitudes to learning is seen as a crucial step towards improving the sustainability of farming.

The formal process of skilled training through a competency-certificate or a tertiary qualification is strikingly different from that of other industries.

Most city-based occupations and trades will usually start with an employer wanting to take an apprentice. The employer would initially contact a training or recruitment company that has a number of interested people wanting to start an apprenticeship. The employer would then be issued several curriculum vitae's and start an interview process leading to the initial appointment and recruitment of an apprentice.

Farm apprentices are significantly different. The farm employer would usually have found by word-of-mouth a worker who would then be expected to spend a considerable period of time working on the farm. At some point, the farm employer would approach a TAFE or RTO and enrol their worker in an apprenticeship.

Farming is also unique in that the majority of competency-based learning is actually undertaken by the farm-business-owner rather than their employees. This has usually been brought about by the farmer realising he or she is missing critical skills to effectively compete in the market place.

There is a crucial need to ensure that all those involved in agriculture have high level skills and capacity to undertake work in the sector to enable the agricultural industry to remain competitive and productive in an international market place both now and into the future.

Training delivery is needed across the age spectrum to those already involved in the industry and to educate those interested in the industry on the role farming plays in Australia's economy.

Skills development is complicated by the mobility and comfort of young people to change careers. Whilst agriculture has generally chosen to bury its head in the sand in dealing with Generation Y, greater attention to catering to the needs of this generation in a rural setting needs to occur

There is also a strong need for farming to move towards higher level skills in order to compete with the job attractiveness of other industry groups.

As the majority of Vocational delivery is actually at the farm owner/manager, it is imperative that the training delivery needs of this person are integral to creating a culture of learning on the farm.

If this person suffers a poor experience or perceives low value in pursuing learning opportunities for themselves, then this perception will transfer to their family members and workforce.

To counter these perceptions, it is extremely important that learning is delivered upon the fundamental adult learning principles. Attitudinal change in the farming population is needed so that farmers and their workforce are prepared to identify their deficiencies, adapt to change, and establish risk management practices.

As long as educational institutions continue to deliver training in the traditional sense of the teacher gifting their experience to a classroom, this is unlikely to occur.

Also to note is that many farmers and their employees have gained sufficient ‘on-the-job’ experience to qualify for a Certificate under the VET structure, but are inhibited from doing so due to the cost and time required by training providers to undertake a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) assessment. However, the rigid and time-consuming Recognition of Prior Learning adopted by many RTOs has basically forced farm apprentices to complete to course in its entirety.

Greater uptake in skills development is expected to occur as farmers are encouraged to undergo an attitudinal change towards value and respect for education and training.

There are some great examples of RPL working efficiently and within the imposed bureaucratic strictures. Horticulture effectively manages its Recognition of Prior Learning and there are great opportunities with the online RPL project being led by Rural Skills Australia.

**NFF submits:**

- **Education and training funding models to be reviewed to improve the Recognition of Prior Learning in full, partial and self assessment, incentives to assist training providers to undertake Recognised Prior Learning, and support services for farmers on the process of undertaking an Recognition of Prior Learning assessment.**
- **That Skills Australia pursue a strong commitment from industry organisations, industry leaders and mentors, to the development of highly-skilled people; also, that there is continued pursuit of the encouragement of business management, risk management and human resource management delivered under Adult Learning Principles will lead to attitudinal change and drive a new wave of farm workforce training.**

- **The development of skills, training, and educational delivery needs to be holistically addressed in manner responsive to the regional needs and timeliness of farmers.**
- **Universities should be more responsive in recognising the learning outcomes provided by VET towards their higher education courses.**

## **4. SKILLS AUSTRALIA**

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A high level body providing advice and focus to the area of skills is welcomed by the farming sector.

There remain concerns over the duplicity and possible conflict of policy advice to Minister from NISC, NQC and a new Skills Australia Board.

The relationships between these bodies and organisations will need to be particularly transparent and cooperative to ensure there is not duplication of effort as is so often the case on VET matters.

The farming community and its training and education needs are also unique as has been previously explained.

Rural Australia does have unique training needs and it is quite easy to forget the enormous distances and lack of training options available to such a thin market.

It is vitally important that the Skills Australia Board maintains strong representative links and relationships with the education, training and skill needs of regional Australia.

Skills Australia also has a difficult task in the determination of industries and occupations sufferings skills shortages.

There are over a dozen officially collected data sets on occupations and industries sufferings skills shortages. On top of this is information right down to small regional locality labour needs.

As explained later in this submission, the collection of labour and skills shortages for occupations in farming is hampered for a number of reasons.

It is for this reason that Skills Australia is urged to look beyond the official Government survey results and engage directly with industry bodies that have crunched the hard numbers and can analytically demonstrate a skills and labour shortage.

It is further recommended that training providers and colleges be engaged in this process as they are at the forefront of delivering graduates to industry.

**NFF submits:**

- **That ‘Skills Australia’ Board members establish formal consultative mechanisms, similar to a “Cabinet Submission Impact Statement”, on their recommendations and decisions concerning the needs of regional and rural Australia.**
- **The roles of NISC, NQC, ISCs and Skills Australia be clearly defined.**
- **Sources of data on skills shortages should include evidence from industry organisations and groups outside of Government.**

## **5. STRENGTHENED INDUSTRY SKILLS COUNCILS**

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The NFF commends the strengthening and certainty afforded to Industry Skills Councils, but is cautious that the roles envisaged to be achieved by the ISCs may not be achievable with the level of increased funding being proposed.

The goals are certainly ambitious and involving, especially for ISCs such as the one representing farming – the Agri-Food Industry Skills Council (AFISC) – who cover an industry managing 60% of Australia’s land mass.

ISCs must also be reviewed to ensure their consultative committees and information sources are actually coming directly from industry and not ‘education and training industry bureaucrats’ who have weak or tenuous links with the on-the-ground employer.

It is imperative that the funding formula to ISC recognises the higher costs to achieve the set goals and responsibilities of ISCs in regional and rural Australia.

A blanket formula for ISCs for carrying out this work is totally inappropriate as the costs of time and travel in regional and rural Australia are significant compared to carrying out these tasks in a metropolitan environment.

Additionally, the NFF holds significant concern over the potential for additional administration burdens of the voucher scheme, particularly on small business owners such as farmers.

It appears to be a particularly overly burdensome process to require a business skills audit and interviews with existing staff for a voucher to be conferred.

Additionally, when the ISC is expected to cover the majority of Australia’s land mass, the difficulties involved with a standard funding formula begin to manifest.

The initiative would work well in sectors such as manufacturing where there is a relatively large workforce located in metropolitan areas with dedicated Human Resources Managers to assist with the process.

It is quite different for a small business owner such as a farmer to engage in a similar way.

This has the potential for the good intent of the scheme to totally miss what has been described by both sides of politics as the ‘engine room’ of the Australian economy.

For farming, this is doubly important considering our industry skills needs as we pull out of the drought.

The NFF also has concerns over the delivery of the training being at a time, place and method reflective of our industry.

Due to the thinness of the market, the ISC may only have the option to engage the most local TAFE in the region to deliver the training. If that TAFE does not wish to provide the training in a flexible manner and insists that the participant attend their campus at a set time and place, the power of the ISC to go to another provider are limited due to the lack of competition.

The NFF would like to see additional ‘top-up’ funding available in these circumstances. This would allow the ISC to broker a deal with another TAFE or private training provider to cover their additional travel and time costs to deliver the training in a way that is flexible to the enterprise.

It is noted that this is a particularity that would only be applicable in thin training markets.

The paper requests ways in which ISCs can encourage and highlight responsive RTOs delivering training for their industry.

It is extremely disappointing that the activities of the Institute for Trade Skills Excellence have been abandoned by the Australian Government.

The star-rating scheme being established by the Institute would have provided the perfect prime mover to answer this issue.

The star-rating scheme was an assessment by industry as to the excellence of the training provider delivering to their industry needs.

It would have been very easy to link a requirement of a star-rating to this program.

The Excellence model under the Quality Framework will not achieve this as it simply looks at the TAFE/RTO as a whole and does not consider the particular industry needs of their ‘school’ or ‘faculty’ of the TAFE/RTO.

**NFF submits:**

- **Review of the funding levels to ISCs to achieve their stated objective**
- **Review of ISCs to ensure their consultative committees and information stakeholders are truly representative of employers and industry.**
- **Funding to ISCs to reflect the significantly higher costs associated with representing industries in rural and regional Australia.**
- **Streamlining and removing of the red-tape required in the overly burdensome skills audit requirements for small business owners.**
- **“Top-Up” funding to allow ISCs brokering power to overcome the lack of competition and the thinness of the training market in regional Australia.**
- **State-based industry advisory bodies should not be involved in the model unless peak industry organisations actually view such bodies as being representative of their industry. ISCs then have the option to work cooperatively, even to the point of outsourcing, with these bodies.**
- **The funding of the Institute for Trade Skills Excellence to administer the star-rating scheme that provides industry recognition of excellent training.**

## **6. PRODUCTIVITY PLACES**

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NFF has concern over setting absolute quotas on the different Certificate levels. This may create problems where there is high demand for training at the Certificate II and III levels.

As intimated earlier, the NFF is also critical of the process used by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations for determining

occupations that are eligible for access to the Productivity Places Program (and other measures and lists reflecting occupations in demand).

The Surveys of Employers who have Recently Advertised (SERA) vacancies is an imperfect measurement tool of occupations in demand especially for the farm sector.

Farming does not typically use job ads, especially those involving metropolitan papers or internet sites principally used in such surveys. Farmers typically use word-of-mouth or hear about someone wanting work on the farm and will then find work for them to do.

Additionally, farming is a thin employment market that manages 60% of Australia's land mass making it very difficult to determine our labour needs through such survey methodology.

Principally, farmers are still small-family business owners and are not adequately equipped to undertake the normal human resource and recruitment drive process you would find in metropolitan environments. For example; you cannot put a "Help Wanted" sign up on a farm gate and expect someone to walk in!

Additionally, the demand for labour is typically held by contractors or group hire companies rather than with the individual farm business.

So if you are interviewing a farmer, they would say they did not have any trouble finding staff. But if you investigate further, it is typically because they engaged a contractor who themselves are suffering acute difficulties.

As indicated in the Introduction, the NFF estimates a labour shortage of over 100,000 (see attached paper providing the critical analysis for this figure). Approximately 70,000 of these positions are for semi and highly skilled positions.

These figures are gathered from a variety of government data and statistical collections. Yet the Australian Government measurements of occupational demand and labour shortage continue to deliver a result that farming (apart from a handful of occupations) is not suffering skill and labour shortages.

Clearly, farming has considerable labour and skill shortages that are not being picked up through the existing measurement processes.

**The NFF submits:**

- **Farming has demonstrated through well developed, analytical research utilising available government data that the farming community is suffering significant labour and skills shortages, and as a result, should be afforded access to all manner of Government programs and incentives for occupations exhibiting skill shortages.**

## 6.1 EXISTING WORKERS

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As previously noted, the farming community already has a significant level of skill that has not been officially recognised.

We see farm workers as being particularly fitted to this initiative to recognise their existing skills and develop new ways to counter areas of deficiency.

As previously outlined, there are significant concerns over the Recognition of Prior Learning processes developed by TAFEs and RTOs. In most cases, they are more trouble to undertake than actually enrolling in the full course.

We would additionally urge flexible learning options and recognising skills sets that support the existing short-course learning favoured by the farming sector. This is accredited and is typically able to be delivered at a time and place and season preferred by farmers.

NFF submits

- Streamlining the process of Recognition of Prior Learning
- Flexible learning options and provision for short-course training towards skills sets.

## 6.2 JOB SEEKERS

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There are legitimate concerns that the process of encouraging job seekers into this Program may be counter-intuitive without some formal job-progression strategies in place.

Most job-seekers are typically in areas not suffering from a labour or skill shortage. Additionally, they need assistance in employment motivation rather than actually requiring a skill prior to starting employment. The number of unskilled jobs available across a wide-range of sectors is evidence of this.

The goal of providing job-seekers with training is admirable, but if the training cannot be linked to employment then it is a wasteful activity.

Our industry and particularly amongst the traditional trades, training cannot occur without some on-the-job component.

As such, job-seekers should be paired to a particular employer at the commencement of the training.

If the objective is to provide a pre-vocation level of training (typically Certificate I and some of Certificate II), there needs to be a willingness of the job-seeker to avail themselves of other Government programs, such as those that fund relocation to areas of employment.

It would be pointless to have a large number of qualified mechanics located in areas not needing mechanics and refusing to re-locate for employment.

## 7. CONCLUSION

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The employment, education, training and skills needs of regional and rural Australia have suffered from a general thinness and lack of competition in the training market. This has resulted in a significant disconnect between regional industry and training provision.

There is potential within this scheme and its focus on being demand driven that training can become central once again to farming.

However, there are a number of significant barriers to this being achieved.

Foremost is the recognition of farming as suffering from labour and skills shortages and being able to access training programs.

The culture and history of training to be institutionally structured and not reflective of the extended time frames accommodating seasonality, production calendars and distance remain a significant factor.

The National Farmers' Federation has provided solutions to cover these significant barriers and we are encouraged by the good-will being invested to date towards the skills needs of Australia and the focus on delivering to industry.

For the extensive activity of Vocational Education and Training to have a real impact, both State and Australian Governments need to recognise the disadvantages that confront delivery in rural and regional Australia and be prepared to adequately address them. This will ensure that regional Australia has equality in training provision to that of metropolitan.