



Implementing a National Agricultural Workforce Strategy: A Discussion Paper

Skills Impact

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Foreword

While it is always a good time to consider skills that will be needed in the future workforce, the National Farmers' Federation (NFF) 2030 roadmap (i.e. Australian Agriculture's Plan for a \$100 Billion Industry) is a key driver for considering what is required. The disruptive events of 2020 have thrown new challenges and new opportunities for the agricultural workforce in the immediate future. COVID-19 has disrupted the labour market, severely curtailing the availability of local and international seasonal workers but potentially increasing the availability of transferable skills held by displaced workers from other industries. The National Agricultural Labour Advisory Committee's development of a National Agricultural Workforce Strategy is therefore both timely and critical for establishing workforce development and training settings that will strengthen and sustain the industry for years to come.

Skills Impact has worked with industry, government and vocational education and training (VET) stakeholders for many years to understand and articulate the training needs in the agriculture, horticulture, and allied industries. Every day, our team communicates with industry representatives, technical experts, and training providers to ensure that national qualifications reflect real work activities and current skills standards and practice. Through this work we capture information on skills gaps, emerging markets and changing work methods, as well as industry views on what is working in the training sector, what needs changing, and possible avenues for improvement.

In this discussion paper we have compiled insights from our industry engagement and research work so that we can test our thinking with key industry players. By inspiring further discussion and idea generation we aim to add value to the work the National Farmers Federation 2030 Road Map and to the National Agricultural Labour Advisory Committee and support effective implementation of the new Strategy once it is released.

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Executive summary

The National Agricultural Labour Advisory Committee is due to present a National Agricultural Workforce Strategy to the Minister for Agriculture, Drought and Emergency Management in 2020. Skills Impact supports the Strategy development and its driving force, the NFF 2030 Roadmap and, with this discussion paper, aims to encourage stakeholders to actively consider how a national Workforce Strategy can best be implemented to achieve one of the aims of the 2030 roadmap, that of supporting the attraction, retention and development of the future agricultural workforce.

This discussion paper has been informed by extensive consultation, research and analysis, and presents Skills Impact thinking on approaches and mechanisms that will be required for a successful roll out of the Strategy. The discussion paper is designed to prompt broader contemplation and discussion of the challenges and opportunities inherent in implementing the Workforce Strategy – and to encourage the development of concrete actions that will progress the aims of the Workforce Strategy.

The unprecedented events of 2020 have significantly impacted the agricultural workforce, most notably by restricting the availability of local and international seasonal labour. However, the industry now has the opportunity to harness the transferable skills of people made redundant in other industries with the potential to catalyse the digital transformation of agriculture. Taking up this opportunity will rely on the availability of effective workforce training, the attractiveness of the industry to new entrants, and the removal of barriers to labour mobility.

In this paper, Skills Impact has identified five areas that will require attention in a successful national roll out of the Workforce Strategy in support of the NFF 2030 Roadmap and has proposed seven recommendations for consideration by stakeholders.

Regionally coordinated, nationally consistent action

Many issues are best solved at the regional level. Regional responsibility will need to be taken for ensuring that actions and initiatives inspired by the Strategy are meeting the current and future growth needs of industry sectors, employers and workers at the local level. Regional responses must:

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- ensure that local education and training availability is aligned with the identified workforce development needs of existing workers and new entrants
- ensure transparency in information about jobs within the region
- attend to the infrastructure and facilities needs and expectations of newly arriving residents.

Recommendation 1: Establish (or, where already established, recognise and support) regional workforce and skills committees (RWSCs) to implement the Workforce Strategy in support of the 2030 Roadmap vision at a regional level by working collaboratively in an ongoing role to identify regional workforce needs and facilitate solutions.

Attention to job attractiveness

Sectors within the agricultural industry and the 2030 Roadmap have recognised that the broader population does not have a good understanding of the job roles and career pathways available in the industry. To expand the agricultural workforce with new entrants and deeper skills, the Workforce Strategy will need to correct common misperceptions of the industry. Implementation will need to:

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- ensure that opportunities in the agriculture industry for women, youth, and middle-aged career changers are widely promoted and understood
- help displaced workers to recognise opportunities to transfer their skills to the agriculture industry
- develop and use occupational titles and job descriptions that are understandable and appealing for people outside the industry.

Recommendation 2: Reframe agricultural job titles and job descriptions to resonate with people across Australia and emphasise valued transferable skills from other industries.

Recognition of workplace learning

Attracting new entrants to the agricultural industry is important for growing the workforce, but it will also be important to build the skills of existing workers to meet future demands and challenges. To attend to the needs of existing workers, Strategy implementation should:

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- seek to recognise and support informal learning that occurs in the workplace so that the knowledge and skills developed can be more readily transferred to new contexts
- connect with existing non-formal learning activity to understand the workforce skills that are valued and prioritised by employers
- use RWSCs to promote the business benefits of human resource practices that value and support ongoing skill development for employers
- recognise that competency is a journey and is best carried out over time, both in the workplace and in the classroom.

Recommendation 3: Support local training efforts through the provision of national and contextualisable learning materials to encourage active learning on farms and by local training institutions.

Recommendation 4: Rename Training Packages as work or skills standards to better encourage their use in a variety of ways by enterprises and industry associations.

Prioritisation of digital skill development

All industries are being impacted by the opportunities and challenges presented by the development and introduction of new technologies. The vision in the 2030 Roadmap will not be achieved without the implementation of a Workforce Strategy that will need to:

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- address the low levels of digital literacy on many farms
- ensure that greater importance is assigned to digital literacy skills and capability in future.

Recommendation 5: Adopt the recommendations in the Agricultural Workforce Digital Capability Framework report¹, such as establishing digital capability benchmarks across sectors and driving the development of curricula and training pathways for both existing and future workers.

Industry participation in VET reform

Many skills critical to the future of the industry have a high delivery cost in the VET system due to issues associated with thin markets in regional, rural and remote areas. A strong voice from industry, and evidence of employer demand for training, is needed to push for policy changes that will improve access to high quality VET programs for the agricultural workforce. To strengthen industry engagement with the VET system, implementation of the Strategy should:

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- push for greater industry influence in the VET system
- encourage greater involvement of industry people with RTOs in planning and delivering training and on-farm learning
- recognise that increased investment is required to deliver VET in regional, rural and remote areas.

Recommendation 6: Encourage capable agricultural trainers and assessors to take up positions for regional, rural and remote-based VET.

¹ KPMG and Skills Impact (2019) *Agricultural workforce digital capability framework* KPMG and Cotton Research and Development Corporation, Australia

Recommendation 7: Recognise the increased cost of training delivery in regional, rural and remote areas and adjust funding accordingly.

Background

The NFF's 2030 Roadmap, sets a compelling future for agriculture in Australia and the National Agricultural Labour Advisory Committee is preparing a National Agricultural Workforce Strategy (the Strategy) for consideration by the Australian Government. The Strategy will recommend potential actions to address the future workforce needs of the agriculture, fisheries and forestry industries, and closely allied service and supply chain industry sectors.

Development of the Strategy provides an opportunity to examine the state of the agricultural workforce, the future workforce needs of the industry and the ability of current government policy settings, industry programs and agribusiness human resource management practices to meet these needs. The Strategy will focus on actions that support the attraction, retention and development of the future agricultural workforce. Without the successful implementation of a national Workforce Strategy, the NFF's vision for 2030 will face significant labour force headwinds.

Skills Impact supports the development of a National Agricultural Workforce Strategy and provided a submission to the National Agricultural Labour Advisory Committee through the Strategy consultation process. The Skills Impact submission focused on ways to:

1. attract new entrants to agricultural jobs
2. better engage industry players in the VET sector
3. stimulate RTOs' training delivery in the context of business viability challenges, and
4. use whole-of-region approaches to attract workers to rural and remote areas.

Given the unprecedented events of 2020, the Strategy is being developed at a time of significant disruption for all Australian industry. With the National Agricultural Labour Advisory Committee due to present the Strategy to the Minister for Agriculture, Drought and Emergency Management later in 2020, Skills Impact sees a need for all stakeholders to actively consider how a national Strategy can best be implemented to meet the needs of the 2030 Roadmap vision.

Skills Impact engages with thousands of stakeholders each year, across agricultural, horticultural and allied industry sectors, about the skills that are needed by employers, and the challenges of accessing a suitably skilled workforce. Further qualitative and quantitative insights have been gathered through the literature reviews, data analysis, surveys, and stakeholder interviews of Skills Impact's research program. Key themes identified through this research and consultation are central to the development and implementation of a national workforce strategy for the agricultural industry.

This discussion paper has been informed by extensive consultation, research and analysis, and presents Skills Impact thinking on approaches and mechanisms that will be required for a successful roll out of the Strategy developed by the National Agricultural Labour Advisory Committee. The

Skills Impact is a not-for-profit, industry-owned organisation with industry members including the National Farmers' Federation (NFF) and ForestWorks. As a Skills Service Organisation (SSO), Skills Impact is contracted to the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) to review and develop vocational education and training (VET) units of competency, skill sets and qualifications for the agriculture, horticulture and allied industries.

Skills Impact engages with stakeholders across Australia to gather insights into industry trends and implications for workforce skills challenges and opportunities. The industry sector coverage of Skills Impact includes:

- Agriculture and Production Horticulture
- Amenity Horticulture, Landscaping and Conservation and Land Management
- Aquaculture and Wild Catch Fishing
- Food and Beverage
- Animal Care and Management
- Forestry, Timber, Wood and Paper Operations and Products
- Meat and Seafood Industries
- Racing and Breeding
- Pharmaceutical Manufacturing.

discussion paper is designed to prompt broader contemplation and discussion of the challenges and opportunities inherent in implementing a national strategy for the agricultural workforce – and to encourage the development of concrete actions that will progress the aims of the Strategy.

The need for a national strategy

There is a clear and driving need for strategic national action to support the future agricultural workforce. Without this challenge being met, the 2030 Roadmap vision will remain just that, a vision. This need was articulated in the National Agricultural Workforce Strategy Discussion Paper and has been evident in industry research for many years. Research has shown that farms from various sectors experience difficulties in recruiting for skilled (non-labourer) positions due to applicants lacking the required capabilities and experience². Family and other Australian workers who live close to farms still represent most of the workforce³. Local workers are hence crucial to sustaining the agricultural industries and yet many rural and regional areas remain under-serviced by formal training provision.

With workforce development strategies lacking, there is an industry-wide shortage of ‘middle management’ employees who can contribute to maintaining and improving workplace productivity and staff capabilities⁴. It has been an enduring challenge to access the digital and leadership skills that are identified by the National Farmers’ Federation as crucial for achieving their 2030 industry growth target⁵.

Market failure in the vocational education and training (VET) system has meant that vital skills are not being offered or delivered to the agricultural workforce. Most agricultural training occurs in the situation of thin markets and high delivery costs and, except in notable circumstances including various state government agricultural colleges, have not been well served by an Australian VET system in which government funding and student choice both influence provision⁶. High costs per learner are experienced in the VET system when there are:

- low ratios of students to trainers due to access and safety issues
- highly technical skills and/or skills requiring access to expensive materials and machinery
- learners spread across large geographic areas with low numbers in any one area.

As a result, many skills critical to the future of the agricultural industry have a high delivery cost. Despite more limited potential for enrolments and income, the regulatory requirements for training providers operating in rural and regional areas are the same as for those in urban areas. The business viability of RTOs for delivery under these conditions is often not sustainable, resulting in a failure to offer the much-needed training solutions or significantly compromised quality of delivery.

In 2020, the issues associated with accessing appropriately skilled workers have been compounded by COVID-19 and, most notably, by the closure of state and international borders immobilising local and international seasonal labour. More than 40% of farmers report labour shortages during peak times (such as harvest) in a ‘normal’ year⁷ and, if strategies are not implemented to respond to increasingly acute labour shortages now, production costs are likely to grow or, worse, producers’ difficulties may lead to limited harvest outputs⁸.

At a time when agriculture is being hailed for its role in maintaining the food supply chain despite society’s many challenges, the effectiveness of workforce assistance programs, such as the

² Dufty, N, Martin, P and Zhao, S (2019) *Demand for Farm Workers: ABARES farm survey results 2018*, Australian Bureau of Agricultural Resource Economics and Sciences, Canberra

³ Ibid.

⁴ Queensland Farmers’ Federation (2018) *2018 Agriculture Future Skills and Training Needs Research*

⁵ National Farmers’ Federation (2020) *2030 Roadmap: Australian Agriculture’s Plan for a \$100 Billion Industry*

⁶ Pilcher, S and Hurley, P (2020) *Skills for recovery: The vocational education system we need post-COVID-19*, Mitchell Institute, Victoria

⁷ National Farmers’ Federation (2020) *Get Australia Growing – Fiona Simson Press Club Address*, <https://nff.org.au/media-release/get-australia-growing/>, accessed 17/07/2020

⁸ Greenville, J, McGilvray, H, Cao, LY & Fell, J (2020) *Impact of COVID-19 on Australian agriculture, forestry and fisheries trade*, Australian Bureau of Agricultural Resource Economics and Sciences, Canberra, p.18

Australian Government's Pacific Labour Scheme and Seasonal Worker Programme⁹, will be negatively impacted. Employers right now are struggling to fill the many positions available. For example, according to Queensland's Minister for Agricultural Industry Development and Fisheries, there will be:

*"major demand in Wide Bay, including the Bundaberg area, with its significant production of tomatoes, capsicums, sweet potatoes and avocados. This region is going to need about 3,000 people each month all the way through to the end of the year. Likewise, there will be strong demand of about 2,000 pickers and packers per month to bring in strawberries in the Moreton Bay, Caboolture, Wamuran, Beerwah and Glasshouse Mountains area"*¹⁰.

Businesses are hoping that, given the huge shortfall of seasonal labour, displaced workers from other Australian industries will seek employment on farms. However, this is unlikely to occur without a level of strategic co-ordination and facilitation. Governments must urgently consider options to connect displaced Australian workers with opportunities in the agricultural industry. The development and rapid implementation of a National Agricultural Workforce Strategy is required if we are to take the opportunity to invest in Australia's regional workforce to achieve lasting structural change including the targets set as part of the 2030 Roadmap.

Implementing a national strategy

The success of a National Agricultural Workforce Strategy will depend on its implementation. The development of a national strategy is a valuable process, whereby diverse stakeholders work collaboratively to articulate industry challenges and concerns and recommend actions to overcome them. For those recommended actions to have the desired effect, co-ordinated responses, clear roles and responsibilities, and effective monitoring systems must be integral to the Strategy roll out.

The Strategy must also respond to social and economic changes as they arise. As an example, the National Skills Commission (NSC) was created in 2019 when much of the national debate focused on skills gaps; but with the onset of COVID-19, the focus is now firmly on managing skills surpluses and elucidating training options for unemployed workers, especially young people, women and city-dwellers who have been disproportionately affected¹¹. The NSC are emphasising skills transferability to facilitate clearer pathways into jobs with similar skills, as well as reskilling and upskilling opportunities that can open new prospects for job seekers.

For the agricultural industry there is an opportunity to capitalise on the availability of displaced young people, especially women, who are seeking jobs. The industry has the prospect of harnessing the transferable skills of people made redundant in other industries with the potential to catalyse the digital transformation of agriculture that is necessary to meet the National Farmers' Federation's industry growth targets¹². However, these strategies rely on the availability of effective workforce training, the attractiveness of the industry to new entrants, and the removal of barriers to labour mobility. Research conducted with young people found:

"the appeal of the sector is low due to a misunderstanding of what a career in agriculture offers. The technological innovation that is taking place within the sector and the new careers that are possible are not being communicated to students. In

⁹ <https://www.employment.gov.au/seasonal-worker-programme>

¹⁰ The Honourable Mark Furner, Minister for Agricultural Industry Development and Fisheries (2020) Plenty of pickers available for Queensland harvest season, Queensland, <http://statements.qld.gov.au/Statement/2020/5/20/plenty-of-pickers-available-for-queensland-harvest-season#:~:text=May%202020%2C%202020-Plenty%20of%20pickers%20available%20for%20Queensland%20harvest%20season,farm%20workers%20are%20readily%20available>. accessed 11/08/2020

¹¹ National Skills Commission (2020) *A snapshot in time: The Australian labour market and COVID-19*

¹² Nolet, S (2018) *Seeds of Success: Advancing Digital Agriculture From Point Solutions To Platforms*, United States Studies Centre

particular, urban students are unlikely to realise that the majority of roles in the agriculture sector occur after the farm gate.”¹³

For the Strategy developed by the National Agricultural Labour Advisory Committee to achieve its goal to support the attraction, retention and development of the future agricultural workforce¹⁴, close attention will be needed to the factors that will impact its implementation.

Skills Impact has determined that a successful roll out of the Strategy will require:

- Regionally coordinated, nationally consistent, action
- Attention to job attractiveness, including living infrastructure
- Recognition of workplace learning
- Prioritisation of digital skill development
- Industry participation in VET reform.

1. Regionally coordinated, nationally consistent, action

Although the agricultural industry is a mainstay of rural and regional economies throughout Australia, there is incredible diversity between regions in terms of the active industry sectors, scale of employing businesses, workforce requirements and availability of training solutions. National workforce development solutions cannot respond to diverse regional needs. Many issues are best solved at the regional level.

Because certain industries are concentrated in specific regions, the skills required by enterprises within a region may be similar. There is, therefore, shared regional interest in building the skills of the local workforce or attracting new workers to the region. Examples of initiatives from around Australia have shown that regional approaches to workforce development can benefit employers in multiple industries and invigorate regional economies. Infrastructure Australia has found that, when supported, rural and remote communities can more successfully meet economic challenges¹⁵. In regional, rural and remote areas, the involvement of communities working together to pool local resources, knowledge and expertise, has been identified as a key to the successful engagement of young people in education and employment¹⁶. Many regions have also been successful with

Make it Work was a program conducted by AgriFood Skills Australia to support strategic workforce planning at a regional level. In the New England and North West Region of NSW, a forum involving 90 regional employers from across industries identified the workforce issues they were facing. Seasonal activity limited their ability to offer ongoing employment and, as a result, skilled workers were under employed and young people were leaving the region.

A regional advisory group was established to develop and implement strategies to address the identified issues. The solution included:

- upskilling workers with cross-industry skills so they could be shared between employers and kept in full employment through all seasons
- embedding rural skills training in school learning and connecting employers with students so that young people knew they were needed and valued by local industry.

Multiple graduates from the cross-industry skills program created a pool of quality workers who are picked up by small and large businesses outside of the main cotton and wheat seasons. Economic outcomes from the program include a 3.2% increase in productivity and a 33% reduction in net migration for the region.

¹³ YouthInsight (2017) *Developing student interest in the agriculture sector*, Western Australia

¹⁴ Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (2020) *National Agricultural Workforce Strategy – Discussion Paper*

¹⁵ Infrastructure Australia (2019) *Factsheet: Small towns, rural and remote areas*, <https://www.infrastructureaustralia.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-08/Audit%20Fact%20Sheet%20-%20Small%20Towns%2C%20Rural%20and%20Remote.pdf>, accessed 12/08/2020

¹⁶ Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies (2015) *Engaging Young People in Regional, Rural and Remote Australia*

community-led initiatives to attract workers from urban areas using strategies that are uniquely suited to their individual context¹⁷.

Attracting workers to a region is a community responsibility. However, it requires infrastructure commitments that are often beyond the capacity of a lone region. Similarly, regional communities cannot adopt sole responsibility for skilling their local workforce. Infrastructure and workforce development solutions developed nationally by government and industry need to be available for adaptation and tailoring at the regional level. Structural arrangements are needed to support this process so that all Australian regions have the ongoing capacity to develop and implement workforce development solutions to meet their specific labour and skill requirements.

While regional structures currently exist to support the growth and development of Australia's regions, such as the network of 52 Regional Development Australia (RDA) committees established in partnership between all levels of government. The remit of these organisations is too broad, both economically and geographically, to reliably focus on, understand and address the complex issues involved in serving the workforce needs of the agriculture industry.

Other groups and committees have focused more specifically on issues of labour supply and demand. However, the existence of such groups is variable across the country with widely varying political and social objectives, levels of industry buy-in, and continuity over time. The Australian Council of Social Service has recently proposed¹⁸ the creation of Local Employment and Skills Partnerships as a new way to empower communities to grow local jobs and skills support that responds quickly to local needs.

To implement a national agricultural workforce strategy, regional responsibility will need to be taken for ensuring that actions and initiatives inspired by the Strategy are meeting the needs of industry sectors, employers and workers at the local level. Skills Impact has identified three key areas where regional responses and facilitation will be needed:

a) **Access to skills and training**

Although the vocational education and training system is ostensibly demand driven, funding and business realities for training providers can limit their ability to offer training in regions where enrolments are low, and workplaces are widely dispersed. Without reliable access to local labour market information, training providers can be unaware of potential demand for training within their communities.

Regional responses must ensure that local education and training availability is aligned with the identified workforce development needs of existing workers and new entrants.

Skills and training solutions may include:

Regional Skills Taskforces were established in Victoria by the Victorian Skills Commissioner as a mechanism for the development of Regional Skills Demand Profiles. In the Mallee, Great South Coast, and Gippsland regions, Regional Skills Taskforces have worked to better align locally delivered education and training with regional employment opportunities and the future workforce needs of industry.

- In the Mallee region, partnerships were established between employers and the local TAFE, group training organisation and schools to deliver needed agriculture and horticulture qualifications and cadetships.
- In the Great South West Region, targeted skilling solutions were developed to support workforce development and induction in the aquiculture and dairy processing industries.
- In the Gippsland region, new programs were developed to boost workforce skills in the dairy and forestry industries through promotion, awareness raising and training delivery.

¹⁷ Regional Australia Institute (2016) *Four strategies for enticing people to make the move to regional Australia*,

<http://www.regionalaustralia.org.au/home/four-strategies-enticing-people-make-move-regional-australia/> accessed 12/08/20

¹⁸ Australian Council of Social Services (2020) ACOSS plan for local action on job creation and skills reduce unemployment, Media Release, Wednesday 5th August 2020, https://www.acoss.org.au/media_release/acoss-plan-for-local-action-on-job-creation-and-skills-to-reduce-unemployment/ accessed 17/08/20

- ensuring training providers are collectively covering the entire student catchment
- using training brokers as intermediaries between employers and training providers to identify and negotiate collective training needs and opportunities
- working across borders when industries also operate cross-border
- identifying where there is future demand for labour and skills and sharing that intelligence with industry bodies, training providers and policy makers
- initiating local training programs to resolve skills shortages, e.g. Hay Inc¹⁹ is a volunteer committee of Hay District community members who are focused on providing hands-on and practical on-farm skills suitable for local needs.

b) Access to labour market information

Many agricultural industry jobs are hidden from potential workforce entrants because local knowledge is needed to understand when and where jobs are available. People from outside the region, or with no connection to the agriculture industry, may not know the seasonal cycles, family networks, industry terminology and occupational titles needed to identify job opportunities that are relevant to them.

Regional responses must ensure transparency in information about jobs within the region.

Labour market information solutions may include:

- supporting the development of a labour pool to serve the needs of multiple employers
- advertising available jobs in a transparent manner locally and to people outside the region
- working with employers to update job titles and descriptions to support broader understanding and appeal among potential workers
- liaising with employers to identify transferable skills and potential sources of workers with the transferable skills.

c) Access to community facilities

For regional jobs to be attractive, workers and their families must feel that they are welcome in their new environment and have access to housing and many of the services that are readily available in urban environments²⁰. People who are permanently relocating to regional areas have higher expectations and greater need for facilities, such as schools and aged care services, than workers on temporary visas.

Regional responses must attend to the infrastructure and facilities needs and expectations of newly arriving residents.

Community facilities solutions may include:

- welcoming newcomers and their families and helping them to integrate into the community
- establishing regional networks to connect new workers with existing workers and with each other to encourage knowledge sharing and mutual support
- actively promoting the facilities and services available in the region to prospective newcomers
- identifying facilities and services that are important for attracting workers to the region and liaising with relevant authorities to support their development.

¹⁹ Hay Inc. <https://www.hayinc.com.au/about-us/> accessed 12/08/20

²⁰ Wu W, Dawson D, Fleming-Muñoz D, Schleiger E and Horton J (2019) *The future of Australia's agricultural workforce*, CSIRO Data61: Canberra, Australia

Recommendation 1

Establish (or, where already established, recognise and support) regional workforce and skills committees (RWSCs) to implement the Workforce Strategy in support of the 2030 Roadmap vision at a regional level by working collaboratively in an ongoing role to identify regional workforce needs and facilitate solutions.

The structure and composition of RWSCs may vary between regions due to differences in predominant industry sectors and existing collaborative structures. For their long-term effectiveness, it will be important that RWSCs are not focused on the achievement of narrow goals or captured by vested interests. Genuine representation from a range of agriculture employers will be essential in addition to representation from stakeholders such as local government, state government, industry and employer groups, unions, agribusinesses, job agencies, public and private education and training organisations, and social service providers.

Broadly, the role of the RWSC is to facilitate the training and job market in regional areas where issues of population, distance, and seasonality compromise market outcomes. This is recommended as an ongoing role, there is no reason to believe that a one-time solution will fix the ongoing and continually emerging shortcomings of regional labour and skill markets. However, there will be value in monitoring the operation of RWSCs to identify critical success factors to inform continuous improvement.

2. Attention to job attractiveness

Sectors within the agricultural industry have recognised that the broader population does not have a good understanding of the job roles and career pathways available in the industry. Several sectors have made attempts to resolve this through initiatives that support career planning.

If the Strategy developed by the National Agricultural Labour Advisory Committee is going to expand the agricultural workforce with new entrants and deeper skills, then common misperceptions of the industry will need to be corrected. Several areas of focus will be relevant to implementation of the Strategy:

- a) **Gender and age segregation**
The agriculture, forestry and fishing industries are male dominated with an aging workforce. In 2018, 30.1% of employees in these industries were female and this proportion has not changed in the last 20 years²¹.

Strategy implementation will need to ensure that opportunities in the agriculture industry for women, youth, and middle-aged career changers are widely promoted and understood.

Stepping Stones was developed by Dairy Australia to provide information on the different types of careers on a dairy farm. The suite of material explores the different pathways available for people who are either looking to start a career on a dairy farm or wanting to progress their dairy career further.
<https://thepeopleindairy.org.au/planning-for-the-future/stepping-stones/>

Cotton Careers is a simple graphic that lists cotton industry job titles for each letter of the alphabet, developed by Cotton Australia to highlight the wide range of careers available in the industry.
<https://cottonaustralia.com.au/careers>

Nursery Industry research examined career pathways in the nursery industry and other agricultural sectors to understand inhibiting factors to attract, retain and develop a skilled workforce.
<https://www.horticulture.com.au/globalassets/hort-innovation/resource-assets/ny17002-nursery-industry-career-pathways-report.pdf>

²¹ Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2019) Gender Segregation in Australia's Workforce, <https://www.wgea.gov.au/data/fact-sheets/gender-segregation-in-australias-workforce> accessed 13/08/20

Implementation activities may include:

- Raising the visibility of women and youth working in agriculture, through campaigns and messaging on social media²²
- Challenging stereotypes about the physical nature of farm work by profiling the growing but less traditional careers in agriculture, such as roles in management, finance and reporting, and data collection and analysis.
- Investing in initiatives to increase leadership diversity and encourage women and people who have lived in cities into leadership and supervisory roles^{23, 24}.

b) **Transferable management skills**

As family farms become larger and increasingly professionalised, farmers are seeking employees who possess leadership and technological skills that are transferable to an agricultural context, rather than prioritising an industry track record²⁵. The Queensland Farmers' Federation describes "updating middle management and supervisory skills" as an urgent workforce issue, citing a "lack of sufficient training in servicing middle management requirements and for leadership and supervisory roles"²⁶. Displaced workers from other industries could potentially fill these skills gaps and, in so doing, help to raise leadership and technological skills in the industry.

Strategy implementation should help displaced workers to recognise opportunities to transfer their skills to the agriculture industry.

Implementation activities may include:

- Investing in industry-specific training to help workforce entrants build on existing skills and knowledge from other industries
- Raising awareness of the range of management and leadership roles in the industry and the types of skills and knowledge they require.

c) **Accessible job titles**

Agricultural jobs and occupations have changed and broadened but job titles and job descriptions do not always reflect those changes. In other industries, job descriptions have been deliberately modernised to better reflect current skill requirements and future career opportunities. Fast food chains use terms like *team member* and *team leader* to inform potential applicants that they can work alongside peers and make friends as they work. Job descriptions emphasise the variety of roles, access to training, rewards and recognition for high performance. Workers who do well understand that they can be given increasing responsibility, with a career path to manager²⁷.

Small but significant changes, such as using terms that reflect the current work environment and future opportunities – like referring to *team members* instead of *farm hands* – have the potential to attract a wider range of workers. Helping potential employees to know what they will be doing, in language that more accurately reflects industry roles and responsibilities, can help to overcome barriers to employment in the industry.

Strategy implementation should develop and use occupational titles and job descriptions that

²² AustralianFarmers (2020) *Dad's call for help inspires farmer #GirlPower Twitter movement*, <https://farmers.org.au/news/dads-call-for-help-inspires-farmer-girlpower-twitter-movement/>, accessed 13/08/2020

²³ AustralianFarmers (2020) *Diversity in Agriculture Leadership Program*, <https://farmers.org.au/campaign/diversity-in-agriculture-leadership/>, accessed 13/08/2020

²⁴ Agriculture Victoria (2018) *Victoria's Agriculture Skills Statement: Smarter, safer farm*

²⁵ Santhanam-Martin, M and Cowan, L (2018) *Making "middle managers": workforce development for agricultural industries in transition*, International Farming Systems Association, Chania, Greece

²⁶ Queensland Farmers' Federation (2018); 2018 Agriculture Future Skills and Training Needs Research

²⁷ Gould, A (2010) Working at McDonalds: Some redeeming features of McJobs, Work, Employment & Society, 24. 780-802.10.1177/09500170380644

are understandable and appealing for people outside the industry.

There can be industrial relations implications of altering job titles where the titles are linked to pay and conditions described in Modern Awards. The following job titles are currently defined in the Pastoral Award 2010: farm and livestock hand, shearers, crutcher, woolpresser, shearing cook, shearing shed expert, station cook, woolclasser, piggery attendant, and poultry worker. Employers will only be receptive to changing their use of these terms if the changes are also made at an industrial relations levels.

Implementation activities may include:

- Identifying job titles that accurately reflect current roles and resonate with potential workforce entrants and encouraging their use by employers
- Working with employment service providers to build understanding of the variety of roles and potential for transfer of skills and knowledge in agricultural occupations
- Using updated job titles and descriptions in career information and secondary school learning materials
- Seeking changes to data systems that use inappropriate, outdated or generic job classifications such as ABS and Job Outlook, including working on these issues with the National Careers Institute.

Recommendation 2

Reframe agricultural job titles and job descriptions to resonate with people across Australia and emphasise valued transferable skills from other industries.

A scan of the jobs on Seek.com in the category of Farming, Animals and Conservation lists the following farm jobs:

- Farm hand
- General farmhand
- Overseer
- Station hand
- Nursery hand
- Harvest hand.

Each of these job titles may be read as representing relatively low-skilled, entry-level roles, apart from *overseer* which is a reminder of language used in the past. These job titles do not represent the breadth and diversity of the roles or convey information on the work to be done. Potential workers from a rural background would understand the job role behind these titles, and the knowledge, skills and attitudes required. However, a person with a non-rural background would likely see *farm hand* as a low-level labouring role. A close reading of farm hand job descriptions reveals that the role can be considerably more complex than unskilled labour – including working with a range of complex machinery, all types of fencing and fence repair, animal husbandry, and plant husbandry – but even these descriptors that are not easily understood by those outside the industry.

3. Recognition of workplace learning

Attracting new entrants to the agricultural industry is important for growing the workforce, but it will also be important to build the skills of existing workers to meet future demands and challenges. Although the industry has an ageing workforce, with more than 100,000 people in the 60 plus age

profile, there are also almost 140,000 people in the 20-50 years age group²⁸ who have the potential to develop and adapt their skills over the next decades. It will be important for a national strategy to attend to the needs of existing workers as well as those of new entrants.

The National Agricultural Workforce Strategy literature review notes that, in the past, most farm workers have acquired their skills in the workplace but the literature review questions whether this is still appropriate given technological changes and the increased need for management skills in the industry²⁹. Based on extensive engagement with industry stakeholders, Skills Impact considers that there is an imperative for clear and decisive measures to assist with formal training provision, and a critical need for supervised and programmed on-the-job learning. It is not a one or the other proposition. Formal and informal training plus supervised on the job practice is required for the future of the industry.

The Australian VET system develops units of competency to describe the work carried out in all industries, excepting that supported by university qualifications. These units of competency are used by registered training organisations (RTOs) to deliver formal qualifications but they also have potential for broader use by industry to consistently describe job requirements and workforce development outcomes.

Skills Impact has identified areas for attention in the Strategy's implementation:

a) **Informal learning**

There are numerous informal ways for agriculture workers to build capacity. The Productivity Commission has observed that, in future, non-formal and informal education will play a larger role in workforce development³⁰. On farms, skills and knowledge have traditionally been handed on from employer to employee, from employee to employee or, in the case of family farms, from parent to child. This is a valid and significantly large body of learning that is rarely recorded or recognised. However, in the changing industry landscape this method alone is unlikely to equip workers with the new, higher-order capabilities they need for the future.

Strategy implementation should seek to recognise and support informal learning that occurs in the workplace so that the knowledge and skills developed can be more readily transferred to new contexts.

Implementation activities may include:

- Developing mechanisms, such as national learning materials including enterprise checklists and skill ready reckoners, for recognising and valuing the quality and extent of informal learning that occurs in the workplace

ClickBuyLearn (clickbuylearn.com) is an online collection of low-cost, non-accredited courses developed by RSOPrime that are aimed at personal development, professional development, and employee development. The courses provide knowledge requirements relating to units of competency and have potential to support workplace learning on-farm with the addition of practical materials.

For example, to support delivery in the workplace, the online course *Plan and construct conventional fencing* could be supplemented with:

- the farm plan
- calculations sheet to estimate materials, labour and costs required
- operating and safety procedures for equipment used
- checklists for monitoring progress
- assessment tasks.

Tocal College provides online and blended training programs linked to units of competency from national qualifications. Tocal's programs are available across Australia and connect learners with each other through online discussions and collaborative research.

Tocal College also retails an extensive catalogue of resources and other publications to support learning found at total.nsw.edu.au/publications.

²⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016) Census of Population and Housing

²⁹ Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (2020) National Agricultural Workforce Strategy literature review, p xi

³⁰ Productivity Commission (2017) *Shifting the Dial: 5 Year Productivity Review*, Report No. 84, Canberra

- Providing national learning materials that help employers to connect informal workplace learning with recognised industry outcomes
- Offering professional development for farm owners and managers to build the mentoring and coaching skills required to support learning in the workplace.

b) **Non-accredited training and non-formal learning**

Primary industries use peer learning through farmer groups, industry group functions, and group extension programs for passing on knowledge and for testing new ideas. This is a home-grown response to lack of access to formal learning and learning resources and, unlike informal learning, does attract some recognition. Supplier or vendor training is also provided by agribusinesses to help their customers learn the techniques and procedures necessary to operate new equipment, systems, and tools. This model will continue to provide some of the needed workforce development.

Strategy implementation should connect with existing non-formal learning activity to understand the workforce skills that are valued and prioritised by employers.

Implementation activities may include:

- Encouraging more employers to engage with available forms of non-formal learning
- Mapping non-formal learning to nationally recognised units of competency to support recognition and transferability of learning outcomes
- Instigating an enhanced role for research and development organisations and Cooperative Research Centres to share relevant findings through workforce development initiatives at all levels of industry.

c) **Human resource practices**

Most farm owners and managers appreciate and take care of their equipment. They house it, regularly maintain and upgrade it and recognise its value as an asset that supports the business. Savvy employers take the same approach with farm employees by recognising that they are also significant assets that need appreciation, regular attention, and development.

Large employers often have well-developed internal training systems linked to business objectives. Workplace learning is supported with manuals, videos, safe operating procedures and protocols. Employee skills development is monitored through in-house learning programs that may be linked to units of competency and qualifications – even when the learning is focused exclusively on business needs and does not result in the learner gaining credentials or accessing longer-term career paths.

Sole traders and family partnerships are most likely not to have internal training systems in place and owners and managers are often daunted by the prospect of adding “trainer” to their many roles. Through Skills Impact’s consultation processes, industry stakeholders share stories about people being “dropped in the deep end” on the farm by being given a new job role or new piece of equipment and having to learn by trial and error, with significant, costly, and sometimes tragic, consequences.

Strategy implementation should use RWSCs to promote the business benefits of human resource practices that value and support ongoing skill development for employers.

Implementation activities may include:

- Partnering with industry associations to document and disseminate information on the ROI benefits of employee development
- Providing national guidance materials to support the implementation of workforce development approaches in small businesses
- Documenting the range of career pathways that may be pursued based on skills developed and demonstrated in the workplace

- Exploring the potential for pooling HR capabilities across a number of smaller enterprises within a region.

d) **Formal vocational education and training**

Registered training organisations (RTOs) deliver formal industry training from nationally endorsed Training Packages that, when assessed, results in the attainment of qualifications, skill sets and units of competency. RTOs need good connections with employers so that they are fully informed of the training needs and expectations of their customers. The national regulation of RTOs can restrict their ability to respond flexibly to local needs. State and national funding policies for VET also impact the viability of RTO operations and influence their decisions on what courses to offer.

RTOs are expected to deliver people who are ‘work ready’ at the end of a course. However, institutional learning with limited practice does not produce workers that most employers consider ‘work ready’. The development of workplace competency is a journey over time that requires the formal learning of knowledge and basic skills, and sustained practice in workplace settings.

Strategy implementation should recognise that competency is a journey and is best carried out over time, both in the workplace and in the classroom.

Implementation activities may include:

- Connecting RTOs with regional committees (RWSCs) to ensure that course offerings are responsive to industry demand
- Helping RTOs to support learning in the workplace through the provision of appropriate learning materials and links with employers for work placements
- Supporting partnerships between RTOs and employers whereby RTOs provide courses for new entrants with a focus on knowledge and safety, then support practical learning in the workplace over time before ultimately providing recognition of competency and formal certification.

Recommendation 3

Support local training efforts through the provision of national and contextualisable learning materials to encourage active learning on farms and by local training institutions.

Units of competency in agriculture are generic and can be applied to a wide range of industry sectors and enterprise contexts. However, there is currently a lack of contextualised materials to support workplace learning. The development of a wide range of contextualised resources will be essential for skills development to thrive at the local level.

Support materials could be contextualised at a regional level to capture local needs. Regional committees (RWSCs) could also work with local training providers to ensure that they are willing and able to support on-the-job learning processes.

Recommendation 4

Rename *Training Packages* as *work or skills standards* to better encourage their use in a variety of ways by enterprises and industry associations.

The value of Training Packages developed in the VET system is already recognised by some employers who use the units and qualifications they contain to inform or design their internal training, job descriptions and HR processes. Renaming Training Packages to better reflect their content – occupational or skill standards – would make their purpose and potential more evident to people in industry.

4. Prioritisation of digital skill development

All industries are being impacted by the opportunities and challenges presented by the development and introduction of new technologies. Consideration of what this means for the agricultural workforce will be critical to the implementation of a national strategy.

Skills Impact has identified the following areas for attention:

a) **Low levels of digital literacy**

The CRDC-funded project, *Agriculture Workforce Digital Capability Framework*³¹ reported that agricultural employees tend to have low levels of digital maturity, with a “consistent lack of proficiency in operating technologies and digital devices applicable to business activities and processes”. Data collection and analysis was found to be lacking on many farms, with resulting shortcomings in the decision-making that these practices are supposed to liberate.

Strategy implementation will need to address the low levels of digital literacy on many farms.

Implementation responses may include:

- Reviewing available workforce development solutions to ensure they meet the digital skills development needs of the existing workforce
- Leveraging the entry of displaced workers from other industries to boost the digital capabilities of the agricultural workforce
- Investing in digital literacy programs that can be contextualised and rolled out at a regional level.

b) **Conflicting priorities**

According to research by ACIL Allen consulting for AgriFutures, to unlock the potential of technology, producers need a strong value proposition to adopt digital technologies at a rate not previously seen in Australia³². Stakeholders in their research defined ‘skills and capability’ as a ‘lower priority’ for industry. Yet, paradoxically, low levels of ‘skills and capability’ are then acknowledged as a barrier to the desired adoption of digital technology. This contradictory position is in part a reflection of cultural reluctance to embrace formal learning within farming

Agriculture Workforce Digital Capability Framework

was created by a project initiated by the Cotton Research and Development Corporation and led by KPMG in partnership with Skills Impact and others to map digital capabilities of the agricultural workforce that will be required in enabling individuals to adapt to a rapidly changing technological environment.

The Framework identifies a range of digital capabilities at different levels. The Framework is complemented by a handbook to help training providers identify what part of the framework they could deliver

CSIRO has developed a self-assessment tool that allows individuals and businesses to assess the current state of their digital maturity and identify the gaps.

³¹ KPMG and Skills Impact (2019) *Agricultural workforce digital capability framework* KPMG and Cotton Research and Development Corporation, Australia, p.7

³² AgriFutures Australia (2019) *Agriculture – a \$100b sector by 2030?*

communities³³, and is compounded by other factors, such as perceptions of training delivery being inflexible and reducing workplace productivity³⁴.

Strategy implementation will need to ensure that greater importance is assigned to digital skills and capability in future.

Implementation responses may include:

- Encouraging individual workers and employers to self-assess their digital maturity and identify skill building opportunities
- Raising awareness of the future need for digital skills and articulating the nature of the skills required
- Working with formal and informal providers of training to develop and deliver a range of digital skill building programs.

Recommendation 5

Adopt the Agricultural Workforce Digital Capability Framework³⁵ by establishing digital capability benchmarks across sectors and driving the development of curricula and training pathways for both existing and future workers.

5. Industry participation in VET reform

In *Get Australia Growing*³⁶ the National Farmers Federation calls for reform of vocational and higher education models to suit the needs of agriculture so that tertiary education is industry-led and recognises the skills requirements of the agriculture industry. As noted previously, many skills critical to the future of the industry have a high delivery cost in the VET system due to issues associated with thin markets in regional, rural and remote areas. A strong voice from industry, and evidence of employer demand for training, is needed to push for policy changes that will improve access to high quality VET programs for the agricultural workforce.

The implementation of a national strategy provides an opportunity to strengthen industry engagement with the VET system.

Skills Impact has identified the following areas for consideration:

a) Industry leadership

In the current VET system, opportunities for industry involvement are primarily limited to specifying national skill standards. Industry has little voice in the delivery or regulation of training and assessment. This is particularly critical for agricultural industries where there is a need to address major issues in relation to access to training, regional and workplace training delivery, and inequitable funding arrangements.

Strategy implementation should push for greater industry influence in the VET system.

Implementation actions might include:

³³ Hall, A, Turnera, L and Kilpatrick, S (2019) Using the theory of planned behaviour framework to understand Tasmanian dairy farmer engagement with extension activities to inform future delivery, *The Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension*, DOI: 10.1080/1389224X.2019.1571422

³⁴ Billett, S, Choy, S, Dymock, D, Smith, R, Henderson, A, Tyler, M and Kelly, A (2015) *Towards more effective continuing education and training for Australian workers*, National Centre for Vocational Education Research, Adelaide

³⁵ KPMG and Skills Impact (2019) *Agricultural workforce digital capability framework* KPMG and Cotton Research and Development Corporation, Australia

³⁶ National Farmers Federation (2020) *Get Australia Growing: Ideas for Economic Recovery*, https://nff.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/NFF_A4Economic-Recovery_FA_email-3.pdf, accessed 13/08/20

- Introducing delegated decision making in relation to defining industry skills standards, and closer ties to VET administration and regulatory bodies
- Enabling greater industry influence in decisions on the provision of training services – when and where they are needed and how they are funded, perhaps through the capabilities of RWSCs
- Establishing requirements for RTOs to work more closely with regional employers and RWSCs to ensure that course offerings are meeting local needs.

b) **Involvement in training**

Many training providers are under-resourced and are unable to engage with employers as much as is needed. Instead they more often focus on students, and meeting student needs, as this is a more direct and cost-effective method for maintaining RTO viability. Increasing the number of industry people taking an active role in the delivery of training, on-the-job coaching and assessment would help to ensure that RTOs are more conscious of industry needs.

Strategy implementation should encourage greater involvement of industry people with RTOs in planning and delivering training and on-farm learning.

Implementation might include activity by RWSCs:

- Adopting common terminology that serves both industry and training providers to foster better dialogue between training providers and employers
- Linking subject matter experts with trainers to assist with the delivery of up-to-date industry content
- Marketing courses to regional industry and employers
- Helping RTOs to compile evidence of industry engagement to satisfy regulatory requirements.

c) **Invest in quality training**

Local trainers and providers are highly valued in rural communities for their roles in helping young people develop through teaching, facilitating opportunities and mentoring³⁷. A 2015 report³⁸ recommended that the challenges and opportunities inherent in regional, rural and remote educational contexts should be explicitly addressed in the selection, preparation, appointment and on-going professional support of educational leaders. The Victorian State Government has since recognised this issue and is investing “\$12.8 million to increase the number of high-quality teachers specialising in VET and VCAL so that more students from country areas can access and complete apprenticeships, traineeships and further

AgSkilled was a collaborative industry-government initiative that ran in NSW over 3 years, concluding in June 2020. The initiative was a direct partnership between the Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC), Cotton Australia and Training Services NSW, Department of Education. The focus of AgSkilled was to ensure that the grain and cotton workforce was well prepared for the future through the provision of vocational training that responded directly to industry needs.

Through AgSkilled, the NSW Government invested \$14.7 million in VET over three years to upskill and prepare the workforce for fast-moving change driven by industry innovation, research and technology. AgSkilled delivered flexible fee-free training, from single units to Advanced Diploma qualifications. The initiative used grassroots input from industry to ensure the relevance of training to rural and regional areas.

Generating Regionally Outstanding Women (GROW) is one example of a course delivered through the AgSkilled initiative by Tocal College. GROW was designed to provide professional development for women business owners and managers. The course develops skills in time management, planning and organisation; communication and networking; staff and team management; industrial relations; and work health and safety and is aligned to national units of competency, allowing participants to achieve statements of attainment that can contribute to several qualifications.

³⁷ Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies (2015) *Engaging Young People in Regional, Rural and Remote Australia*, p.48

³⁸ Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies (2015) *Engaging Young People in Regional, Rural and Remote Australia*, p.5

education”³⁹.

Recent reports have recommended that access to high quality VET should be improved in regional, rural and remote areas, including increased opportunities to undertake work-integrated learning⁴⁰, and that training needs to relate to local contexts and current labour demands⁴¹.

Recommendation 6

Encourage capable agricultural trainers and assessors to take up positions for regional, rural and remote-based VET.

Strategy implementation should recognise that increased investment is required to deliver VET in regional, rural and remote areas.

Implementation activity might include:

- Contributing to the policy making processes of the National Skills Commission in relation to VET funding
- Exploring alternative funding models to support the delivery of training that meets regional industry needs, such as the AgSkilled model
- Building the capacity of regional employers to recognise and demand quality training from the VET system.

Recommendation 7

Recognise the increased cost of training delivery in regional, rural and remote areas and adjust funding accordingly.

Next steps

Skills Impact aims to use this paper to start conversations with stakeholders about the practical actions necessary to realise the workforce development aims of the Strategy being developed by the National Agricultural Labour Advisory Committee. Insights and intelligence gained through these conversations will be shared with the Committee to support their work to develop and implement a Strategy that is effective in addressing the future workforce needs of the agriculture, fisheries and forestry industries, and closely allied service and supply chain sectors.

³⁹ Victorian State Government (2019) Targeted initiative to attract more teachers, <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/educationstate/Pages/targeted-initiative-to-attract-more-teachers.aspx>, accessed 27/07/2020

⁴⁰ Commonwealth of Australia (2019) *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy*, p.6-7

⁴¹ Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies (2015) *Engaging Young People in Regional, Rural and Remote Australia*, p.14