

Queensland VET Strategy

Cotton Australia is the peak body that represents the interests of Australia's 1500 cotton growers supporting about 1,200 cotton farming families in NSW, Queensland, Northern Australia and now in Victoria. Additionally, we represent Australia's 42 cotton ginneries located across NSW, Queensland and the Northern Territory. While our production can vary significantly from year-to-year, dependent on rainfall and water availability, it is worth on average \$2.5 billion in annual export earnings and employs approximately 12,000 people nationally.

Queensland's cotton growers produce approximately 33% of the Australian cotton crop which in a 'average season' contributes just under \$800 million to the Queensland economy operating across approximately 600 farms employing around 4,800 people¹. Queensland's cotton growers produce other winter and summer crops, significantly adding to production opportunities and output.

What opportunities have you been able to experience through VET as: a student an apprentice or trainee an employer a registered training organisation other groups? (e.g. peak bodies, unions, community organisations)

For students, VET offers a wide range of courses and training programs for students seeking practical skills and qualifications in specific industries. Students can gain valuable knowledge and hands-on experience relevant to their chosen career paths. VET courses often focus on employability, helping students enter the workforce with specific skills.

VET is a common pathway for apprentices and trainees to gain essential skills in trades and vocations. Through on-the-job training combined with formal instruction, apprentices and trainees can earn nationally recognised qualifications, setting the foundation for a successful career in their chosen field.

Employers can benefit from VET by having access to a skilled and job-ready workforce. By employing apprentices or providing training to their existing staff, employers can enhance productivity and competitiveness. VET can be tailored to meet the specific needs of businesses, helping them address skill shortages and adapt to changing industry requirements. The VET sector must acknowledge, employers value practical skill sets over qualifications.

RTOs play a crucial role in the VET sector as they are responsible for delivering accredited training programs and issuing qualifications. They have the opportunity to provide valuable educational services, establish partnerships with industries, and contribute to the overall development of the workforce.

¹ These figures are taken from industry estimates that QLD produces 33% of the national cotton crop

Peak Bodies, Unions and Community Organisations can actively participate in the VET sector by influencing policy and advocating for the interests of their members. They can collaborate with governments and industry stakeholders to shape the VET landscape, ensuring it aligns with the needs of employers, workforce and community.

By investing in VET, governments can support economic growth, reduce unemployment, and improve the overall skill level of the agricultural workforce. Additionally, VET can be utilised to address social issues and provide learning opportunities for marginalised communities such as first nations people, the culturally and linguistically diverse and people living with a disability to contribute to societal development.

Overall, VET plays a crucial role in preparing individuals for the workforce, improving the competitiveness of industries, and contributing to the overall socio-economic development of a nation. The diverse opportunities offered by VET cater to the needs of various stakeholders, fostering collaboration and growth within the education and training sector.

What gaps or challenges have you experienced with VET as: a student an apprentice or trainee an employer a registered training organisation other groups? (e.g. peak bodies, unions, community organisations)

From our experience we can highlight some common gaps and challenges that different stakeholders have experienced with the Queensland Vocational Education and Training (VET) system.

For students, the relevance of some VET courses might not adequately address the current needs of industries, leading to a gap between the skills learned and those required by employers. The inconsistent course quality among different training providers can affect the learning experience and the value of qualifications. Limited access to VET programs in certain regional, rural and remote locations can significantly disadvantage groups and may hinder opportunities for skill development. These groups include First Nations People, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD), people living with a disability and the long term unemployed

For apprentices and trainees gaining employer engagement can be difficult and daunting in finding employers willing to provide quality on-the-job training and support for apprentices and trainees. Apprentice wages may be insufficient to cover living expenses, discouraging some individuals from pursuing apprenticeships. High drop-out rates and non-completion can result among apprentices due to various factors, including work-related challenges or inadequate support.

For employers there is an acknowledged skills gap between employer expectations and graduates of some VET courses such as Cert III's. This results in a difficulty in finding adequately skilled workers, particularly in rapidly evolving industries, leading to workforce shortages. An additional obstacle for employers includes the complexity navigating regulations and paperwork related to offering apprenticeships and traineeships providing workplace training.

The process of obtaining and maintaining accreditation can be time-consuming and resource-intensive for RTOs. RTOs may face uncertainty in funding arrangements, affecting their ability to plan and deliver courses effectively to ensure

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the content being presented is industry relevant. Ensuring course offerings align with industry needs and maintaining up-to-date training resources can be challenging.

For peak bodies ensuring that VET policies and programs address the needs and concerns of their respective industries or communities can be a challenge if they are not engaged with effectively. Without government support, some organisations/industries may struggle to secure sufficient funding or resources to deliver effective VET initiatives.

There are several systemic challenges which need to be managed to ensure effective learning outcomes. The first being, addressing the persistent perception that VET is inferior to traditional academic pathways and promoting VET as a viable career option. Another challenge is incorporating technology into training methods and materials to keep pace with digital advancements and ensuring VET courses remain relevant and up-to-date with rapidly changing industries and technology such as the adoption of AgTech and automation in the agriculture sector.

It is important to recognise that these challenges may vary across different regions, industries, and educational systems. Addressing these gaps and challenges requires collaboration between governments, education providers, industries, and other stakeholders to improve the overall effectiveness and quality of VET programs.

What is the one thing you would do to improve the VET experience?

Establish mechanisms for regular and meaningful consultation with industry representatives, including employers, peak bodies, and unions. This ensures that VET offerings are responsive to evolving skill requirements and technological advancements. Encourage and incentivise VET providers to incorporate practical workplace experience within the training curriculum. This can be achieved through work-based learning, apprenticeships, internships, and on-the-job training, allowing students to apply their skills in real-world settings.

This would be achieved by creating industry-led advisory committees for each sector, composed of employers, industry experts, and educators. These committees can provide valuable insights into current and emerging skill needs, review and validate course content, and ensure ongoing relevance. Offer professional development opportunities for VET trainers to keep them updated with industry trends and best practices, ensuring they can effectively transfer the latest R&D knowledge and skills to students.

How has TAFE supported you, your industry and/or your community?

TAFE offers a wide range of vocational courses and training programs that equip individuals with practical skills and knowledge relevant to their chosen career paths. This enables students to gain industry-recognised qualifications and enhances their employability. In addition, TAFE provides accessible and flexible learning opportunities, accommodating students of diverse backgrounds and circumstances, including those in regional, rural and remote areas and with specific needs.

TAFE plays a crucial role in creating clear career pathways for individuals by offering courses that align with the needs of industries and the job market. This helps students make informed choices about their career trajectories.

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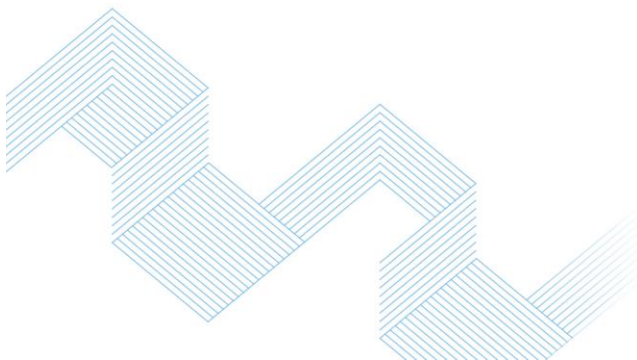
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TAFE needs more industry-driven Training, TAFE institutions need to collaborate more effectively with industries to develop and deliver training programs that meet specific industry needs. This ensures that the workforce is equipped with the skills and competencies required to meet industry demands. This will go further to providing skilled and job-ready graduates to the workforce, TAFE is an important cog that contributes to the development of a competent and productive workforce, filling skills gaps and supporting economic growth.

In addition to better collaboration with industry and deliver cost competitive training, TAFE institutions need to actively engage with their local communities by providing training and education services that meet the unique needs of the area, especially those of regional, rural and remote Australia. This includes addressing specific skills shortages and supporting local industries that exist in all locations of Queensland.

TAFE plays a significant role in supporting community members in gaining employment or advancing their careers through education and training. This contributes to the economic well-being of the community. By forging closer relationships with industry, learners will be provided with a true student to workforce pathway leading to better employment outcomes.

TAFE excels at promoting social inclusion by providing opportunities for individuals from first nations, culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and those living with a disability to access education and skill development, thereby empowering them to participate fully in society.

Overall, TAFE institutions are vital components of the education and training landscape, supporting individuals in their personal and professional growth, helping industries meet their workforce needs, and contributing to the well-being and development of communities at large.

What are the barriers to accessing or delivering quality training and skills for: a student an apprentice or trainee an employer a registered training organisation other groups? (e.g. peak bodies, unions, community organisations)

Accessing and delivering quality training and skills for regional, rural and remote Australians can be challenging due to several barriers. These barriers can vary based on factors such as geographic location, dispersed population, thin market perception, lack of infrastructure, economic conditions, and social factors.

Many regional, rural and remote areas in Australia are far from major cities and training institutions. This geographic isolation makes it difficult for individuals to access training centres and for training providers to reach these communities.

Remote areas often lack adequate infrastructure, such as reliable internet connectivity and transportation networks. This can hinder online learning opportunities and limit the availability of training facilities.

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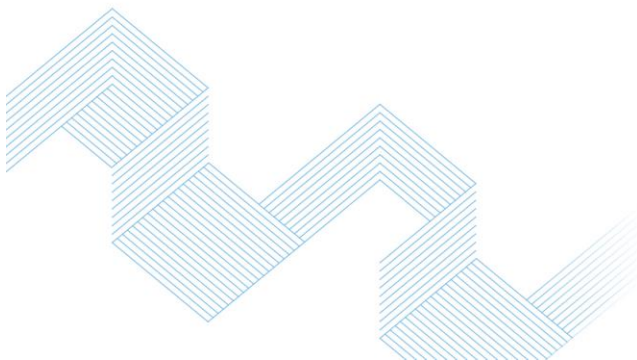
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Training providers might be less inclined to establish their services in sparsely populated regions due to limited demand and higher operational costs. As a result, there may be fewer options for individuals seeking training opportunities.

Economic disparities can make accessing training courses challenging for individuals in remote areas of Queensland. Course fees, travel expenses, and accommodation costs can be significant barriers for those with limited financial resources.

Many individuals in regional and remote areas might not be aware of the training opportunities available to them. The absence of information and outreach programs can hinder their ability to access training. Indigenous communities and culturally diverse populations may face additional barriers due to language differences and a lack of culturally appropriate training programs.

In some remote areas, the job market might be limited, and there may be fewer opportunities for individuals to utilise their newly acquired skills. This lack of job prospects can discourage people from pursuing training.

Remote areas may lack sufficient support services, such as career counselling, mentoring, and job placement assistance, which are crucial for individuals to make the most of their training. Moving to urban centres for training can be difficult for individuals with family and community ties in regional and remote areas. The lack of available housing, relocation costs and social dislocation can also be significant deterrents.

Even if individuals in regional and remote areas manage to receive quality training, there might be a risk of brain drain as they move to urban centres in search of better job opportunities.

Addressing these barriers requires a comprehensive and targeted approach, involving collaboration between governments, educational institutions, community organisations, and employers. Initiatives such as improved digital infrastructure, targeted funding, outreach programs, and flexible training delivery methods can help overcome these challenges and ensure that all Australians have access to quality training and skills development opportunities, regardless of their geographic location.

What is the one thing you would do to improve access to quality training and skills for you, your industry and/or your community?

To improve access to training opportunities for the employers and workers within the cotton industry, Cotton Australia would propose an industry lead training initiative (SmartAg QLD) supported by government. This accredited and unaccredited training (micro credentials and skills sets) would be delivered against four key pillars; business, safety, production and technology.

We believe these pillars reflect businesses that are profitable and sustainable and that will continue to contribute to the growth of agricultural production in Queensland and its contribution to the Australian economy. The skillset required by

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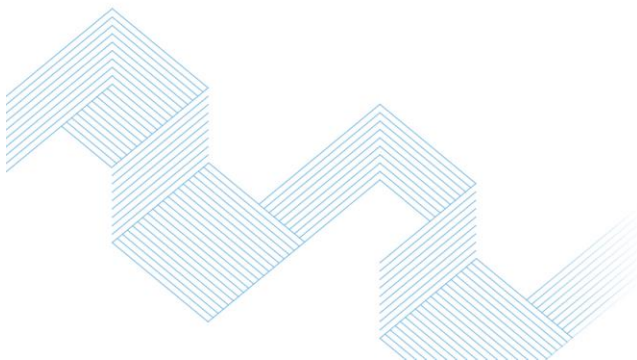
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people working on-farm is highly varied and will depend on the enterprise cropping mix, structure and size of the property. Any training needs to be industry-specific, leveraging the investments all industries make each year in research and development.

A research report by the National Centre for Vocational Education and Research (NCVER) on the “*Readiness to meet demand for skills: a study of five growth industries*” confirmed the changing skills needs in agriculture, and has highlighted a range of challenges and opportunities including:

- The widening gap between the knowledge generated in the education and training systems and the skills demanded by employers.
- Industry collaboration with education and training providers is a key factor in ensuring greater industry input into the nature of education and training, and in anticipating the extent and nature of future demand. Providers also need to foster collaboration in order to keep abreast of contemporary industry requirements.
- The Agri-food scan in 2013 listed the ‘poor speed-to-market of publicly-funded research findings to be one of the major constraints in substantially lifting Agrifood productivity levels.’ The scan identified paraprofessionals and technicians as those responsible for much of the application of new practice and knowledge. They need to be equipped during their VET training to ‘spearhead dissemination and application of research findings back at the workplace.’

Research has confirmed that farmer educational attainment is directly linked to productivity growth, and education broadly influences a farmers’ innovative capacity (their propensity to adapt and implement new practices or technologies).²

A recent study analysing the economic consequences of adopting paddock scale innovations reported labour availability was the main challenge growers faced when attempting to adopt new farming practices. Grain farmers report significant challenges sourcing farm workers, especially during peak periods and has meant many have been unable to complete farm operations in a timely manner.³

In order to succeed, our workforce needs a mix of both technical and ‘soft’ skills. Interpersonal skills such as personal effectiveness, time management and communication result in a more cohesive workplace and are directly transferable to other industries and businesses – returning on the investment across Queensland.

² Review into agricultural education and training in New South Wales’, James Pratley, Graham Centre for Agricultural Innovation. page 41

³ Labour costs and availability are key challenges to modifying farming systems, GRDC Article, accessed <https://groundcover.grdc.com.au/story/6454352/labour-can-be-an-obstacle-to-on-farm-innovation/>



Technical skills will ensure the ability to successfully manage crop pest and disease, irrigation, agronomic and nutrition requirements, to make timely management decisions, to manage diverse teams and to efficiently manage the finance, risk management, marketing and compliance requirements which underpin all farming businesses. Producers also require the necessary skills to understand the masses of property specific data now available to them through advancements in technology, and to manage this to create opportunities for data-based decision making in their businesses.

There is an increasing requirement for producers to master the personal effectiveness required to manage diverse teams and to communicate effectively with both industry and the wider community. They also need the skills to manage risk, and to scan the horizon for new technologies and prospects, identifying opportunities to increase sustainability, productivity and profitability on farm. All skills that will continue to see Queensland farmers as forward thinking and the best in the country.

While our industries value full qualifications, they have a preference for incremental learning through a “bite sized”, life-long learning approach, acquiring skills and knowledge that will result in practice change in their business. Therefore, we propose a combination of both accredited and nonaccredited training to best meet the needs of all Queensland agriculture industries.

Short courses tailored to specific subjects and leveraging the latest in research and development are ideal for agriculture producers. Training needs to be delivered flexibly, and locally - when and where determined by industry with rural and remote delivery a priority. Leveraging industry expertise, through guest presentations from genuine subject matter experts, recognised by industry, will ensure training is relevant and need driven.

While production and business focussed training is essential, improving on-farm safety is incredibly important. Over the past 20 years there has been only a small reduction in the number of on farm-related and non-intentional-injury deaths across the Australian agricultural and fishing sectors.

However, these reductions, while welcome, have not been as extensive as those in other known high-risk sectors such as mining and construction, making primary production comparatively the most dangerous industry in Australia.

To ensure the ongoing development and future prosperity of Queensland’s farming industries we must ensure they are well placed to attract, develop and retain a capable and skilled workforce. Contextualised workforce development opportunities tailored to all levels of the workforce will be essential to attract new industry entrants, and to facilitate meaningful career progression for those already in the industry with the opportunity to continually learn.

The proposed SmartAg Queensland model will develop meaningful partnerships between industry, the Queensland Government and the training sector to ensure the delivery of current and relevant training to meet industry needs and deliver real outcomes.

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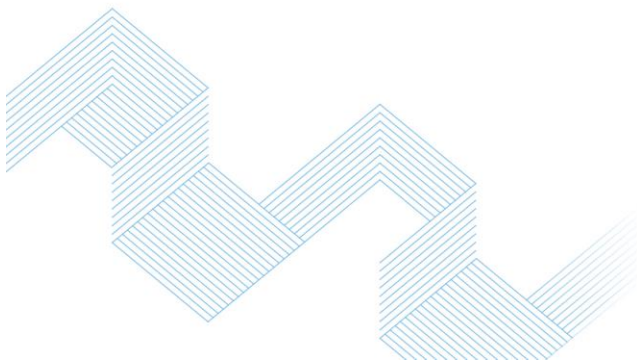
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What is one thing government could do differently to improve employer and industry input to training that meets workforce needs and delivers student outcomes?

One thing the government could do differently to improve employer and industry input in training programs that meet workforce needs and deliver student outcomes is to establish strong and meaningful partnerships between educational institutions, communities and businesses.

Governments should actively encourage and facilitate collaboration between schools, colleges, universities, and various industries. This can be done by creating incentive programs or grants that promote partnerships. Such collaborations can take the form of internships, apprenticeships, joint curriculum development, or advisory boards composed of industry experts.

Employers and industry representatives should have a significant role in shaping the curriculum of educational programs. By involving them in the development process, training programs can be tailored to equip students with the skills and knowledge that are directly relevant to the current and future needs of the job market.

Governments need to establish regular feedback mechanisms that allow employers and industries to provide input on the effectiveness of training programs. This can involve conducting surveys, hosting roundtable discussions, or organising industry forums to gather insights and suggestions.

Workforce needs are constantly evolving due to technological advancements and changing market demands. The government should foster flexibility in training programs to adapt quickly to emerging trends and demands. This could include incorporating short-term courses, upskilling modules, or micro-credentials that address specific skill gaps in real-time.

Governments should utilise data and labor market insights to inform the design and implementation of training programs. By analysing job market trends and anticipating skill shortages, training initiatives can be better aligned with the demands of the workforce.

Recognising that workforce needs can vary by region and industry, the government should adopt a targeted approach. By tailoring training programs to the specific needs of different regions and sectors, they can ensure that employers' input is well-integrated.

By implementing these strategies, the government can foster stronger connections between education and the job market, ensuring that training programs are more relevant, effective, and responsive to the ever-changing needs of employers and industries. This approach will not only benefit students by increasing their employability but also contribute to overall economic growth and prosperity in regional, rural and remote Queensland.

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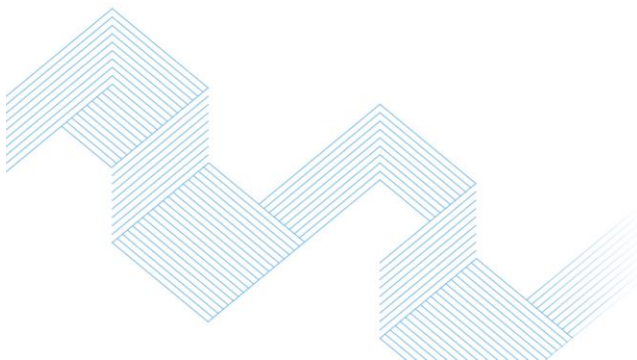
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How can we support you to access the training you need to set you up for success if you are: a secondary student a job seeker a worker an employer?

Supporting the workforce to access the training needed by agricultural employers is crucial for the development of a skilled and competitive agricultural workforce. The government can allocate funds and provide grants to agricultural training institutions and programs- such as the SmartAg Queensland training proposal. This financial support can help reduce the cost of training for individuals and encourage more people to pursue agricultural education.

In addition, implementing subsidised training programs can make agricultural training more affordable for prospective participants. This could involve offering reduced tuition fees or covering a portion of the training costs.

The government can offer scholarships or other subsidies to individuals who demonstrate a commitment to pursuing a career in agriculture. These financial incentives can help attract more people to the sector and support their training expenses. VET providers can collaborate with agricultural employers to identify specific skills and training needs in the industry. This partnership can ensure that the training programs offered align with the requirements of the job market, making graduates more employable.

Establishing vocational training facilities such as the TAFE Centres of Excellence which specialise in agriculture can provide hands-on, practical training to individuals interested in pursuing a career in the field. We must acknowledge the Queensland Government for their support and establishment of these centres and encourage future investment in this space across regional areas of Queensland.

In rural and remote areas, where access to training centres might be limited, the government can set up mobile training units that travel to different locations to provide training to aspiring agricultural workers.

Creating online training platforms and resources can make training more accessible to a broader audience, including those in remote areas. The government can develop or support existing online courses related to agricultural skills and techniques.

Encouraging agricultural employers to invest in the training of their workforce can be achieved through various incentives, such as subsidies or other financial rewards for providing training opportunities to their employees.

To enhance the effectiveness of training programs, the government can offer job placement assistance, networking opportunities, and career counselling services to help trained individuals find suitable employment in the agricultural sector.

With the support of industry, government can promote lifelong learning and continuous skill development among agricultural workers by offering relevant refresher courses and upskilling programs for those already employed in the industry.

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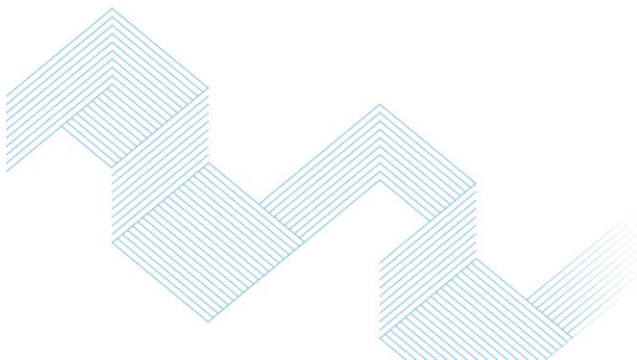
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Advancing Australian Cotton

By implementing these measures, the government can play a significant role in supporting the agricultural workforce's access to the training they need, leading to a more skilled, competent, and productive workforce in the agricultural sector.

If you would like to discuss any part of this submission into the Queensland VET Review, please contact Paul Sloman on 0448 094 883 or by email on pauls@cotton.org.au.

Best regards,

Paul A Sloman

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