

YOU CAN DO MORE THAN JUST TRAINING WITH TRAINING PACKAGES

Charlie Bell ¹

1. Education Officer, Tocal College, Paterson, charlie.bell@dpi.nsw.gov.au

INTRODUCTION

Tocal College is part of NSW Department of Primary Industries and delivers training across the rural and related industries of NSW and nationally. Full-time youth education programs are delivered at the Paterson Campus in the Hunter, and traineeships, shortcourse (NSW PROfarm), home study and online training is delivered covering a wide range of subject areas.

Tocal College has been working closely with the cotton industry since 2006 to deliver skills development and accreditation programs. This has ranged from Certificate II Skill Sets for jobseekers in Moree to Diploma level qualifications – including the development of the Cotton BMP Accredited Manager program. In all of these projects, Tocal College has worked with the cotton industry to find innovative and flexible ways of using competencies and qualifications to drive human capacity developments. This paper will outline and discuss this process and present some current developments.

HUMAN CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

Cotton Seed – Cotton Basic – Cotton Intermediate – Cotton Advanced

In 2006 Tocal College joined with Cotton Australia to take some positive and practical action to address the issue of attracting, training and retaining the next generation of skilled workers for the cotton industry. This program was aimed at providing training and accreditation for workers from entry level to managers with qualifications starting at Certificate II and progressing through Certificate III, Certificate IV and Diploma.

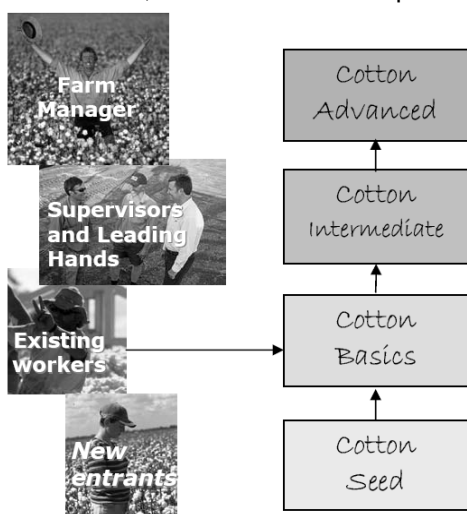


Figure 1: The Skills Development Pathway

The first activity in this program was the delivery of training for 16 trainees through an innovative program delivered at Moree equipping them with the skills and knowledge needed to find employment in cotton production. Training was delivered in the operation and maintenance of farming plant and irrigation systems. These trainees were equipped to find employment immediately as productive farm workers.

In addition to the training program, Tocal assessed a number of existing farm managers for a Diploma of Agriculture specialising in Cotton Production. Through the Tocal Skills Recognition program these managers were able to have their existing skills and knowledge assessed and gain a qualification without the need to carry out further study. This same process was also used to assess 16 existing farm workers for Certificate III and IV in Agriculture specialising in Cotton Production. This was a great opportunity for highly skilled and knowledgeable staff to have their skills formally recognised and accredited.

The achievement of this first group of people to complete training and Skills Recognition was acknowledged at the Cotton Trade Show in Moree in 2007 with the presentation of qualifications to farm managers, farm workers and also a group of students from Farrer Memorial Agricultural High School.



Figure 2: Graduates at the Cotton Trade Show

Labour Management Workshops

Allied to training and skills recognition for existing workers, a training course was developed and delivered to farm owners and managers focussing on the issue of labour management. Three workshops were delivered in Narrabri, Moree and Mungindi with over 60 people attending. The focus of these workshops was to help employers develop strategies to improve their success rate in recruiting

and retaining staff in a highly competitive labour market. (See <http://www.wincott.net.au/NewsItem.aspx?id=1421>)



Figure 3: Darren Bayley from Tocal College explains Skills Recognition to participants at the Moree Labour Management Workshop

PROFESSIONAL ACCREDITATION OF COTTON FARM MANAGERS

Cotton BMP Accredited Manager program

This program emerged from a Queensland farmBI\$ funded project to align the Skills and Knowledge required to attain BMP Certification of a cotton farm to units of competence from a Diploma of Agriculture (McKee, 2007; Hickman and Dugdale, 2007). The competency mapping project identified a set of Units aligning to the BMP process which meet the requirements for a Diploma of Agriculture. The Units for this qualifications are as follows:

RTC5701A	Establish and maintain the enterprise OHS program
RTC5702A	Develop and manage a chemical use strategy
RTE5006A	Plan and manage long-term weed, pest and / or disease control in crops
RTE5014A	Manage crop production
RTE5516A:	Develop a whole farm plan
RTE5524A:	Develop and implement sustainable land use strategies
RTE5604A:	Develop an irrigation and drainage management plan
RTE5807A	Manage staff
BSBMGT609A	Manage risk
BSBSB405A	Monitor and manage business operations

These competencies reflect the skills and knowledge a cotton farm manager needs to demonstrate to operate a BMP compliant farm and, at the same time, also meet the requirements for a Diploma. Thus this Diploma of Agriculture can be used as the basis of an Accreditation program for cotton farm managers and the competencies provide the objective assessment criteria to carry out the assessment process. This approach allows a rigorous assessment to be carried out to accredit farm managers in parallel to the process of assessing and accrediting BMP compliant farms.

The assessment process for the Cotton BMP Accredited Manager is the same process of Skills Recognition or Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) which is used by Tocal College to assess and accredit candidates across all industry sectors. (Bell, 2009). The assessment is based on a

workplace interview and collection of evidence of competence which is not dissimilar to the BMP Audit process.

The Cotton BMP Accredited Manager program was piloted in 2007 and 2008 and 17 farm managers have completed the Accreditation process to date. The first group of graduates were presented with their Accreditation at the 2008 Cotton Conference (Adcock, 2008)

Similar processes for using competencies and qualification have been used by Tocal College to deliver accreditation programs to other sectors in addition to the cotton industry. These are:

- **Certified Irrigation Agronomist.** Delivered in association with Irrigation Australia to assess and accredit best practice in irrigation management. (See <http://www.irrigation.org.au/assets/pages/68BB9941-1708-51EB-A6D60BA1C2EECF4B/cim%20factsheet10.pdf>)
- **AgCredited.** A professional accreditation scheme for Australian Institute of Agricultural Science and Technology. (see http://www.aiast.com.au/index.php?menu=prof_development&action=prof_agcredited)

Taking the assessment process online

In 2009 Tocal College, in partnership with CRDC, was successful in gaining funding from the Flexible Learning Framework – a Commonwealth funded program investing in the development of online or e-learning resources. This funding was received to develop online resources to support the delivery of the BMP Accredited Manager program. With the assistance of this investment, Tocal College has developed a package of online resources to assist candidates in preparing for the assessment interview process. (Bell, 2009).

This cotton industry based initiative has been the prototype for the development to range on online and electronic systems and resources to support training and Skills Recognition across all of the varied clients of Tocal College.

COTTON INDUSTRY SKILLS BENCHMARKING

Tocal College is currently undertaking a project funded by Cotton Research and Development Corporation to develop and implement a cotton industry wide skills assessment and benchmarking system. This project seeks to generate objective information to better inform future investment in the development of training programs for the cotton industry and give a dynamic picture of the changes in the skills profile of the industry over time.

It is very difficult to measure by any direct means the impact that training has on the productivity of the industry and gain any insight into the return on investment in training. The impact of investment in science and technology can often be measured directly by metrics such as water use efficiency, crop yield and quality or chemical usage. This project aims to use the Agriculture Training

Package and its' Units Competence as a tool to carry out an audit of skills and knowledge and give a broad picture of human capacity in the industry. So again, it is an example of using the Training Package as a tool to assist industry development in addition to its main role as a guide for development of training programs and assessment.

The Cotton Industry Skills Benchmarking is a web based system (See <http://agskills.com.au/>) that allows participants to carry out a self assessment in a wide range of relevant skills which are categorised into 21 Skill Areas. These skills are all based in Units of Competence from the Agriculture, Horticulture and Conservation Training Package (Agrifood Skills Australia, 2011) and therefore align to what is considered to be current industry best practice. The Skill Areas are:

1. Farm Hygiene
2. Business Administration
3. Business Planning
4. Business Marketing
5. Quality Assurance
6. Crop Production
7. Chemical Application and Management
8. Emergency Response
9. Gravity Fed Irrigation
10. Pressurised Irrigation
11. Human Resource Management
12. Livestock Management
13. Natural Area Management
14. Machinery Maintenance
15. Machinery Operation
16. OHS and other Risk Management
17. Pest Management
18. Soil & Water Conservation
19. Repairs and Maintenance
20. Weather and Climate
21. Industry Leadership

For each of these Skill Areas, participants are asked to do the following:

1. Answer a range of questions stating whether this accurately describes their skill.
2. State whether they are interested in training in each of these Skill Areas.
3. Indicate a reason for interest in training or otherwise.

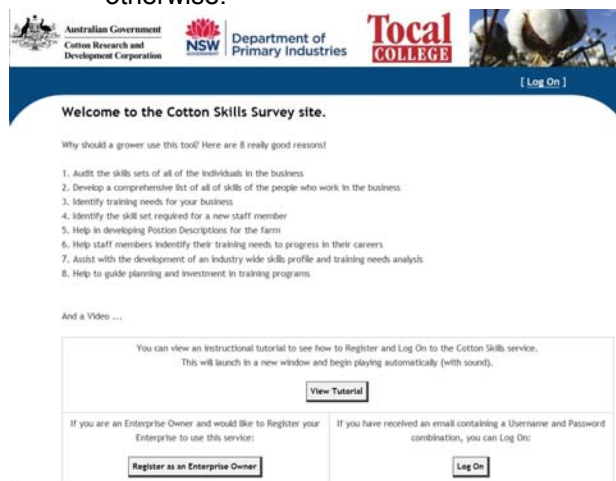


Figure 4: Cotton Skills Benchmarking web page What's in it for participants and the industry?

The Cotton Industry Skills Benchmarking system is structured to not only provide industry wide information on skills, but to also be used as a tool that farm managers can use to develop a profile of the skills of their own staff. This will be useful for making decision about investment in training and could also be used as a recruitment tool.

Each enterprise owner or manager participating in the Benchmarking system simply needs to register their business and all of their staff members to commence the process. Once workers have completed the assessment process the manager can view a report for all of their staff presented in a graph format. A farm manager will only have access to data about staff working on that farm.

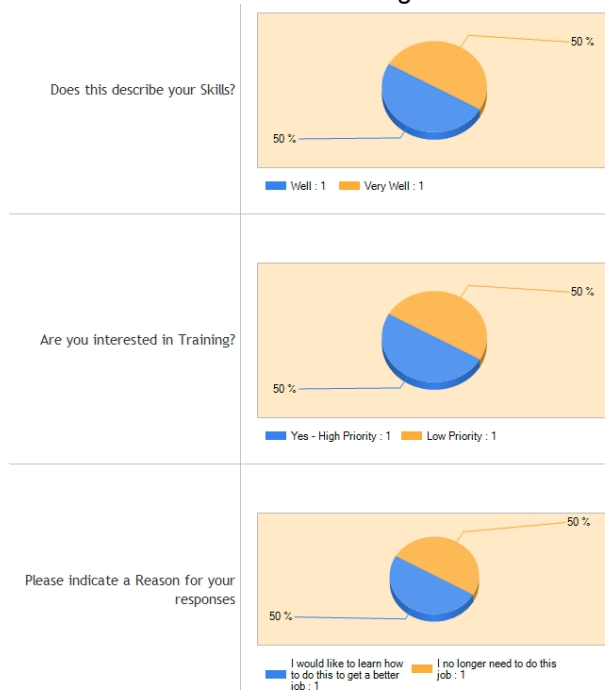


Figure 5: Graphic reports available to farm managers

This same information will be used on an industry wide basis to develop a picture of the skills profile and identify any areas of skills gaps which may be addressed with new training programs. All data collected by the system used to generate industry wide information will be made anonymous so the privacy of individuals and businesses will be completely protected.

CONCLUSION

The Vocational Education and Training (VET) system has developed a great deal in the past 20 years since the introduction of the National Training Reform Agenda in the late 1980's. This was essential to improve Australia's international competitiveness. (Guthrie, 2009) Today we have National Qualifications aligned to standards described by the Training Packages. The VET sector today is well funded and has bipartisan support from both sides of politics. This contrasts vividly with the fortunes of public sector extension and advisory services over the same period.

The Cotton Industry has been proactive in taking advantage of VET sector training with the development of training programs aligned to the Training Package and national qualifications. This move to delivery of training has to some extent filled the void created by the reduction in traditional extension and advisory services delivered by the public sector.

Over the years that Tocal College has worked with the cotton industry to develop and deliver training and accreditation programs, there has been an underlying theme of innovation and practicality. Tocal College, as a specialist college within NSW Department of Primary Industries, is able to work closely with industries to develop and deliver practical solutions to training needs. The College is strongly committed to the idea that each industry has unique needs and the 'one-size-fits-all' approach does not work.

Partnering in the innovative use of the tools of trade for training – Training Packages and Units of Competence – has allowed the cotton industry to be at the forefront of training in the rural sector. This will continue into the future as the industry continues to address the challenges of a changing labour market and competition of skilled staff.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Funding from Cotton Research and Development Corporation.

REFERENCES

- Adcock L. 2008 *Many Degrees of BMP*. Spotlight Spring CRDC.
- Agrifood Skills Australia 2011 *AHC10 Agriculture, Horticulture and Conservation and Land Management Training Package*
- Bell, C. 2009 *Case Study Cotton Online Skills Audit Flexible Learning Framework*.
- Bell, C. 2009 *Skills Recognition for the Rural Sector*. Skills Recognition 09 Conference.. Retrieved from – https://www.training.nsw.gov.au/forms_documents/industry_programs/skillsonline/sr_agenda_2009.pdf. May 2012)
- Guthrie, H 2009 *'Competence and competency-based training: What the literature says'*. National Centre for Vocational Education Research.
- Hickman, M. and Dugdale, H. 2007 *Aligning national competencies with the Cotton Industry's best management guidelines for strategic planning: Final report*. FarmBi\$ Targeted Industry Initiative. Toowoomba: Cotton Research and Development Corporation.
- Jacobsen, N. 2007 *Cotton industry skills development pilot project: Final report April 2007*. Cotton Australia.
- Mackee I. 2007 *Mapping Report Australian Cotton Industry 'BEST MANAGEMENT PRACTICES MANUAL'* Department of Primary Industries & Fisheries on behalf of the Cotton Research & Development Corporation
- NQC Cotton industry: 2008 *Workforce capability case study* National Quality Council