

## **Inquiry into the delivery of vocational education and training in regional, rural, and remote Queensland**

**Submission No:** 7

**Submitted by:** Bowen Gumlu Growers Association

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**Submitter Comments:**

**Submitter Recommendations:**



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Committee Secretary  
Education, Employment and Training Committee  
Parliament House  
George Street  
Brisbane Qld 4000

Monday, 16 January 2023

Attention: Committee Secretary

**RE: Inquiry into the delivery of VET in regional, rural, and remote Queensland**

Bowen Gumlu Growers Association (not-for-profit) is situated in the Whitsunday region of North Queensland. Our Association represents members that produce the largest Australian winter crops of fruit and vegetables. We are committed to ensure all aspects of horticulture growth and management are extended to all agribusinesses via relationships with our partners, government bodies, and industry groups. Our Association is dedicated to sourcing funding opportunities to deliver access to research, industry, and workforce development, as well as market access, Agri-tourism opportunities, technology education, and disaster management. Additionally, our Association hosts two extension officers; Queensland Agriculture Workforce Network (QAWN Officer) and Regional Development Officer (RDO) who provide support and guidance for agribusinesses in the North region across all commodities in Agriculture and Aquaculture.

**Background**

The Australian agriculture workforce is faced with chronic labour and skills shortages due to mega-trends to include changing demographics, adapting to climate change, global disruptions, sustainability, and digitisation. The industry has observed an increased use and sophistication of agricultural technology to meet population growth and to provide ongoing access to high quality fresh produce. As a result of this workforce shift, some agribusinesses are being left behind due to workforce skills shortages. This shift has contributed to misconceptions surrounding the diverse occupations in agriculture and how these occupations are promoted in education contexts, thus impacting on students choosing career pathways in this industry. Additionally, VET currently lacks alignment with industry skills requirements.

**Workforce Shifts**

National forecasts highlight significant shifts in occupations and skills to support the emerging nature of modern farming practices across the agriculture industry, observing a demand for professionals, technicians, and paraprofessionals. Occupations include Horticulture Scientists, Consultants, Mobile Plant Operators, Technicians, Agronomists, and Engineers. This shift has dramatically changed the required skillsets, emphasising digital literacy, data management, monitoring, interpretation and communication, cyber security, digital infrastructure planning, and technical operation skills. Whilst there has been a significant shift in occupations and farming practices, the public perception remains embedded with a stereotypical image of a farmer. Furthermore, students have been reported to intentionally choose Agriculture Practices as a senior secondary subject, as they feel this is a “bludge subject”, rather than leading to a career. Whilst it is forecasted that 1 in 3 jobs created in the Agriculture Industry will be technology related by 2030, these new occupations and skillsets are not widely understood, nor promoted. VET is one of the key players in this evolving innovation system and the skilling and attraction process.

The Queensland Workforce Strategy (2022) articulates a commitment to reform the VET sector by identifying school-to-work transitions as a mechanism to produce vibrant communities and to establish a robust, skilled, and diverse workforce. The closure of Agriculture Colleges has significantly impeded upon the school to work pathway. Our Association has observed a growing need to support Vocational Education Training in schools, as one cog in this school to industry supply chain. Ongoing investment and prioritisation to build infrastructure and human capital towards connecting schools and local Indigenous populations with industry will remain critical during this hybrid model from low-skilled to high-skilled workers across the agriculture industry. To empower and upskill there is a need for accessible and affordable training for local indigenous people.

## **VET Barriers**

VET in school settings enables students to access skills and training to prepare for specific jobs post-schooling. Research conducted in Norway concluded that VET programs for secondary students produced a 96% employment rate in comparison to 40% in Australian schools. Training delivery in Australia is driven in an open and decontrolled market environment due to the privatisation of education. Additionally, the VET sector is meandering towards urban based 'buzz' industries and is overly dependent upon market forces, preferencing a management focus on commercial concerns, instead of the National building tool it should be. VET in rural settings is limited due to lack of student numbers to enable the provision of a variety of VET offerings. Moreover, VET pathways are currently undervalued by the education system, students, parents, and the community, as being second to university studies. This can be attributed to minimal changes in the model and operations of VET over the past century, thus necessitating sector transformation.

Secondary Education in Australia is heavily focused on university pathways to the detriment of VET. The reasons for VET offerings in schools often are a means of retaining non-academically minded students engaged in schooling rather than focusing on intrinsic value or for employment outcomes. Yet, most students do not enter university and most future jobs will require a VET qualification, rather than a university degree. As a response, many schools have implemented VET programs, with a total of 377 685 students enrolled Nationwide, with 48% of this total enrolled in VET across QLD schools. From this total QLD VET enrolment, 5355 students are enrolled in qualifications from the Creative Arts and Culture Training Package, 1465 enrolments in Certificate III Aviation – Remote Pilot (drones), 9655 enrolments from the Construction Industry Training Package (with 7610 in Cert I), and 21 600 enrolments in the Sport, Fitness and Recreation Training Package. Furthermore, in 2021, the total national employment in the Sport, Fitness and Recreation industry was 104,200. VET in Schools enrolments is equivalent to 41% of the total workforce. It is highly unlikely that 50% of the total Australian employment in Sport & Rec is in QLD. Therefore, a huge number of students enrolled in VET in QLD schools are being trained in industries for which there is no employment demand. This defies employment logic. Additionally, the current VETiS funding in Queensland currently places private RTOs as the financial beneficiaries. To further enhance school-based VET, changes to the funding model are required to ensure school RTOs and school system RTOs receive direct government funding for VET delivery to assist with the cost of staffing, equipment, facilities, and resources to enhance delivery at a school level.

The Australian and Queensland Governments recently announced to take action to deliver 37, 000 Fee Free TAFE and VET places for Queenslanders in 2030. Whilst this provides the opportunity to address skills workforce shortages in agriculture by offering fee free training at a Cert II, III or Diploma level, the main beneficiaries of this training reside with those who have access to such training facilities, rather than in rural and regional areas. This barrier of accessing fee free training limited rural communities to grow their own workforce. The opportunity exists to continue to further explore diverse delivery modes to ensure equitable access for training.

## **Place-based VET**

The lack of industry engagement by regional schools is comparable to that in metropolitan areas. Regional communities have an advantage and potential to capitalise on the social connectedness, which exists amongst many rural and regional communities, in comparison to the disconnectedness across urban communities. The establishment of industry to school connections can leverage from this social connectedness. VET programs

require strong and ongoing connections with industry to ensure that the skills gained during VET programs replicate the skill currency required on farm.

### **Existing Programs**

The Queensland Workforce Strategy (2022) articulates a commitment to reform the VET sector by identifying school-to-work transitions as a mechanism to produce vibrant communities and to establish a robust, skilled, and diverse workforce. This will involve creating effective school-industry partnerships to provide students with opportunities to explore career pathways, enhance workforce preparedness, and recognise local employment options. The success of these partnerships is dependent upon the capacity for industry liaison functions, the delivery of accurate career advice and information, enabling access to appropriate industry experiences, and building upon existing programs. Agribusiness Gateway to Industry Schools Program (AGISP) is one existing program in this school-to-work partnership system. Currently, 75 schools in Queensland participate in AGISP, supporting young people to positively transition from school into ongoing employment or education in Agriculture related industries. This is achieved by schools collaborating with VET providers, industry bodies, and universities to provide career opportunities for students. The AGISP school-based coordinator plays a crucial role in building partnerships across school-to-industry and the teacher cannot be understated in sustaining partnerships.

### **Successful Localised VET Models**

To maintain a vibrant Agriculture and Aquaculture ecosystem, the success of school-to-work transitions cannot be addressed in isolation. The 'Greater Whitsunday Aquaculture Education Partnership' is one example of a successful localised VET model, which recognises the need for collaboration across school to industry. The goal of this project is to enhance the VET outcomes by providing students with industry-standard learning opportunities leading to meaningful employment pathways in aquaculture. Aquaculture is one of the key developing industries in the Greater Whitsunday region. Tassal alone, has a predicted employment growth of up to 400 new positions. Aquaculture is at the cutting edge of innovative technology, yet entry-level employees in regional areas rarely have a requisite level of digital literacy. Through working together as a collective, four schools have partnered with aquaculture industry leader Tassal Group Ltd and TAFE Queensland, and in line with the Queensland Government's Agriculture and Aquaculture Tech Skills Hub concept, to create enhanced purposeful learning opportunities for students, leading to structured employment outcomes, thus value-adding: learning, working, and living in our regional community.

In partnership with Tassal and TAFE Queensland, the four schools will implement new Certificate II in Aquaculture programs. Small scale, industry-standard facilities will be established in each school and there will be direct industry involvement in delivery of education. This will provide authentic workplace learning contexts and lead to structured employment outcomes in prawn farming and other regional aquaculture operations. This is one example of an existing program, which reduces barriers and supports high priority industry workforce shortages in an emerging industry, enabling access to place-based VET.

### **Opportunities:**

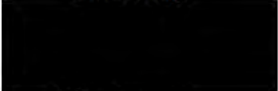
The future of work can be described through three organisational dimensions. These dimensions include: 1) Workforce: labour and skills required at work, 2) Workplace: the location, operation, and organisation of how we do work, and 3) Work life: the culture and meaning of work. The way we work is continually changing and evolving, with workforce shifts and advances posing significant issues for all businesses. It is anticipated that automation and technological advancements will replace many jobs, and in turn, will generate new jobs with different skills. Future workforces will require increased human interactions and customer service skills, along with digital capabilities, with an anticipated reduction of demand for repetitive and labour-intensive jobs. Therefore, the contemporary workforce will require a change in mindset, to move towards thinking about tasks and skills, as the common currency for future employment. As such, the success of VET will require a formal forum or dialogue mechanism between education and industry bodies. The role of industry is fundamental to the success of delivering an adequate workforce pipeline to align with projected workforce demands and skill requirements. Roles such as Industry Liaison Officers will become increasingly important in connecting industry to schools, with ongoing financial

and human resource support required to support existing effective place-based programs. Furthermore, with the education landscape changing, there is increasing demand for shorter-form courses to enable workers to rapidly upskill, with access to micro-credential training being crucial. However, the micro-credential ecosystem is currently lacking consistent definition across higher education, VET, and industry.

### Summary

Growers across the North Region are desperate for workers at all levels and stages of their production, from farm management to seasonal harvest workers. Workforce shortages have resulted in reducing crop sizes and produce remaining unpicked, increasing the cost of living for everyday Australians. The impact of COVID-19 will continue to be heavily felt across industry for many years to follow, thus highlighting the need to address workforce issues collaboratively and as a priority. As the industry journeys throughout this period of rapid change, access to migrant workers and the ongoing need to support this highly vulnerable workforce will remain critical, along with an investment towards supporting school-to-work transitions and addressing housing challenges.

Sincerely,



Ry Collins



Chief Executive Officer  
Bowen Gumlu Growers Association