ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN INDUSTRY CONSULTATIONS: SYDNEY 9 SEPTEMBER 2014

Summary

- All sectors are becoming more technological and evolving their practices. They are becoming reliant on advanced knowledge and skills not just in their own businesses but in the supply chain to ensure the value of those skills are not negated. For example, public amenity spaces are failing because clients do not always have the knowledge to effectively maintain the sites.

- Business models are changing/adapting to the new environment by:
  - progressively moving to contractors and outsourcing;
  - investing in infrastructure capital – plant and equipment/automation/robotics;
  - increasingly investing in training when they find the right people; and
  - investing in post-doctorate research to strategically develop capacity.

- There is insufficient tailoring of advice to industry on available opportunities and training funds. The system needs to ensure it uses industry’s established communication channels rather than presuming employers will search government websites.

- There is insufficient awareness within industry of national qualifications and how straightforward it can be to become ‘qualified’. Industry bodies are struggling to generate demand for formal training; some employers believe that formal training will mean higher wages once staff are qualified.

- There are concerns on how training providers are restricting the breadth of content available within qualifications. Enterprises are not being offered the full suite of units of competency available through the qualification packaging rules (electives). Unless informed, enterprises see the qualification as the problem/irrelevant rather than realising it is a filter placed on by the RTO.

- Variable funding models and criteria across the different states are confusing and act as a significant deterrent for enterprises operating nationally – “it’s a national system in name only - we can’t get an RTO to deliver a coherent national strategy because of the inconsistent approaches to funding across the states”.

- VET acronyms and terminology continue to undermine a system that claims to be client focused. Creating new names for enduring issues, re-badging programs or over-intellectualising basic issues is a source of major frustration for those inside and outside VET. The issue represents an ongoing barrier to client engagement and empowerment.

- Baseline knowledge of apprentices and young job seekers in mathematics and English is unacceptably poor. It prevents completion of the apprenticeship and poses high risk to the business, for example, the use and measurement of chemicals. Mature workers are becoming a more attractive option for a number of sectors, bringing with them a far greater work ethic and sense of responsibility.
The percentage of school leavers seeking employment but who have poor attitude towards work and poor discipline is unacceptable. This is not about basic skills (see point above), rather it is an attitudinal issue that the school system needs to start addressing in earnest. “The schools have to start delivering on their role not handballing their job to employers and trainers to fix – it’s too late in the piece anyway by the time someone comes looking for a job”.

Significant work still needs to be done to turn around industry’s image – while some sectors may have turned the corner, industry needs to help job seekers (and careers advisors) realise that agrifood is “an opportunity to be part of something special”, “agrifood is the ultimate sustainable industry”. “Why can’t agrifood have the equivalent of the mining campaign ‘this is our story’ to get across our message?”

Positioning of agrifood with the community needs to focus more on the technician, para-professional job roles and promote the fact that many roles are mainstream business/commercial jobs which simply operate in an agrifood context, for example, brand development and marketing.

While progress is being made to ensure skill sets are more widely funded, there is still an overwhelming emphasis on full qualifications which continues to be at odds with how many sectors learn (incrementally) and how existing workers need to upskill.

Units of competency sometimes contain elements (performance criteria, knowledge/skills) that are not relevant to the specific workplace. It poses problems in ensuring the individual learner achieves competency but at the same time, if the elements are too enterprise specific, people will not be trained to the broader industry standard.

There needs to be greater recognition of people’s existing skills rather than repeating training in areas where they are already competent. Questions exist over whether recognition of prior learning (RPL) is really working or are funding models a disincentive to training providers to offer RPL?

There need to be less training providers in the marketplace but a higher proportion of “better ones”. It is too hard for industry to determine whether RTOs are good, bad or indifferent without first having a bad experience which is inevitably turning industry away from the VET system longer term.

Careers advisers lack the knowledge, open mindedness and ability to promote the linkages between jobs and young people’s passions, for example, an interest in sport/outdoors could be steered into a career in horticulture or racing or turf management.

VET regulators need to look at the quality of trainers and assessors; too many have outdated skills and are not current but continue to train the next generation.

Where wages are improving, working in the industry is more lucrative than being a trainer, for example, animal grooming. Securing training is made harder still by government funding models which dismiss such sectors and job roles as a ‘hobby’ rather than a legitimate occupation.

Getting people to become employers of choice is paramount. “It is not that people don’t want to be better employers they just don’t know how to be better”.

Enterprises need to be much better at mentoring people coming into the industry and of those already employed, particularly for those in apprenticeships.
A number of sectors are being targeted by environmental and animal activists. Industry needs to ensure the skills/knowledge are in place, workers are credentialed and go on the “front foot” to evidence their social license (to operate).

The job of school careers advisors needs to be recognised as a profession in its own right with advisers specifically trained for the role and requiring currency of knowledge across defined industry sectors to ensure the information they impart to students is accurate and valid. Industry can and should do more to support this role, for example, webinars by various sectors which can be broadcast and recorded for multiple audiences.

The Environmental Scan needs to be more influential within the VET system given the industry advice it contains.

There are significant concerns that thin markets and small sectors will go unserviced in a competitive training market where providers chase the most lucrative and viable student numbers.

There is a need for a series of skill sets targeted specifically at the needs of small food manufacturers, rather than using full qualifications.

Industry and training providers will no longer be able to expect government funded support for training but the VET system will need to be much better at developing clear and individual value propositions for each enterprise if they are to generate greater industry investment in training.

More qualified people are returning to the industry from unrelated industries and sectors, but much more needs to be done to attract skilled people into the industry, including formal bridging qualifications and publicised ‘common skills’ and opportunities.

There needs to be greater co-ordination/collaboration between like industry associations to share the task of skilling the workforce. Some sectors are “doing all the heavy lifting” and then losing their trained people to sectors that can pay higher rates, for example, green keepers are lost to the turf industry which in turn, regularly lose people to the landscaping sector.

Existing qualifications for race administrators are considered to be too specific to thoroughbred racing for administrators in harness racing.

“There need to be more qualifications specific to agriculture, not combined with agriculture”.

“Incorporation of agriculture and horticulture in the Training Package has been detrimental to horticulture”.

Industry associations/bodies need to have more information on their websites for members on workforce development and provide direction on where members need to go. AgriFood Skills Australia should develop a ‘starter pack’ of tools/information on workforce development that can be co-branded with individual industry bodies to ensure accurate, consistent advice is getting into all sectors of industry.

Development of broader qualifications aimed at recognising portability of skills between sectors is compromising the needs of some of the smaller sectors who are being overruled on content by bigger industries.

More coordination/brokering support needs to be provided to smaller communities/regions to identify their skill needs and articulate those into the training system.
There needs to be a national coordinated strategy and program to establish an adaptive and dynamic regional workforce, for example, identify and develop cross-sector work opportunities and skills that keep people employed in the region throughout the year.

The demise of regional research centres has removed a fundamental mechanism where sectors and their supply chains get together and share knowledge – what replaces this platform?

Much more needs to be done to ensure industry can have confidence in the quality of outcome from VET providers – “it’s hit and miss”. Some sectors are starting to develop their own informal ‘list’ of good training providers to overcome the system’s lack of transparency.

Agriculture/agrifood is becoming more topical with school students starting to pick up on the messages of its potential. More needs to be done through VET in schools to turn the interest into skilled job seekers.

Industry ambassadors are needed; preferably young entrepreneurs and those working in atypical roles to demonstrate the breadth and opportunities available across the industry sectors. There are questions over why is there no high profile industry wide campaign, who owns this space and no awareness of what if anything is being done at that level.

Industry is yet to capitalise on the skills of grey nomads. Are there companies out there with better models that deliver better productivity? There should be more case studies on how companies are innovating and dealing with the seasonal workforce issue effectively.

The extensive number of industry groups means that turning the image of industry around is not straightforward – inconsistent messaging, language and advice to governments on the key priorities are a major blockage.

Critical points in industry’s value chain where public training investment will make most difference to productivity are those where a breach can literally undo an entire supply chain:

- biosecurity – plant and animal
- animal handling and welfare
- technology adoption
- innovation and entrepreneurship
- business management/ risk management.