



Secretary:
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 AUSTRALIAN MUSHROOM GROWERS ASSOCIATION LTD
 HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
 STANDING COMMITTEE ON
 AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES
 AND FORESTRY



Submission by the Australian Mushroom Growers Association to the Inquiry into Rural Skills Training and Research

May 2005

The Australian Mushroom Growers Association (AMGA) is the peak industry organization for the mushroom industry in Australia. Almost all mushroom growers and service providers to the industry are members. AMGA takes responsibility for the strategic needs of all facets of the industry. Training is an important aspect of the industry's current strategic plan because about 50% of our cost of production can be attributed to labour. An efficient and productive workforce is an important strategic objective for the industry in attempting to meet market demands and remain financially viable.

AMGA welcomes the review into rural skills training and research and is keen to ensure that the needs of the mushroom industry are reflected in the outcomes of the review. In particular we would like to ensure that the review focuses not just on formalised education structures and institutionalised learning but also looks at the needs of industries such as ours for workplace based training and assessment as discussed in more detail below. AMGA sees learning as a lifelong process and that ongoing industry specific training is essential for a happy, safe and productive workforce. Training structures and funding needs to accommodate this.

Currently there is limited training available to the mushroom industry. Accredited courses were developed by the industry for mushroom growers and pickers and delivered through external providers such as NSW Agriculture's Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture at Yanco.

Until recently the training needs of the mushroom industry have not been recognised in a training package. However, the skills and knowledge required for all those working in the mushroom industry are now to be included in the Rural Production Training Package (RTE03). Specific units of competency and qualifications have been developed which specify the skills and knowledge required in the mushroom industry from mushroom picker to supervisor to manager. AMGA has been involved in the development of the units and qualifications and sees this as a very important way to develop needed skills and knowledge in the industry from generic skills such as communication and health and safety to specific skills such as picking, grading and handling of mushrooms to the preparing of mushroom substrate.

Now that there is a formal training structure for the industry through the inclusion of units and qualifications in the Rural Production Training Package, there is even more of a need for government support so that needed skills and knowledge are developed and recognised.

Sufficient and recurring annual funding needs to be provided to institutions to provide training for the mushroom industry so that the industry can develop the skills and knowledge it needs.

Training needs to be workplace based because of the high concentration of small businesses where it is very difficult for workers to go off-site for training. Systems developed for accessing training need to be simple and unburdened by bureaucracy.

Furthermore, training needs to be conducted by industry experts rather than traditional full time academic/teaching staff. This means having industry based people with specific expertise working in conjunction with registered training organisations (RTOs) who can issue the qualification and provide other support services.

Note that the mushroom industry workforce is made up of a large number of women and people with languages other than English. Providing funded, workplace based training to the mushroom industry also provides a means for the skilling up of workers from these groups, particularly in the case of people with languages other than English who would be unlikely to participate in formal training.

Another issue of concern which we would like to raise also applies to the horticultural and agricultural industries as a whole. There is a lack of university graduates entering the industry to fill research and development and technical positions. The Government needs to look into ways of encouraging graduates to enter the industry so that the industry has a pool of highly qualified practitioners in the areas it needs for the future. The long- term prognosis is a dearth of human capital in these technical areas that underpin our industries unless the current trend is reversed. If not, we fear our industry and others will become internationally uncompetitive resulting in increased imports (and resultant job losses) or poorer export performance. Technology has been our strong suit in the past but the future looks uncertain.

Please note that I would be willing to appear before the committee if required. I will be out of the country from 26 June – 23 July 2005 and will therefore be unable to attend a public hearing during this time.

Greg Seymour

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