



Australian
Dairy Farmers

**House of Representatives Standing Committee
on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry**

Inquiry into Rural Skills Training and Research

Submission from Australian Dairy Farmers Limited

June 2005

**Developing the best dairy people
in the world!**



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Preamble

The Australian dairy industry is one of Australia's most technically sophisticated and progressive agricultural industries, operating in a highly complex and dynamic global environment. It produces about 10 billion litres of milk per year, producing products worth approximately \$9 billion ex-factory including exported products worth about \$3 billion. The dairy industry employs approximately 100,000 Australians in farming, processing and service industries. It underpins the society and economy of many rural communities. Its current and potential importance to Australia is huge, and its continuing success is largely dependent on the capabilities of its people.

Most dairy farm businesses are growing and so face new management challenges relating to employment, compliance, environmental management, risk management, contracting, succession, technology and farming systems. Consequently, the industry welcomes this opportunity to comment on the provision of opportunities to meet the *learning needs of people managing and operating dairy farms*.

We ask the Committee to note that this submission takes a broad view of what might be called the *"dairy farming learning system"*. The submission is not confined to the Vocational Education and Training sector and its relationship with the industry. Rather, it recognises that people learn through many different avenues: independent activities such as reading and reflection on experience; interactions with others such as family, peers and professionals; extension activities such as field days and discussion groups; and formal education such as primary and secondary schooling, VET and universities.

Consequently, this submission embraces the industry's relationship with all providers – TAFE, Registered Training Organisations, departments of primary industries, dairy companies, private service providers, Dairy Australia and universities – which support the entire range of dairy farm management and operation by provision of education and extension services.

The picture portrayed in the submission is not a happy one. This is perhaps well exemplified by the fact that a recent workshop of dairy industry people and education providers were unable to offer a firm estimate of the proportion of dairy farmers who engage with the VET sector, and guessed it might lie in a range between 3 and 20%. Many fewer would be involved with the university sector. This one finding suggests three problems which may be limiting the ongoing development of the industry:

- Few – industry, education providers, and government – see education as important enough to merit close monitoring of participation, let alone outcomes;
- Few – industry and government – see education as integral to the continuing progress of an industry immersed in a highly complex and dynamic operating environment;
- Few – industry and government – are actively concerned about the enormous human potential remaining unlocked in many dairy farming people.

These problems have to be owned by the industry, education providers and government. The good news is that the reasons for this situation are becoming better appreciated, and that there are ways and will to bring about necessary change.

Against this background, this submission addresses the Terms of Reference, and then concludes with a series of principles to guide the development of a better dairy learning system.

That system will deliver on the aim of dairy leaders to ensure that Australian dairy farmers have the educational opportunities to allow them to *be the best dairy people in the world!*

In making this submission, ADF would like to recognise Dairy Australia which funded and contributed to the industry workshop from which this submission was produced.

Responses to the Terms of Reference

ToR 1

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The availability and adequacy of education and research services in the agriculture sector, including access to vocational training and pathways from vocational education and training to tertiary education and work.

Access to education services

In a quantitative sense, formal education services for the dairy industry are probably inadequate. While many courses are on offer at VET and university levels, they are often difficult to access. This stems from reducing regional accessibility and various on-farm factors. The latter include: poor matching of programs to seasonal activities and time demands; increasing costs of courses; travel and time; failure to appreciate the benefits accruing; lack of confidence in the quality of educational services; and unwillingness on the part of some employers to “waste” employees’ time by giving them educational opportunities.

Furthermore, many dairy regions, particularly those outside Victoria, do not have access to some education services such as management training at competency levels 5 and 6. This is often the consequence of contraction of industry population and dispersal which limit the number of course participants attracted to attend at some locations. It is also the result of a failure to recognise this reality and use available models of provision which can surmount this obstacle.

Even in Victoria, where the number of dairy farmers is highest and demand for training is therefore greatest, the quality of education is potentially reduced by competitive models that split the service several ways. In some cases this must reduce the quality of available trainers, the viability of the individual courses and the experience of the training that comes with a larger group of people who can interact and share experiences.

In contrast, extension services which the industry sees as an integral part of dairy education, are usually local and easily accessible, low cost, and sharply focused on seasonal or other needs. However, even these are under-utilised, despite such advantages and some outstanding success stories, largely because of on-farm factors such as those listed in the first paragraph of this section, but also because of

inadequacies in provision. Those inadequacies, such as a blurred focus on key issues, and poor quality of design, development and conduct, are now diminishing as farmers are increasingly brought into the entire process from needs identification through to program conduct.

Finally, the industry is always looking for ways to attract new entrants into dairying. In this context, it is noted that there are few courses at secondary school level which might assist this goal, nor are VET level programs available at schools in metropolitan areas. This situation reduces the chance of people unfamiliar with dairying seeing the potential of a career within it.

Quality of education services

In a qualitative sense, too, education services are often inadequate. Several problems can be found here: moves from specialist to generic courses; inflexible curricula; failure to harness available expertise; slow response times; limited use of adult education approaches; and lack of attention by industry.

Reducing investment by governments and poor enrolments in specialist courses have the inevitable result of searches for more “efficient” ways of provision, generally through creating generic courses to suit a wider range of industries, thereby expecting to attract a larger number of participants. Unless creatively designed and marketed, generic courses are often perceived as less relevant. Such perceptions are underlined when curricula leave little room for rapid adaptation to current needs and opportunities, and when providers take many months and even years to design and offer new courses based on emergent needs. While providers must accept some of the responsibility for this, industry’s silence is also a critical factor. If industry does not effectively and persistently promote its needs to providers, they might sensibly resort to centralised design and production and reduce resources.

Another problem which has emerged in the past two decades stems from the high profile now given to matters such as Occupational Health and Safety, Quality Assurance, and environmental management, all of which are now competing for time within already crowded learning programs. As these new demands emerge, they crowd out or reduce attention to existing elements of formal learning programs, or crowd out other elements of the extension program. The result can be reduced quality, unless more time is allocated and given to learning.

There is still too much reliance in VET and universities on the educational approach used in primary and secondary school. This approach sees the teacher as authority, teaching a set curriculum and using specific methods. It makes poor use of the capability of the adult learner, or their growing interdependence in their learning. People operating and managing dairy farms are adults and respond best to adult learning approaches. These adopt flexible and dynamic curricula which meet people where their needs lie, when those needs arise, and incorporate their on-the-farm experiences. Adult learning is, importantly, very effective at developing the types of attitudes recognized by people in the industry as essential to being able to anticipate and manage change.

Progression through competency levels

Opportunities for people to progress through the various levels of the VET competency hierarchy, and to gain credit for entrance to university courses, have increased markedly in the past decade. However, the path is often unclear so that potential learners are put off from participating. Beyond this, whether or not people take advantage of this facility depends on matters such as geographic location and personal circumstances. Much more could be made of these opportunities as the industry places more emphasis on learning: for example, building pride in achievement, gaining access to better positions and rewards within the industry, encouraging continuing learning, and identifying “employers of first choice”.

In summary, the availability and quality of education services are limiting the rate of progress of this significant industry. In essence, these problems have arisen through failure of providers to target and hit the real needs of the industry, and failure of the industry to give necessary guidance and support.

ToR 2

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The skills needs of agricultural industries in Australia, including the expertise and capacity of industries to specify the skills-sets required for training, and the extent to which vocational training meets the needs of rural industries.

Learning needs

The learning needs of dairy farmers span the entire range of knowledge, skills and attitudes used on the farm. They range from the basic technical capabilities of milking and machinery operation to those underpinning highly sophisticated management of multi-million dollar enterprises. At all levels from the most junior member of the team to the manager, successful operation requires the ability to perform certain tasks (skills), a certain level of information and understanding (knowledge), and a set of values, perspectives and ways of dealing with people and problems (attitudes) to allow optimum outcomes. If these three dimensions are not recognised separately, as often happens, the critical one of attitudes drops off the list and focus is given to the more easily taught dimensions of skills and knowledge.

The needs of the owner/operator are the logical starting point for a learning-oriented farm and industry. If that person does not recognise that learning is integral to success in life and business, they are unlikely to pursue learning opportunities for themselves, or encourage others in their family or workforce to do so. This throws into sharp relief the fundamental importance of attitudes such as: willingness to identify one’s own deficiencies, acceptance of the reality of continuous change and the need to adapt with change or even trigger it; valuing others; willingness to ask “dumb” questions; pride of workmanship; capacity to respond intelligently to contingencies. These qualities are most effectively learned through participation in well-designed adult learning activities as well as through reflection on personal experience.

From this perspective, examination of any one sector of education in isolation from the others will yield sub-optimal outcomes in terms of enhanced capability of dairy people. The Committee is urged to take the more expansive view.

The dairy industry's capacity to specify its learning needs

The dairy industry has had some notable successes in identifying learning needs, producing attractive and effective programs, and gaining substantial participation.

In particular, the dairy industry led the way in the development of competencies for training. Combined with a more flexible education and training structure that was much closer to the dairy farm sector, dairy education experienced a relative boom during the late 1980s and early 1990s. At that time, those involved were more experienced and attuned to the industry, and were well-supported. The best of these times needs to be taken with us into the future.

In more recent times, the industry itself has initiated and, with a range of providers, developed several extension programs to address specific industry issues – e.g. In-Calf, Countdown DownUnder, TopFodder and Dairy Moving Forward. Dairy Moving Forward, which is having considerable success in reaching dairy farmers, offers a valuable model. Its key elements are sharp focus on needs stated by farmers; a bringing-together of the experienced people of the industry's R&D service body (Dairy Australia), dairy processors, private consultants and departments of primary industry; and a clear focus on achieving on-the-ground outcomes as the end-product of learning.

In some cases, the industry's extension programs have been mapped onto the VET competencies, but the VET sector has had little involvement in any other way: this indicates a perceived lack of relevance and a missed opportunity. There have been instances in the VET sector where highly respected programs have been offered through close interaction between VET and the industry: for example, the dairy apprenticeship program and the Advanced Diploma of Dairy based at McMillan.

The above instances demonstrate that the industry can identify its learning needs and pursue them to successful outcomes. However, its approach is probably best described as shotgun rather than systematic, with examples such as some above being the result of very obvious need and passionate champions. Where this has happened, the formal education providers have not figured large. In fact, there are few formal mechanisms for communication between the education sectors and the industry, and those that do exist are the result of local need and relationships. There is a clear need for the industry, in association with the education sectors, to establish structures and processes – a brokerage - which deliver the required outcomes in a systematic and strategic manner. Significant improvements have already been made with respect to identification of issues for attention through research, extension and policy development. It is called the National Priority Setting Process, and is championed by Dairy Australia and Australian Dairy Farmers. This may provide the appropriate vehicle at the levels of identification of needs and development of strategies for improving provision of learning opportunities through VET and universities. Whatever approach is used, a dialogue with the providers is necessary.

How well does vocational education meet the needs of the dairy industry?

It is not possible to make a substantiated assessment, because there is little monitoring of outputs (in the form of course availability and quality) or outcomes (in terms of behavioural and productive change on farm). The monitoring that does take place seems confined to numbers of students undertaking programs and even these statistics appear to have limited reliability and usefulness.

However, there is a strong perception that the education providers do not serve the industry well. Deficiencies mentioned above include slow response times, inaccessibility, centralised and inflexible curricula, and the learning approaches used.

As was discussed earlier, the current competitive model for education services is highly questioned by the dairy industry. Although dairy is a large industry, it is questionable that the dairy education sector can survive let alone thrive in a competitive environment where resources and participants are split. This is true in all regions. Where two or more providers compete for students in a location with only sufficient potential candidates to justify the resources of one, the situation is clearly unsustainable for the providers. It is evident that the industry with the providers should identify cost-effective locations and appropriate providers, as well as develop alternative course models which require fewer but more concentrated face-to-face activities to facilitate attendance if necessary. The providers must also think more laterally so that the full range of services can be offered to dairy farmers in every region of Australia.

It is accepted that the current deficiencies are not entirely the providers' fault: as outlined above, the industry is not systematically identifying and communicating needs effectively, and has not taken any responsibility for monitoring and accrediting programs with respect to relevance and standards. The result is that the industry is not making best use of the resources of the education providers and is probably contributing to their erosion and fragmentation as a consequence. The reality is that education providers will respond to those industries which are well organised and good at making and pressing their demands.

In summary, the dairy industry's track record is that it can be very effective at identifying its learning needs, but it does not currently do so in a strategic and systematic way. Its relationships with education providers requires substantial development, so that an effective collaboration may be forged. Programs such as Dairy Moving Forward and the Advanced Diploma of Dairy at McMillan provide clues for the way forward.

ToR 3

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The provision of extension and advisory services to agricultural industries, including links and coordination between education, research and extension.

Substantial resources are employed in providing extension and advisory services to the dairy industry. Providers include departments of primary industry, processors, merchandisers, private consultants and natural resource management agencies. Some of the larger programs such as Dairy Moving Forward are facilitated and resourced through the industry's peak service organisation, Dairy Australia Limited which has taken an increasingly prominent role in promoting extension.

Despite this mass of resources, extension and advisory services are often poorly coordinated and poorly utilised, and often poorly linked with research and education. In fact, in at least one State, research and extension are now managed from different sections, when conventional wisdom (and previous practice) holds they should be woven together. Concerns about such matters has led to many investigations designed to find better ways of improving the capability of dairy farmers, and these are progressively generating a wider range of more effective options, some of which have been mentioned earlier.

A crucial element in success is that all stakeholders are aligned with the agreed goal, methodologies and resource allocation. That this does not always happen can be a reflection of various underlying issues: for example, a lack of interest, differing agendas, a concern to gain access to funds rather than achieving goals, the need to respond to different, perhaps conflicting performance targets, etc. A greater openness and willingness to listen by all parties could do much to reduce this problem.

ToR 4

The role of the Australian government in supporting education, research and advisory programs to support the viability and sustainability of Australian agriculture.

The Australian government has a responsibility to ensure that the learning needs of significant industries are met, so they have the human resources needed to continue to contribute to the nation's wealth and support strong regional societies. The dairy industry is one such industry, but it is clear that the structures and processes that now surround its education and training leave much to be desired.

The influence of government is greatest when it works with industries to find the most effective and equitable ways forward. The dairy industry would welcome an invitation to follow this submission with some firm proposals based on the principles listed below. In general terms, these will argue for a continuing role for government, for funding models which stress achievement of outcomes rather than inputs, and for incentives and mechanisms to facilitate productive working relationships between industry, government and providers. Through this, the industry will be looking for a robust mechanism to allow for a more industry driven, relevant and flexible system.

The following principles lay the basis for action to bring about a substantial lift in the proportion of dairy people engaged in education and extension, and for consequent on-the-farm improvements.

1. Learning should be seen and promoted by the dairy industry, government and education providers as the foundation of farm success, industry progress, regional prosperity and national wealth;
2. Government should support and the dairy industry should drive the dairy learning system to achieve those outcomes;
3. An industry-driven body to act as broker: to identify needs, set standards, recruit providers, monitor outputs and outcomes, accredit programs, and develop and oversee a national framework of competencies and awards on to which all education and extension programs are mapped. The broker to consist of industry people and education providers so as to facilitate communication;
4. The dairy learning system should be easily understood and accessed by dairy people;
5. All providers should be seen as interacting parts of the dairy learning system, and be supported in their continuing development as dairy educators;
6. Extension programs should be seen as just as much a part of the learning system as formal education programs;

7. Learning programs should be placed within the context of the whole dairy supply chain;
8. Dairy learning programs should be designed and run on adult education principles;
9. Dairy learning programs should attract people from outside the industry;
10. Competencies, certificates, diplomas and degrees should be recognised in all States as providing assurance of the level of work that may be expected; and
11. Government should maintain an accessible national database of course offerings, participation and outcomes to allow continuous improvement.

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