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A way forward for rural regions

Sue Kilpatrick

Helen Bound

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Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia

The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author/project team and do not necessarily reflect the views of ANTA or NCVER.

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Key messages

- ✧ As a group, seasonal workers tend to fall through the formal training net.
- ✧ Collaborative arrangements among regional stakeholders such as local government, development bodies, industry bodies, major employers, recruitment and labour market agencies, training providers and unions have the potential to put in place programs and initiatives to address the learning and training needs of seasonal workers, their supervisors and employers.
- ✧ Training must be integrated into industry and community processes. Planning needs to take place at a regional level to ensure that training is beneficial to and accepted by seasonal workers and employers. Only then can we be reasonably confident that those at the margins of the 'standard' workforce, including seasonal workers, will have easy access to the formal Australian VET system.
- ✧ A collaborative, integrated regional approach to training must be matched by an integrated approach in education and training, employment, recruitment, community development and industry policies.

Executive summary

Many industries in rural and regional Australia employ casually on a seasonal basis, notably tourism and hospitality, agriculture, horticulture, aquaculture, and food processing. Primary industry and hospitality alone employ 14.5% of all workers outside the capital cities, compared to 5.3% in the capital cities (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001 Census unpublished data). Many of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable regions in Australia rely heavily on industries associated with seasonal work.

As a group, seasonal workers tend to fall through the formal training net. The temporary nature of their work and the traditional understanding that seasonal work is unskilled has provided little impetus for workers, employers, providers or government to consider formal training necessary. Training helps individual seasonal workers, who must be readily able to find work in a number of different industries in different seasons. A pool of trained workers is a benefit to employers and industries with seasonal labour needs, and regions in which the industries with seasonal labour demands are located. Consumer demand for quality service and produce and an increasing focus on occupational health and safety (OH&S), along with rising workers' compensation insurance premiums, have created an interest in training among employers of seasonal labour.

This study is a qualitative in-depth investigation in two regions—Circular Head, Tasmania, and Wide Bay–Burnett, Queensland—with data from a variety of sources: employees, employers and stakeholders such as vocational education and training (VET) providers, recruitment agencies, local government, state government personnel based in regional areas, industry associations, and unions.

The Wide Bay–Burnett region used a more extensive set of skills in agricultural and food processing for seasonal work. Circular Head had a wider variety of seasonal industries. These differences can be accounted for by climatic differences (leading to more sustained seasonal work in Queensland), larger properties in Queensland than in Tasmania, the more extensive, better organised and cohesive regional industry bodies in Queensland and the larger number of seasonal workers in Queensland.

Five different groups were identified as needing skills for seasonal work: temporary workers motivated by income (for example, students and backpackers); less experienced temporary seasonal workers with a low motivation; aspiring seasonal workers; career seasonal workers; and employers of seasonal workers. All groups required occupational health and safety and technical skills, although career seasonal workers only required updates. Those with low motivation required attitudinal and generic skills for the job such as reliability and teamwork. Supervisors were drawn from career seasonal workers and would benefit from basic training and assessment, conflict resolution, and basic front line management skills. Employers required skills in people management, planning and negotiating training, and basic training and assessment. All groups would benefit from recognition of current competencies. Aspiring seasonal workers, career seasonal workers and employers of seasonal workers in particular would benefit from formal training that is recognised by the VET system.

The study found that for seasonal workers most learning is on the job, much of it is informal, as needed and non-accredited. Experienced workers are highly valued by employers and they will often support inexperienced workers. However, employers expect to have to train workers on the job, as staff turnover is high, and each enterprise has different requirements. In regional areas, many large businesses see the benefits of training for their whole workforce but access the formal VET system

only for permanent workers. Small businesses are unlikely to access the formal VET system; instead they tend to rely on informal on-the-job training for seasonal workers.

Barriers to appropriate formal and informal training in the two sites were identified as:

- ✧ inappropriate training delivery, including delivery of a standard package; delivery of a whole qualification; and lack of industry- or enterprise-specific customisation
- ✧ barriers to access: for workers—costs of training, transport and childcare costs; for all stakeholders, including workers—difficulties of identifying and accessing formal training, especially from sources outside the region; for employers and other stakeholders—systemic funding arrangements that make it difficult for enterprises and other interested organisations, such as recruitment and job placement agencies, to resource training for seasonal workers
- ✧ limited understanding by employers and other regional stakeholders of how structured on-the-job training can be used flexibly to enhance outcomes for enterprises and seasonal workers
- ✧ lack of career pathways in seasonal work and payment by piece rates
- ✧ limited learning-to-learn skills and literacy/numeracy skills of seasonal workers in some cases.

Enhancers of effective formal training in the two sites were identified as:

- ✧ collaborative arrangements among regional stakeholders to address the training needs of seasonal workers, their supervisors and employers that encourage the development of generic, transferable skills, accompanied by strong external networks
- ✧ on-the-job customised delivery leading to improved work practices, facilitated by providers with a deep knowledge of the industry, the employer(s) and the workers; selection of individual competencies as appropriate; flexible delivery; and recognition of current competence
- ✧ external business and legislative factors, including product quality assurance processes, especially those incorporating feedback from customers; and legislative requirements, such as for occupational health and safety
- ✧ payment by wages and pay levels structured to training
- ✧ employer training orientation, fostered by membership of relevant industry association with an interest in training, and training participation by employers/managers or supervisors of seasonal workers
- ✧ subsidising costs incurred by employers in providing training.

Collaborative arrangements among regional stakeholders—such as local government, development bodies, industry bodies, major employers, recruitment and labour market agencies—training providers and unions have the potential to put in place programs and initiatives to address the learning and training needs of seasonal workers, their supervisors and employers. This study has shown that training must be integrated into industry and community processes and planning at a regional level to ensure that training is beneficial to and accepted by seasonal workers, and employers. Only then can we be reasonably confident that those at the margins of the ‘standard’ workforce, including seasonal workers, will have easy access to the formal Australian VET system.

Training for seasonal workers must be customised to take account of the local context and the nature of the region and its industries. In particular, the nature of the industries, the needs and characteristics of the businesses in the region, and the characteristics of the seasonal workers who work in the region must be considered in the design of training.

There is a diverse array of funding sources that can be used to facilitate training for seasonal work; however, expertise in accessing funding is required. Regions with strong networking arrangements are best placed to tap these funding sources.

A collaborative, integrated regional approach to training must be matched by an integrated approach in education and training, employment, recruitment, community development and industry policies.

Regions should plan together to meet regional training needs by, for example:

- ✧ identifying and involving all stakeholder groups within the region, including local government, development bodies, industry bodies, major employers, recruitment and labour market agencies, training providers and unions
- ✧ identifying and involving external stakeholders who may be state industry bodies, state and federal government agencies and training providers who do, or could, deliver training in the region
- ✧ establishing a forum for sharing information to encourage cross-sectoral linkages and sharing of resources
- ✧ collecting data on training needs of seasonal workers, employers, industries and the region
- ✧ identifying internal and external resources, including funding sources
- ✧ building a vision and a plan for regional training
- ✧ putting the plan into action and evaluating progress regularly.

The apparent importance of regional collaborations and partnerships in facilitating structured, effective training that is linked to the national VET system suggests it is important to understand how such collaborations are initiated and sustained. Further research is required into the ways in which effective collaborations operate in planning and negotiating training. The role of community and external agents in partnerships deserves further exploration.

Training for seasonal work in rural Australia

Why training for seasonal work matters

Many industries that employ large numbers of people in rural and regional Australia employ casually on a seasonal basis, notably in tourism and hospitality, agriculture, horticulture, aquaculture, silviculture and food processing. Primary industry and hospitality alone employ 14.5% of all workers outside the capital cities, compared to 5.3% in the capital cities (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001 Census unpublished data). Many of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable regions in Australia rely heavily on industries associated with seasonal work—for example, Hervey Bay and Wide Bay–Burnett in Queensland, Cowra in New South Wales, Murray Bridge in South Australia, Circular Head and Northern Midlands in Tasmania, Gannawarra in Victoria, and Plantagenet in Western Australia (Baum et al. 1999).

Work is increasingly taking the form of casual, part-time, or contract and/or is organised through labour hire companies (ANTA 2003; Marginson 2000)—so much so that part-time, casual, contract and labour-hire employment patterns are now central ways through which workers in Australia are employed (Board of Vocational Education and Training 2001). Non-standard workers number two in every five workers (Board of Vocational Education and Training 2001). While data specific to seasonal workers is not routinely collected, it is safe to assume that the vast majority of seasonal workers are non-standard workers, employed casually, on piece-rates or short-term contracts. Hall, Bretherton and Buchanan (2000, p.10) note that the increase in the casualisation of work is one of the most significant changes in the Australian labour market over the past decade. Areas of lowest skills have the biggest growth in employment in Australia over the last decade (ANTA 2003, p.v; Maglen & Shah 1999). While the actual number of people employed in lower skilled occupations has increased, aggregate hours worked by lower skilled workers have declined (NCVER 2002, p.6). This increase in casualisation means there is increasingly less job security for a growing number of workers, and fewer opportunities for skill development for these workers (Hall, Bretherton & Buchanan 2000).

As a group, seasonal workers fall through the formal training net. The temporary nature of their work and the traditional understanding that this type of work is unskilled has previously provided little impetus for workers, employers, providers or government to consider formal training necessary. Training for seasonal workers could be expected to be an advantage for individual workers, who should be readily able to find work in a number of different industries in different seasons. A pool of trained workers is a benefit to employers and industries with seasonal labour needs, and regions in which the industries with seasonal labour demands are located. Consumer demand for quality service and produce and an increasing focus on occupational health and safety along with rising workers' compensation insurance premiums have created an interest in recognised, formal training among employers of seasonal labour. NCVER (2003b) notes that organisational commitment to quality is associated with formal workplace training. Workplace change has been identified as a major incentive for training (NCVER 2003b). New technology in the form of new machinery and differing quality standards, for example for niche markets, can prompt training in food processing and agriculture.

A number of factors affect decisions about the use of formal training for seasonal workers. Knowledge about the vocational education and training (VET) system and how to access providers who can structure appropriate training around training packages, or parts of packages, is one factor. The value that employers place on formal qualifications and their attitude to, and understanding of, the benefits of structured training is a second factor. A third is who pays for training? Is it the first employer who wants workers trained in a skill that is common to a number of seasonal jobs? Is it the seasonal worker? Is it a labour hire company? A fourth factor is readiness to access training, with many seasonal workers and their employers perceiving little need for formal training for what is described as low-skilled work. However, the tensions between the need for quality assurance and legislative requirements for occupational health and safety, and the seasonal nature of the work that 'leaves no time for training', require different ways of thinking about training for seasonal workers, their supervisors and employers.

This chapter reviews literature on the characteristics of seasonal workers, training and recruitment for seasonal work, the need for training for competitiveness, responsibility for training, and outlines theoretical bases for understanding regional learning systems. The following chapters consider and analyse training for seasonal work in two Australian regions, Circular Head in Tasmania and Wide Bay–Burnett in Queensland.

Characteristics of seasonal workers and their work

The characteristics of seasonal workers are varied, and vary from region to region, with female workers dominating in some regions and some industries (Tasmanian Food Industry Training Board 1999). Local people who only work in one seasonal industry, professional pickers who travel following work, unemployed people, migrants, backpackers and students are all well represented in the national seasonal workforce (George & Dickinson 2000). Some seek to move into higher paid work, while others choose this type of work for the flexibility it gives them—for example, many women work to supplement the family income when large purchases are needed, and others work to supplement the income of a farm business (George & Dickinson 2000).

Lower skilled occupations of labouring in agriculture, basic factory operatives in food processing and service workers in hospitality are relevant to this project. The unemployment rate for people in labouring and elementary clerical, sales and service occupations is higher than for other occupations (NCVER 2002, p.21). Using Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data, Dunlop (2000) found that the risk of being low paid is greater for workers who are employed part-time and who are not unionised and work in small work places. These factors also contribute to joblessness (Dunlop 2000, pp.6–7). Workers in rural locations are more likely to remain in their low paid job from one year to the next (Dunlop 2000, p.31). Part-time employment is generally associated with lower levels of training and opportunities for skill development as well as increasingly less job security where part-time workers are employed as casuals (Hall, Bretherton & Buchanan 2000, p.11). Seasonal workers can be expected to reflect these characteristics—that is, to be low paid, likely to experience unemployment and underemployment, and have limited opportunities for training.

Training and recruitment for seasonal work

The demand for and interest in training can be expected to vary, with those seeing seasonal work as a one-off short-term income earner being less ready to invest time in training than those who expect to undertake seasonal work on a regular basis. Locals who work in only one seasonal industry are not as likely to be interested in cross-industry qualifications as those who want to put together a year round pattern of work. Typical characteristics of seasonal workers mean that many of these workers do not fit neatly into the new worker identity of commitment to the enterprise and industry valued by policy makers and employers, nor do they meet the institutional arrangements for readily accessing formal vocational education.

Seasonal workers tend to fall outside funding and institutional arrangements for formal training and outside enterprise-based learning initiatives. This can be attributed to the intermittent nature of their employment (Australian Agribusiness Group 1999) and the low value often placed on their skills. Those in labouring and related occupations, those with low qualifications levels and those employed in the agriculture, accommodation, cafe and restaurant industries are less likely to participate in training (Dumbrell 2004). Seasonal workers are over represented in each of these three groups. Those employed by small businesses are least likely to receive structured training from their employer: in 2001–2002 only 31% of enterprises employing less than five people provided structured training, compared to 98% of enterprises employing 100 or more (ABS 2003).

The rural industry, via the Rural Training Council of Australia, has taken a particular interest in training for seasonal workers, and how training packages can be used more flexibly, including via a cross-industry qualification (Group Training Australia 2003). A recently developed cross-industry training package has been trialed in regions in four states, with group training companies being the key players in implementing the new package. Job Network providers are seeking to place job seekers in seasonal work. Many of their clients require training before they are 'work ready'.

Agricultural labour work is sometimes perceived as straightforward and repetitive, and all you really need to harvest cauliflower, for example, is a knife and the cauliflower. However, as the following quote from an application for funding to train seasonal workers in the viticulture industry demonstrates, what appears straightforward is anything but:

It is sometimes perceived that picking grapes is a fairly mundane, easy task, i.e. all you really need is a set of arms and eyes, see the bunch, cut it off ... If secateurs are used incorrectly muscles will be tired by the end of the first week, painful by the end of the first fortnight and there is a possibility Repetitive Strain Injury may develop. (Searsonbuck pers. com. 2003)

The need for skills training for seemingly simple tasks is evident from this quote. Yet despite the perception that the work is 'mundane' and unskilled, employers are increasingly experiencing difficulties in sourcing seasonal workers. Future requirements for agricultural seasonal labour in Tasmania, for example, are likely to outstrip available labour (Department of Economic Development, personal communication 2 September 2003). Employers in rural regions expect workers to come with generic skills such as communication and teamwork, but prefer on-the-job training for job-specific skills (Enterprise Marketing and Research Services 2002). However, the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) (2003a) notes that the workplace is a key site for developing generic skills. If employers do not value formal training or pre-employment training, it is not surprising that seasonal workers do not participate in training of their own accord.

Developing a pool of skilled seasonal workers presents challenges. The systemic funding arrangements for training make it difficult for enterprises and other labour market organisations such as recruitment and job placement agencies to resource training for seasonal workers. The training packages available within the formal Australian VET system do not fit readily with the bundles of skills that employers and seasonal workers themselves believe are needed (Farrell & Wyse 2003). Funding arrangements that support the delivery of units of competency create an issue for both employers and workers, who are interested in training as it relates to the job, not the unit of competency. 'The current practices of RTOs [registered training organisations] of unit based delivery and assessment rather than job based delivery and assessment is identified as a major obstacle to effective delivery' (Office of Post Compulsory Education and Training 2001, p.7). However, this study found that a few registered training organisations do customise training to the job using relevant training package qualifications. This problem has added dimensions in agricultural communities where much of the labour is seasonal, and where workers need to move between employers during the year.

The barriers facing seasonal workers in accessing training are formidable. Access to information about learning and training, low pay, welfare payment arrangements, and transport and childcare arrangements are issues of equity. The barriers identified by providers to providing training for

seasonal workers in rural areas include the cost of delivering training in thin markets (magnified by applicable rules and regulations), the lack of skilled trainers in rural areas, and the difficulties of customising training for workers with poor literacy and numeracy skills (Clayton et al. 2004; Farrell & Wyse 2003).

Competitiveness and responsibility for training

In order to remain competitive organisations are required to be agile, respond quickly to market conditions and to develop new collaborative arrangements and capabilities (ANTA 2003). The increased casualisation of the Australian labour force (ANTA 2003) has improved agility, but has meant, among other things, broadening the responsibilities and skill requirements of workers to include quality management and teamwork.

For workers such as seasonal workers, who increasingly move across enterprises and industries, the range of skills required to successfully gain employment and to meet employer needs for skills ‘may best be served by training that takes a broader approach to skills development rather than a narrow sector based approach’ (ANTA 2003, p.2). This perspective would result in workers gaining skill sets and qualifications transferable across industries and industry sectors. Such an approach also needs to take into account regional and human resource strategies, as discussed above. The Skills Passport (Dalby Agricultural College 2003) developed in Queensland, an example of this approach, is described in detail later in this report.

Low literacy and low levels of qualifications make it difficult for businesses to be competitive. This has been recognised as an issue for seasonal work—for example in the food processing industry—by the Tasmanian VET Strategy for Food (Office of Post Compulsory Education and Training 2001). In order to remain competitive, employers increasingly consider aptitudes, capabilities, capacities and dispositions important as part of the desired set of generic and employability skills (ANTA 2003; Department of Education, Science and Training 2002). Current Commonwealth Government policy documentation (for example the report *Employability skills for the future*, Department of Education, Science and Training 2002) promotes a worker identity that meets current ways of organising product and labour markets, and therefore matches the requirements of today’s employers. This identity includes attributes of being acceptable to peers, and the customer, and attitudes and values in line with the company’s approach, enthusiasm, reliability, positive self-esteem, and motivation. Skills listed include teamwork, communication skills, self-management skills and learning skills. Not only do some groups available for seasonal work not possess these desired aptitudes, capabilities, capacities and dispositions, but also they do not see themselves as needing a broad range of generic and employability skills. This leaves a gap between the expected requirements for competitiveness and the capacity of regions and their industries to meet those requirements. Research shows that the development of generic skills requires a partnership between the learner, education and training providers, and workplaces (NCVER 2003a). This partnership is problematic when workers and employers have different expectations. The need for generic skill development and for reshaping worker attitudes and dispositions has implications for the ways in which ‘training’ is delivered.

Hall, Bretherton and Buchanan (2000) note that a decline in investment in training by private employers continues to push the responsibility for training to the individual. They point out that it is unreasonable to expect non-standard workers on low rates of pay and irregular hours and unemployment patterns, as most seasonal workers are, to invest in training. There is a tension between developing and/or reshaping worker identity to match employer expectations and the focus of responsibility for skill development being increasingly placed on the individual.

How can such issues be addressed? There are bodies of literature which suggest that networking in regions results in a range of structures and systems—for example regional skill ecosystems (Board of Vocational Education and Training 2001)—which could be understood as regional learning.

Networks should include links that reach outside the region to those with power to access resources (vertical networks) and networks within the region (horizontal networks).

Regional learning systems

The number of stakeholders who can benefit from training of seasonal workers—for example, employers, providers, local council, and recruitment agencies—suggests that a collaborative approach to planning and negotiating training is required. Because of thin markets, collaboration between stakeholders is necessary in order to deliver training in regional areas. Regional frameworks and initiatives that connect vocational education and training with local and community networks are important in managing and meeting the needs of diverse clients, as well as meeting local economic and social needs (Waterhouse, Wilson & Ewer 1999). Training that meets a mix of individual, enterprise, industry and regional needs is an outcome of effective collaborations and partnerships around vocational education and training at a regional level (Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia 2001; Billett & Hayes 2000).

Why regional learning? As seasonal workers typically work for several employers during the year, strategic human resource management (ANTA 2003) must occur for whole regions and industries, rather than only in single work places. Such an approach indicates a focus away from individual learning to workplace learning and an understanding of regional industries. Regional learning recognises learning as collective and social, involving both vertical and horizontal networks of interaction. Such learning can contribute to meeting the training needs of seasonal workers. There are a number of different theoretical approaches to understanding what we have termed ‘regional learning’, and these include communities of practice, networking (an aspect of social capital), and the notion of skill ecosystems.

The community of practice literature states that learning is integral to the setting. A community of practice is defined as ‘a set of relations among persons, activity and world over time and in relation to other tangential and overlapping communities of practice’ (Lave & Wenger 1991, p.98). Communities of practice support learning by providing the opportunity to participate and to learn in practice. Wenger (1998) notes that communities of practice are sites of complex mixtures of competition and cooperation, trust and suspicion, and power and dependence.

Learning in the workplace often takes place within communities of practice, is collective and is mediated by the requirements of the work (see for example, Marsick, Bitterman & van der Veen 2000). Workplace learning recognises learning as not solely the property of individuals making or constructing meaning but, rather, that learning is shared across the group through the use of physical tools and work practices (see for example, Engeström 1994). Much seasonal work requires teamwork and communication—for example, to ready hotel rooms for incoming guests’ arrival times, or to coordinate fruit or vegetable picking with mechanised harvesting machinery and in-shed packing. This suggests that employer preferences for on-the-job training, or workplace learning, may be appropriate.

The formal VET system recognises and values workplace learning. By facilitating customisation of training to individual enterprise needs, it integrates workplace learning with human resource development to fit with the enterprise’s strategic direction. A limitation of this approach to learning is that it relies on learners being in work (ANTA 2003). Seasonal workers are rarely employed on a permanent basis. Rather, employers tend to recruit seasonal labour on a when-needed basis, often for short periods. This makes engagement with the VET system problematic.

Workers learn different skills, or simply different ways of undertaking similar tasks, as they work for different employers. They take these ‘learnings’ with them from one employer to another within and across regions. The resulting exchange of stories potentially contributes to regional learning. At a regional level, a community of practice that is a learning community and operates across enterprise

and organisational boundaries draws not only on learnings from the movement of workers but also from interaction between employers, training providers, and industry and regional bodies.

Networks should include links that reach outside the region to those with power to access resources (vertical networks) and horizontal, within region networks. Networking gives access to different perspectives and resources (see for example, Ashman, Brown & Zwick 1998; Gulati 1999). Networks are a major element of social capital. Social capital approaches to training in rural areas suggest networks are more effective if there is a coordination structure. Kilpatrick et al. (2002) advocate a 'hub' that acts as a one-stop-shop for vocational education and training, employment and businesses services, while Farrell and Wyse (2003) suggest use of a local broker, who has established credibility within a local community, to liaise between internal and external networks (see also Kilpatrick & Bound 2001). Stakeholders needs are best addressed when there is collaboration between a range of groups or stakeholders, including those from 'outside' the region (Farrell & Wyse 2003). Kilpatrick et al. (2002) present a strategy for developing collaboration and social capital in a region. The process is first to identify which stakeholders to involve, including external stakeholders, and then to consider existing activity in the community, before encouraging development of a vision and priorities. Extending and further developing cross-sectoral links is an important step, as it leads to a range of perspectives and resources.

External stakeholders bring a different range of experience and other resources and can act as independent facilitators to bring stakeholders together to build social capital through education and training collaborations (Kilpatrick et al. 2002). For example, the central role of group training companies in the trial of the new cross-industry qualification (Group Training Australia 2003) recognises the need for facilitators or intermediaries who can work across the boundaries of enterprises and industries in order to coordinate training.

The concept of skill ecosystems is a way of understanding skill at a regional level as integrated with modes of production, labour market mobility and issues of social equity (Board of Vocational Education and Training 2001). This approach provides a framework for gathering regional baseline data that stakeholders can use to develop strategies for addressing training needs and developing regional training infrastructure.

Skill ecosystems

Regional planning is required to meet unique regional training needs (Billet & Hayes 2000). Different industries use skills differently, have different forms and levels of competition and adapt to their environments in different ways. In some industries such as in the information technology (IT) industry there is a tendency to buy-in highly specialised skills; in the building and information technology industries competition between sub-contractors has intensified; in other industries such as cleaning, work has changed little (Board of Vocational Education and Training 2001). Being aware of these differences between and within industries is important when identifying individual, employer and industry training needs and modes of delivery. Employee and employer expectations of training will vary across industries, and be related to employment arrangements, work arrangements and forms of production. In the high technology industry workers move from one organisation to another, taking skills and knowledge with them and learn new skills and knowledge in each new workplace. In this way skills are distributed across a region (Keeble et al. 1998). These changing work arrangements offer possibilities for developing regions of skilled workers in industries where there is movement of workers between employers. Other industries, including the agricultural and tourism industries of interest in this study, also experience movement of workers between employers, and may be able to develop as skill regions or industries in a similar way. In the agricultural industry, seasonal work is organised predominantly on a casual basis—rather than contract as in the high technology industry—and less value is accorded to workers' skills.

Enterprises are increasingly organising production through new forms of inter-organisational collaboration. This collaboration includes networks of production, supply chains and outsourcing arrangements (Board of Vocational Education and Training 2001). Ways of thinking about skill is

changing. There is now reference to technical, cognitive and behavioural skills, core skills, generic/soft skills, underpinning skills, literacy and numeracy skills, communication skills, cultural skills and learning skills. The changing meaning of skill is a reflection of different needs and usage of skill. French research (for example Mounier 2001) points out that notions of skill are embedded in labour relationships and broader social structures.

Skill ecosystems (<<http://www.skillecosystem.net/about/>>) understand that there is regional and industry sector diversity in the level and type of skills required, depending on the mode of production. Skill ecosystems may be organised regionally or by industry sectors. Skill needs constantly evolve and adapt to external and internal stimuli (Finegold 1999). The Board of Vocational Education and Training (2001) concluded there were five key features which structure any given regional or sectoral skill ecosystem: business settings (for example, type of product market, competitive strategies and business networks); institutional and policy frameworks (for example, VET and non-VET); modes of engaging labour (for example, casual, labour hire, and contract); structure of jobs (for example job design); and level and type of skill formation (for example, apprenticeships and informal on-the-job training) (Board of Vocational Education and Training 2001).

For deliverers of vocational education and training, this changing perception of skill requires highly integrated delivery modes and collaborative arrangements that tap into knowledge of the dynamics of local skill ecosystems. Collaborative arrangements among regional stakeholders have the potential to put in place programs and initiatives to address the learning and training needs of seasonal workers, their supervisors and employers (Farrell & Wyse 2003). Developing skill needs within a region requires collaborative settings that come to understand the regional skill ecosystem, including the skill ecosystems of the dominant regional industries. This is the first step to develop a region as a learning community. Business settings, related modes of engaging labour and the structure of jobs in many regional areas mean that skilling of seasonal labour is an important part of regional skill ecosystems.

About the study

This study investigates provision of training to meet the needs of seasonal workers within two geographic regions. It examines barriers and enhancers to the provision of training by employers, industries and regions as well as barriers and enhancers of participation for employees. The ‘fit’ between current VET provision and needs is also investigated. The objectives of the study are to:

- ✧ identify the training that is delivered to/undertaken by seasonal workers over a 12-month period, with the assistance, or not, of their employers
- ✧ identify the training needs of employers and seasonal workers
- ✧ examine the factors that enhance and inhibit use of structured training to meet the training needs of seasonal workers
- ✧ prepare two case studies of good practice in the use of structured training to meet the needs of seasonal workers
- ✧ investigate the roles that regional industry, government and providers can play in meeting training needs of these workers.

The study is a qualitative in-depth investigation in two regions—Circular Head, Tasmania, and Wide Bay–Burnett, Queensland—with data from a variety of sources: employees (n=25), employers (n=8) and stakeholders such as VET providers, recruitment agencies, local government, state government personnel based in regional areas, industry associations, and unions (n=16).

Summary

Seasonal workers fall outside funding and institutional arrangements for formal training. Because of the intermittent nature of their employment and the low value often placed on their skills, seasonal workers also fall outside enterprise-based learning initiatives. The systemic funding arrangements for training make it difficult for enterprises and other labour market organisations—such as recruitment and job placement agencies—to resource training for seasonal workers. The training packages available do not fit readily with the bundles of skills that employers and seasonal workers themselves believe are needed. The barriers facing seasonal workers in accessing training are formidable. Access to information about learning and training, low pay, welfare payment arrangements, transport and childcare arrangements are issues of equity, requiring specific attention from policy makers nationally. Within these restrictions, collaborative arrangements among regional stakeholders have the potential to put in place programs and initiatives to address the learning and training needs of seasonal workers, their supervisors and employers. These collaborative arrangements must consider the skill ecosystem of the region. Regional stakeholders can be leaders in a regional learning community that will benefit seasonal workers, their employers and the region as a whole.

Training and learning activity in the two regions

Introduction

This chapter describes training and learning activity for seasonal workers in the two regions. It provides an overview of the study, a description of the seasonal workers in the regions, the skills their employers require of them and how they learn to do their jobs. Much of the learning spoken of by seasonal workers and their employers is informal and happens on the job. The chapter outlines the formal training undertaken by seasonal workers and discusses training available and gaps in training in each of the regions. Regional collaboration among industry bodies, major employers, local government, recruitment agencies, providers and government agencies is responsible for much of the training that occurs. The stories told in this study indicate that these stakeholders come together in various combinations and with a range of motivations. The chapter concludes with a description of the networks of stakeholders, employers and workers that are drawn on in these collaborations.

The two regions

Circular Head in Tasmania and Wide Bay–Burnett in Queensland have been selected for the study. The selection is based on prevalence and variety of seasonal work and, in the case of Circular Head, on previous research by the project researchers and others into training in the Circular Head local government area.

Circular Head

Circular Head spreads over the far north-west tip of Tasmania and covers one of the largest municipal regions in the state—4917 km². The region includes the historic town of Stanley, and extends along the northern coastline, to the West Coast and south through farming districts. The main centre, Smithton, is on the coast (Circular Head n.d.). The population of 7702 comprises a growing number of residents from overseas. Many people choose to come to Circular Head for the lifestyle. The region has a comparatively large Indigenous population (Circular Head Council n.d.), being home to approximately 19% of the state's Indigenous people (ABS 2001).

Forestry plantations and agricultural land dominate the area. These industries, along with the aquaculture industry, provide the area's main employment and income. Circular Head is the largest dairying and prime beef-producing area of the state. Other major industries include fishing, oyster and abalone farming, tourism, and the processing of many raw products such as vegetables, timber, meat, milk and an iron ore pelletising plant (Circular Head n.d.).

A quarter of the 3402 people employed in Circular Head are employed in the agriculture, forestry and fishing industries, compared to 9% for Tasmania as a whole. One-third of all those employed in Circular Head are employed on a part-time or casual basis, similar to the state average. The unemployment rate is lower than the state average (ABS 2001).

Wide Bay–Burnett

Situated in an area ranging from 160–400 kilometres north and north-west of Brisbane, the Wide Bay–Burnett region covers 52 382 km². It includes the cities of Bundaberg, Maryborough and Hervey Bay. The estimated resident population of the region at June 2001 was around 237 000 persons—which was approximately 6.6% of the Queensland population—and includes almost 6% of the state’s Indigenous community. There has been a large influx of new residents, in particular to coastal areas such as Hervey Bay. The last ten years have seen a 21% increase in the population. However, some smaller rural areas are experiencing a net loss of population. In general, the region has a higher proportion of population between the ages of 50 and 80 years than the rest of Queensland, and a lower proportion of the population aged between 15 and 29 years.

Agriculture underpins much of the economic activity in the region, with over one-third of the business locations in Wide Bay–Burnett being in the agricultural sector. In terms of numbers of employees, retail trade (13 151 employed persons), agriculture (11 391) and manufacturing (8515) are the most significant sectors in Wide Bay–Burnett; however, it should be noted that the retail trade sector has a comparatively high incidence of part-time employment. The total number employed in agriculture is 14%, which is well above the national average of 4%.

Unemployment is the highest of any major region in Queensland, with about a third of those in employment employed on a part-time basis. The youth unemployment rate (persons aged 15–24 years) was 18.5% during 2001–02. Household incomes tend to be lower than for Queensland as a whole. At the 2001 Census the proportion of workers without post-school qualifications was 63.3% for Wide Bay–Burnett, compared with 57.2% for Queensland (Jones 2000; Department of Transport and Regional Services 2002).

Comparing the two regions

The two regions—one in a temperate climate and one in a tropical climate—experience different seasonal cycles. Other differences include state legislative arrangements and regional collaborative arrangements. There are commonalities between the regions such as the nature of learning on the job and possibilities for training and collaborative arrangements. These are described in the chapter, ‘Key Actions and Relationships’, which includes a discussion of enhancers and barriers to learning and training for seasonal workers, employers and stakeholders. Preceding that chapter is a descriptive account of training in the two regions.

The seasonal workers and their work

The seasonal workers interviewed for this study ranged in age from 17 to over 50. The workers included students and a few others who saw seasonal work as a temporary stage in their working life, but most of those interviewed had worked as seasonal workers for decades. Worker education levels ranged from early high school to trade qualifications and partial university studies, with most leaving school at the end of Year 10. A handful spoke about informal on-the-job training and formal training linked to their work that provided them with skills to manage/supervise other seasonal workers. Some workers had forklift and heavy rigid vehicle licences, relevant to their work.

The type of work undertaken by seasonal workers is varied. It includes picking, packing, pruning, milking, fieldwork consisting of picking up rocks, planting, spraying, trickle irrigation, and factory-based food processing. In Wide Bay–Burnett, where the seasons are more varied and longer than in Tasmania, workers can pick and/or pack eight or more crops in a season. In Circular Head, workers interviewed undertook cutting of broccoli, work on a potato seeder, honey collecting, food processing, and work in tourism such as cleaning and front counter reception.

Many seasonal workers choose this type of work because it provides flexibility and control over their lives, as illustrated in the following quote from a Tasmanian seasonal worker:

I'm single but there's others, other men they're married with large families ... they've just always been casual workers too, but it suits them because if they want to go and do something they just go and do it ... You can have a holiday whenever you want because you just don't work, and when you have to go back to work you just go and find another job somewhere else, so its good in that respect. And if you're in a job that's low paying and your money does get down a bit well you just go somewhere where it is high paying and build up your reserves and then come home again.

Others perform seasonal work to earn an income to assist their studies, as a temporary means of gaining an income, or because of a preference for working outdoors and stress-free work:

It does keep you fit. I quite enjoy it. I'd rather be out there rather than thinking, you know having to sit down and think things out somewhere else sort of thing. And it's something you can come home and forget.

Pickers interviewed in Queensland tended to be paid piece rates when picking and wages for tasks like pruning. Seasonal work in Circular Head was generally waged work.

Skills used and required on the job

Employers in both regions spoke of the need for workers who have commitment and preparedness for hard work along with a willingness to finish a job. This was generally referred to as having 'the right attitude'. In both regions experience was highly valued; however, the expectation was that workers would arrive without the technical skills required. It was more important to be able to get labour when required than to have trained, experienced workers. This was particularly the case in Circular Head, where the small agricultural employers and some other stakeholders spoke of the difficulty of getting good, reliable workers. In this region these workers tended to be married women (who were not listed on unemployment registers). In Wide Bay–Burnett, backpackers made up a small but significant proportion of the seasonal labour—30% on one farm—whereas in Circular Head there was very little reference to backpackers.

Product quality is heavily dependent on the skills of seasonal workers in the two regions. In agriculture and horticulture seasonal workers pick, pack and process produce. One Circular Head employer explained that the choice of crops grown depended on past experience with pickers, in terms of reliability in turning up for work and work quality.

The skills of experienced seasonal workers and those skills desired by their employers for each of the two regions are summarised in table 1. In general, as one Wide Bay–Burnett employer explained, 'experienced workers, [those who are able] to actually work [successfully] in the environment, they ... seem to have the mentality already in them'. An experienced seasonal worker notes that being alert and aware of what is happening around you is an important safety issue:

Be careful not to put fingers in the wrong places in the machines, you've basically got to watch where tractors are going because they don't watch you, you've got to be aware of where you are and what you are doing, you can't take your mind off it a lot of the time, keep your knife sharp.

A Queensland supervisor notes that some seasonal workers have very different values and priorities than those of the employer:

If they've had experience of fruit and vegies that's an advantage, but it's not necessarily a requirement. The main thing probably is they're hard working, reliable, got their own transport, and are willing to work outside and work odd hours. So you'd probably like to ask for more, but that would be asking too much and often we don't get people that meet those criteria. I mean reliable transport is probably a classic one. Unfortunately the trouble with it is you often get people with different goals and aims in life than business owners or our more

regular staff, and they're pretty haphazard about when they turn up and what kind of health or mental state they're in when they turn up and that kind of thing.

Workers who fit the description in the quote above do not match the worker identity promoted in reports such as the Department of Education, Science and Training (2002) with attributes of being acceptable to their peers, enthusiasm, reliability, positive self-esteem, and motivation. This was more evident in the data from the Queensland region.

Many seasonal jobs require literacy and numeracy skills. Requirements range from the ability to read basic safety signs through to operating computerised machinery. Not all workers have the literacy skills desired by employers. One Queensland employer estimated that 60–70% of seasonal workers employed could not read a set of workplace safety procedures:

Most of our seasonal staff are of a very low education level ... We are meant to be providing a safe working environment and everything for these workers but if they can't read a sign saying 'chemicals do not touch', what are we supposed to do! (Queensland employer)

When they are brand new they usually get into the broccoli area and it's probably the least skilled area, and they probably would be struggling to a degree, because they're casual, to even get put on certificate I because of the kind of work. Numeracy becomes quite difficult. (Tasmanian employer)

Teamwork is important in many seasonal jobs—for example, pickers have to keep up with each other and with machinery drivers, and in tourism where housekeeping and reception must work together. Many seasonal workers are unfamiliar with cooperative endeavour:

They're from broken homes, they're from families that were full of conflict ... And they're also survivors, they've learnt if they want to survive they've got to look after number one, so they don't work well in a team for that reason. And when they're told we've got to work as a team, and such and such can't keep up and you guys need to help him out, and they'll say 'Oh, why should I help him?'. (Queensland employer)

The more extensive set of skills in the Wide Bay–Burnett region can be accounted for:

- ✧ Climatic differences. The growing season is much longer in Wide Bay than in Circular Head. This meant a greater variety of crops over longer seasons for the Queensland site. Tourism in Circular Head is seasonal. In the Queensland site it is a year-round activity.
- ✧ The difference in farm size. In Circular Head, farms tended to be small, whereas farmers interviewed in Wide Bay–Burnett were from large properties.
- ✧ Regional industry bodies are more organised and cohesive in Wide Bay–Burnett than in Circular Head. This is important in developing knowledge about training, accessing training and awareness of the value of training. Again this can be attributed to the presence of more large farms in the Queensland region.
- ✧ Access to infrastructure. The range of providers, including Agricultural Colleges in Wide Bay–Burnett, along with stronger industry collaboration, presented greater opportunities for developing skills.

As a result of these factors—and the larger size of our Queensland region—there were far more seasonal workers, including those who work within and across regions, than in the Tasmanian site.

Table 1: Seasonal workers and their skills

Region	Skills and attitudes of less-experienced workers	Skills and attitudes of experienced workers	Skills and attitudes desired by employers
Circular Head	<p>Lack technical skills for job</p> <p>Unprepared for physical demands of job</p> <p>Those less likely to stay:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✧ are unreliable in turning up for work ✧ have poor generic skills, e.g. literacy, teamwork, OH&S ✧ cannot cope with physical demands of job <p>Those more likely to stay:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✧ have adequate generic skills ✧ are reliable ✧ learn to cope with physical demands of job 	<p>Knowledge of the work environment</p> <p>Variety of work experiences in the agricultural industry</p> <p>Self-care knowledge—dress for all weathers and protection from rough leaves etc., bring your own water, lunch, knowledge and practice of back-care, good fitness levels</p> <p>Provide own gear (e.g. knife, wet weather clothing)</p> <p>Provide own transport</p> <p>Ability to maintain constant awareness of machinery and work flow</p> <p>Ability to work in a team</p> <p>Show initiative</p> <p>Reliable and committed</p>	<p>Small employers prefer experienced workers as described in the column to the left</p> <p>Employers who have links to their industry body would like workers to have basic knowledge of OH&S</p> <p>Evidence of a past work ethic for new seasonal workers</p> <p>Basic literacy and numeracy skills</p>
Wide Bay–Burnett	<p>As above, motivation and teamwork more an issue among those less likely to stay</p>	<p>All of the above, noting that in self-care there is a need to protect against the sun</p> <p>Knowledge of how to maintain quality</p> <p>Some first aid knowledge</p> <p>Some knowledge of OH&S</p>	<p>All of the skills and attitudes listed in the left-hand column with an emphasis on OH&S</p> <p>Basic literacy and numeracy skills</p> <p>Team work and communication skills</p> <p>Forklift ticket and truck licences</p> <p>Specialised skills, e.g. spraying, pruning</p> <p>Ability to accept specific requirements of new task</p>

Note: OH&S = occupational health and safety

The following two sections discuss the training and learning activity in the two regions under the headings of learning on the job and structured training. Structured training activity is planned and has pre-determined content and learning outcomes. This contrasts with informal learning where learning depends to a large extent on chance—for example on the training skills of a mentor-worker—and there is no systematic checking that certain content has been covered. All accredited training is structured training, as are planned induction sessions for new workers.

Learning on the job

For seasonal workers, most learning is on the job, much of it informal, as needed, and non-accredited. Generally workers are given instructions by their employer or a supervisor, and then left to get on with the job. The quality of the instructions and the degree of follow-up vary considerably from one property to another, and, as a result, workers often support and learn from each other—if they are on wages.

Instruction and learning from peers are the most common sources of information and learning. On the Wide Bay–Burnett farms supervisors would spend the first hour or so with a first-time picker explaining what was required—for example sizes and colours of tomatoes. This was followed up with occasional checking over the next few days. The verbal inductions generally included

information about occupational health and safety, site-specific requirements and, where appropriate, hygiene issues relating to product quality. The follow-up is necessary because ‘there’s a lot to remember’, as this supervisor explains:

Training, well it’s basically just pick it up as you go. It doesn’t matter what the job is, you can’t explain everything to everyone in the first ten minutes, you can give them a basic induction which we do anyway, don’t stick your fingers in there, make sure you turn it off, sort of thing like that, show them where the toilets are, the exits, the hot water system, because we have hot water there, we have compressed air there, explain about the floor, get too much [product] on the floor it becomes very slippery ... basic things like that. And then they won’t remember it all tomorrow so then gradually just remind them and gradually, they get used to the different system and they learn.

Where follow-up was structured and consistent, workers reported that they learnt the job thoroughly and product quality was generally much better. In other instances, follow-up and support were not provided. One seasonal worker, for example, was given a few minutes instruction at the beginning of the day and then left to work alone. The job required more than one worker, and so, with the permission of the farmer, she organised friends to work with her, becoming the ‘expert’ after one day’s work with the product. Alternatively, workers might receive a quick ten minute instruction session from the farmer, and are then left to get on with the work. In these cases, support from peers becomes critical. This was only possible where workers were on wages, as piecework is structured to encourage each person to work as quickly as they can in order to earn as much as they can in the given time frame. Consequently, piecework generally results in every person looking after themselves, with little opportunity for teamwork.

Feedback from peers provides information about product size and quality and picking technique:

I hadn’t picked corn before and some guys had and they’d say ‘Look you’re leaving too much you’ve got to go down smaller’. So you know you get the idea and now I’m starting to say the same thing to the newer pickers ... and I found that in most properties that I’ve worked on. You know the cocky will just spend ten minutes with you and showing you and then away you go.

However, the quality of the feedback received is dependent on the skills of the worker providing the feedback and on the worker’s skills in seeking and receiving feedback, as explained by this young worker:

It mainly depends on how much interest you’ve got in the job. If you’re interested in doing a good job then you’ll ask more questions. And there are some pretty bad seasonal workers around, but if you’ve got someone good to stand next to I mean you can have all the information you need in the one day.

Understanding the employer’s point of view assists with motivation and the quality of the work. As this experienced worker explains, the consequences of not meeting requirements have an impact on wages:

It doesn’t require a lot of training, what you need is experience. You can’t just walk into a field and say ‘I can pick this’ ... you need guys that are willing to sit there, spend ... say three weeks, to learn how the job is done, the size of the product the farmer wants, the type of product that the farmer wants, so that when he sends our product out he’s going to get money for it. But as the money he gets for the product is your wages, you can’t send shit product out, or he doesn’t get paid ... I worked for [Name] Seafoods as well, and I’ve seen a load come back because they’ve rejected it.

Some larger workplaces in both regions supplemented verbal induction and instruction with written procedure manuals. While this could be expected to reduce the risks associated with the potentially variable quality of peer induction, written manuals are not necessarily consulted. The

fact that manuals are not designed to take account of the low literacy skills of many workers along with workplace culture are reasons for this, as in these workers' factory:

Procedures, there are procedures in work instructions at each workstation, that are never used. Anybody, everyone has access to the work instructions and the procedures which is usually, well on the caulif [cauliflower], what would it be, 40 or 50 pages of instructions and procedures ... you are told at your induction that there's procedures ... And those procedures are available for everyone to look at but nobody does ... because they are written in such hard language.

Employers interviewed expected to provide on-the-job training for their workers, particularly in relation to the specifications for the product that they will be dealing with. One of the reasons that there has to be on-the-job training is that every enterprise has different practices, is producing for different customers and has different technology. For many, the short seasons for picking mean they need to have people work-ready quickly. As well, there is a 'knack' to seemingly simple tasks like cutting broccoli. Something that is automatic is difficult to pull apart and explain to others; it is not easy to teach these psychomotor skills if you are an employer who is not performing a task regularly. For these reasons, employers deliberately used more-experienced workers to train newcomers:

Induction, we used to have it over two days but we found that the people weren't retaining the information so we reduced it to one day ... There's just so much information like we're giving them all the rules and the regulations and the occupational health and safety, and hygiene and sanitation, quality and its just too much information for them to remember ... So what we do is we try and meet them on their first day and pair them up wherever we can with an experienced person, that doesn't always work out as well as we would like because they could end up on any shift, anywhere.

On-the-job learning matches the learning preferences of the vast majority of seasonal workers interviewed for practical, hands-on learning. Many of the more experienced seasonal workers enjoy their jobs and are keen to learn. They have chosen seasonal work because it is physical and practical, and prefer a similar learning style: they like to learn by doing.

I've been doing seasonal work on and off for 13 years. Most work I've done is picking the tomatoes, potatoes, corn, oranges, apples. The work I find very interesting. I like working outdoors, and I find it very easy, you don't have to use much brain power to do the job and you know you learn a lot too.

Regional stakeholders and some employers saw advantages in supplementing informal on-the-job learning with some structured training, which may or may not be linked to the formal training system.

Structured training

Structured training activity for seasonal workers in the two regions focused on the same areas as informal learning: workplace health and safety and technical skills needed for a quality product. The bulk of structured activity arranged or funded by employers in both regions for seasonal workers was non-accredited. Many of the employers, however, funded accredited training for their permanent employees.

There was more accredited training in the agriculture and horticulture industry in Wide Bay–Burnett than in Circular Head. The emerging hospitality and tourism industry in Circular Head is engaging with accredited training for seasonal workers, including cleaners and customer service workers. Table 2 sets out the structured training that is delivered in each region, according to who arranges or initiates the training.

Table 2: Structured training for seasonal workers

Region	Training arranged or funded by employers	Other training relevant to seasonal work arranged by industry or region	Other recent training participation by seasonal workers
Circular Head	<p>Technical/practical job-specific skills: picking, packing (non-accredited)</p> <p>On-the job health and safety induction (non-accredited)</p> <p>Certificates II and III in Hospitality</p>	<p>Business and Employment Centre arranged: Seafood processing, fire fighting, customer service training for tourism, workplace health and safety, first aid, forklift</p> <p>TAFE Annex arranged: Tourism and hospitality, women's course, computer courses (all accredited)</p>	<p>Computer courses (accredited and non-accredited)</p> <p>Diploma in agriculture (accredited)</p>
Wide Bay–Burnett	<p>Workplace health and safety induction (accredited and non-accredited)</p> <p>First aid certificate</p> <p>Communication training (non-accredited)</p> <p>Quality system training (non-accredited)</p> <p>Forklift and truck licence training</p> <p>Chemical handling (part of accredited qualification)</p> <p>Supervisor/management training (non-accredited)</p> <p>Technical/practical job-specific skills: picking, packing, chain saw operation, computer management system (most non-accredited)</p> <p>Certificates in agriculture and horticulture (I to III)</p>	<p>Generic workplace health and safety induction training by recruitment agency (non-accredited) and registered training organisation (short course, part of accredited qualification)</p> <p>Generic fruit picking training by recruitment agency (non-accredited)</p> <p>Skills passport (accredited) arranged by Dalby Agricultural College (Dalby Agricultural College 2003)</p>	<p>Basic computer and internet</p> <p>Emergency response (e.g. fire fighting)</p> <p>Certificate II in Horticulture</p>

Note: TAFE = technical and further education

Employer access and participation

Employers used structured training for seasonal workers because of legal obligations and to improve the quality of their product. The cost of training relative to the returns and ease of accessing relevant training by external providers were major determinants of employer participation in structured training.

Employers arranged for training required by regulation for seasonal workers—for example, for forklift driving licences and chemical handling. In Queensland, pickers are legally required to have some workplace safety training. Queensland employers spoke of their legal obligation to provide a safe workplace and their concern that their workers may engage in unsafe work practices—for example because of personal circumstances or attitudes. An induction session focusing on workplace health and safety issues was a common employer response to workplace safety risks in both regions. The employers ran most of these induction sessions. Recruitment agencies and industry bodies are actively promoting occupational health and safety training to employers. Where employers used an employment agency to provide employers, the agency provided basic induction training as part of the contract. While some large employers are well aware of the benefits of this training for their businesses as well as their workers, many smaller employers in both regions are yet to be convinced the benefits outweigh the costs. The largest recruitment agency for seasonal workers in Wide Bay–Burnett had developed a workplace safety induction for the fruit and vegetable industry, but only two growers, both large, required workers to do the induction.

Larger employers see the value in, and use of, structured training even though it may not be accredited training. One Circular Head employer describes their training for seasonal workers:

It's packaged, it's pretty good actually, like for instance in our trim area in our potato area ... it's only a couple of hours but it's fairly detailed training program that they have to go through and get assessed, have them fill out a questionnaire, the full works there ... and of course it's the same in our packing area, because it's more skills required, there's a training package that goes with that, as well.

There are excellent examples of providers in both regions who customised training to suit individual workplaces, as in the case of this Tasmanian provider:

A significant amount of [the trainer's] early time on a site is about shadowing, it's roaming around talking to people about what they do, watching process, it's watching the milk coming through the truck, what happens to it, who fills in what, what kinds of documentation is written, what that looks like so that by the time we actually even begin to do any pre-assessment activities or assessment, [the trainer] knows that job inside out and upside down ... it's about us knowing what we're doing so that our assessment and training approaches are relevant and rigorous and valid.

Training is an investment that delivers benefits over time. Seasonal workers are a mobile group, particularly in the Wide Bay–Burnett region. Employers are reluctant to invest in workers who may be with them for only a few days, or even a single season. A regional/industry approach to training in that region has encouraged fruit and vegetable growers to train seasonal workers. As workers move around the region, all employers benefit from a pool of skilled labour. A state government grant accessed by a fruit and vegetable growers' cooperative in Wide Bay–Burnett has helped make the cost of training more closely match the benefits employers receive from their training investment:

All the employers paid for was the cost of the staff member's time which in a lot of cases was one or two days, so that's a big cost, but at least we didn't have to pay for the training on top of that time, and also while they were at training you've got to employ a person to fill in for them, so really you are paying for two people ... and that really made it a lot easier for us to justify training because as you know these seasonal staff are going to be gone tomorrow if the mood takes them. So to put a lot of money into training them is a really big risk. And for example with that training ... done last year, I would say 65–70% of those staff we trained no longer work here, now they might come back. But that's the other thing they do, if they slide around the district, they get annoyed with one farmer so they go off for another one for three months and then they are back, they might come back, excellent when they do they've got those pieces of paper ... It really had a big impact on growers, [they are] starting to see the benefits.

Worker access and participation

Many of the seasonal workers interviewed have a desire for learning, although they do not refer to their acquisition of knowledge as learning. They speak with enthusiasm about the life cycle of the product they are working with. Their preference is for practical learning situations on the job. Consistent with a generally low level of formal education, they do not like to sit in classrooms and are not adept at learning from written text. Very low literacy levels cause low self-esteem, as this employer explains:

The big [issue] with the seasonal workers, not the ones that are pretty permanent or regular, is the reading and writing skills, I think that is just so important, and it's such a barrier, and more than just the fact that they can't read something, but the emotional issue that they have with that, the lack of confidence.

Only a handful of the seasonal workers interviewed had participated in training that was not arranged by their employer or recruitment agency as a part of their seasonal work. Cost of training, childcare and the travel involved in accessing training are all barriers for seasonal workers. Attitude

and previous negative experiences in the education system are further barriers to participation. Many of the workers do not see the point of any training even if it is directly work related and at no cost to the worker, as this recruitment agency finds:

We do deliver workplace health and safety inductions for one of our growers. When you get the people in you can tell they think it's a big waste of time because as far as they are concerned the workplace health and safety, it's not their problem, it's someone else's problem.

Even seasonal workers who have chosen to participate in self-sponsored structured training prefer on-the-job learning for their seasonal work. This seasonal worker is completing a Certificate II in Horticulture through distance study (not sponsored by his employer) but prefers the informal on-the-job learning that his employer provides for his pruning work:

Basically you just learn from your supervisor and I probably think that's one of the best ways to learn it, because you know its not something that you can go and learn at say TAFE or something, because different varieties of trees require totally different pruning.

Summarising training needs for seasonal work

The kinds of training needed by seasonal workers depends on which of these four groups the worker falls into:

- ✧ less experienced seasonal workers who use seasonal work to help them achieve a goal; for example, students, backpackers, and those saving for a one-off expense such as retired people saving for a new car—this group are termed 'temporary workers with income motivation'
- ✧ less experienced seasonal workers who have a low motivation to work, usually accompanied by low levels of generic skills—this group are unlikely to stay the duration of a given seasonal job and are termed 'temporary workers with low motivation'
- ✧ less experienced seasonal workers who expect to continue in seasonal work, either moving from job to job and/or returning to the same job each season—this group are termed 'aspiring seasonal workers'
- ✧ those experienced seasonal workers who see a career in seasonal work as, for example, informal trainers of new workers or supervisors of seasonal labour—this group is termed 'career seasonal workers'.

As well, we have identified some training needs for employers of seasonal workers, which are added to the training needs of seasonal workers in table 3.

Table 3: Training for seasonal work

Temporary workers: income motivation	Temporary workers: low motivation	Aspiring seasonal workers	Career seasonal workers	Employers of seasonal workers
OH&S relevant to job, preferably formal training	OH&S relevant to job, preferably formal training	OH&S relevant to all intended industries of employment, formal training	Updates on OH&S relevant to all industries of employment, formal training	Best practice re OH&S in industry, implications of legislation and insurance arrangements
Technical skills for job including for quality product, usually informal training	Technical skills for job including for quality product, usually informal training	Technical skills for job including for quality product, preferably formal training	Updates on technical practices, e.g. result of new technology or work practices Specialised skills, e.g. chemical handling, fork lift driving, formal training	Skill development implications of new technology and quality-driven work practices

Temporary workers: income motivation	Temporary workers: low motivation	Aspiring seasonal workers	Career seasonal workers	Employers of seasonal workers
	Attitudinal and generic skill requirements of the job, e.g. reliability and teamwork, usually informal training	Some workers would benefit from formal work skills training	Basic training and assessment skills, front line management skills, conflict resolution; preferably formal training	People management skills, basic training and assessment skills
	Workers may benefit from formal basic literacy and work skills training	Some workers would benefit from formal basic literacy and numeracy training	Some workers would benefit from formal literacy and numeracy training	Planning and negotiating training, including collaboratively
Formal recognition of current skills	Formal recognition of current skills	Formal recognition of current skills	Formal recognition of current skills	Formal recognition of current skills

Note: OH&S = occupational health and safety

Access to information about training for workers and employers is dependent on the extent and nature of the networks that individuals and groups are involved with. The following section describes these networks in each of the two regions in this study.

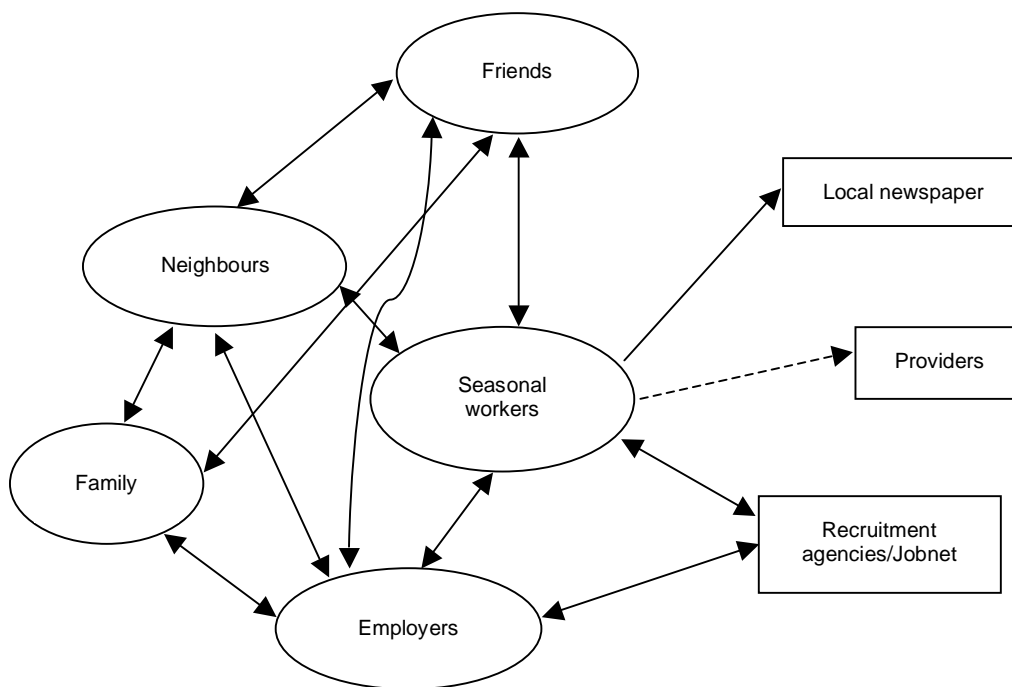
Networks

As a step toward understanding the question ‘what roles can regional industry and government personnel play in developing a “community of practice” to address training needs for seasonal workers’, the following network diagrams have been included. These diagrams map the typical networking that takes place and provide information about the richness or otherwise of networking. Networking is a prerequisite for effective regional development (see for example ABS 1997; Keeble et al. 1998; OECD 1999).

Seasonal workers

Seasonal workers in both regions have rich horizontal, within-region networks, often learning about work through other seasonal workers they meet on a job, an employer or through friends, family or neighbours. They also learn about work through the local newspaper and recruitment and Jobnet agencies. Links with providers are more tenuous, as indicated by the dotted line in figure 1. Of the seasonal workers interviewed, it is those who work for wages rather than pieceworkers (particularly the gunners—very fast competent workers) who are more likely to seek out training that may increase their chances of work. Younger workers and those who had some contact with the tourism industry were also more likely to seek out training. Some employers do not consider requests for employment and redirect enquiries to a designated employment agency. For seasonal workers looking for work this means there is no longer a direct link between them and these employers, unless later employed.

Figure 1: Typical networks for seasonal workers



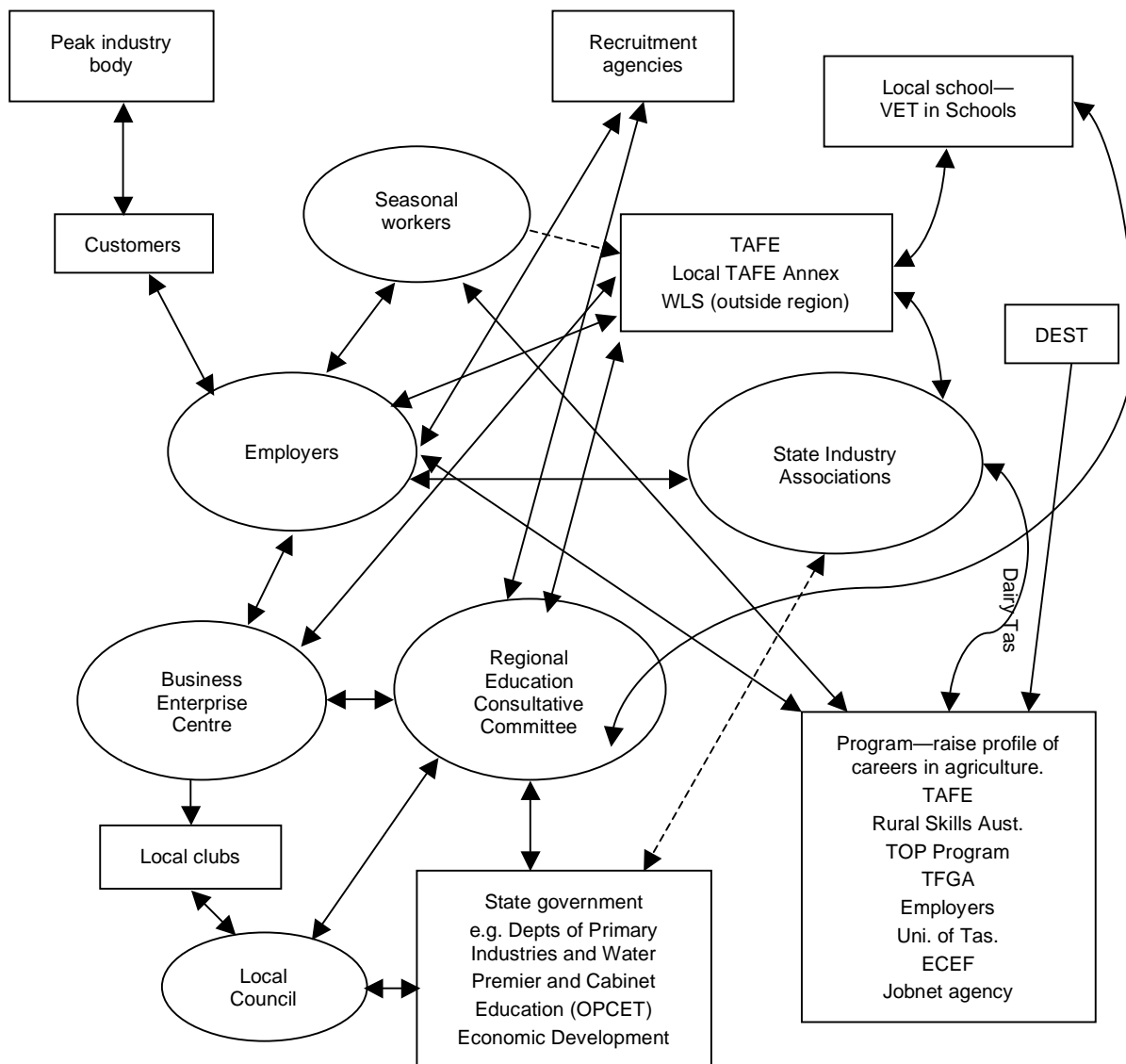
Employers and stakeholders in Circular Head

Circular Head has extensive networking and infrastructure for interactions around employment, education and training; however, these networks are under-utilised in relation to training for seasonal work. Through the state government partnership arrangements, the region has established an Education Consultative Committee with representatives from local government, training providers, local schools, regional Department of Education personnel, Office of Post Compulsory Education, technical and further education (TAFE), and the Department of Economic Development. The local council plays an active role in supporting the development of its community, and has a strong interest in education and training and business development. The number of training providers in this region is limited.

The small size of the region means that the number of training providers in the region is limited, as are organisations that may provide motivation or access to information about training. There is a TAFE Annexe, with the nearest regional TAFE campus being in Burnie, which is more than an hour's drive away over narrow, winding roads. This is a barrier to training in terms of the cost of transport and the time required to travel, including for childcare arrangements. The Workplace Learning Services unit, which delivers the Workplace English Language and Literacy program, and is located in the regional TAFE campus, contributes to servicing the training needs of enterprises in the Circular Head region. Some employers were members of, and active in, their relevant industry association. The Business Enterprise Centre provides advice to businesses in the region and serves as a networking hub. State government personnel are generally situated in Burnie. There are two recruitment agencies based in Smithton, the major centre in Circular Head.

As figure 2 indicates, the networking is quite rich, involving both horizontal and vertical, out of region, linkages. However, despite the existing networking, a forum on training for seasonal work held in the region as part of this study identified considerable gaps in information flow relating to the training needs of seasonal workers and possible training arrangements. Seasonal workers are isolated from recruitment and training institutions, have limited access to the formal VET system, and few have links with recruitment agencies.

Figure 2: Circular Head networks of employers and stakeholders

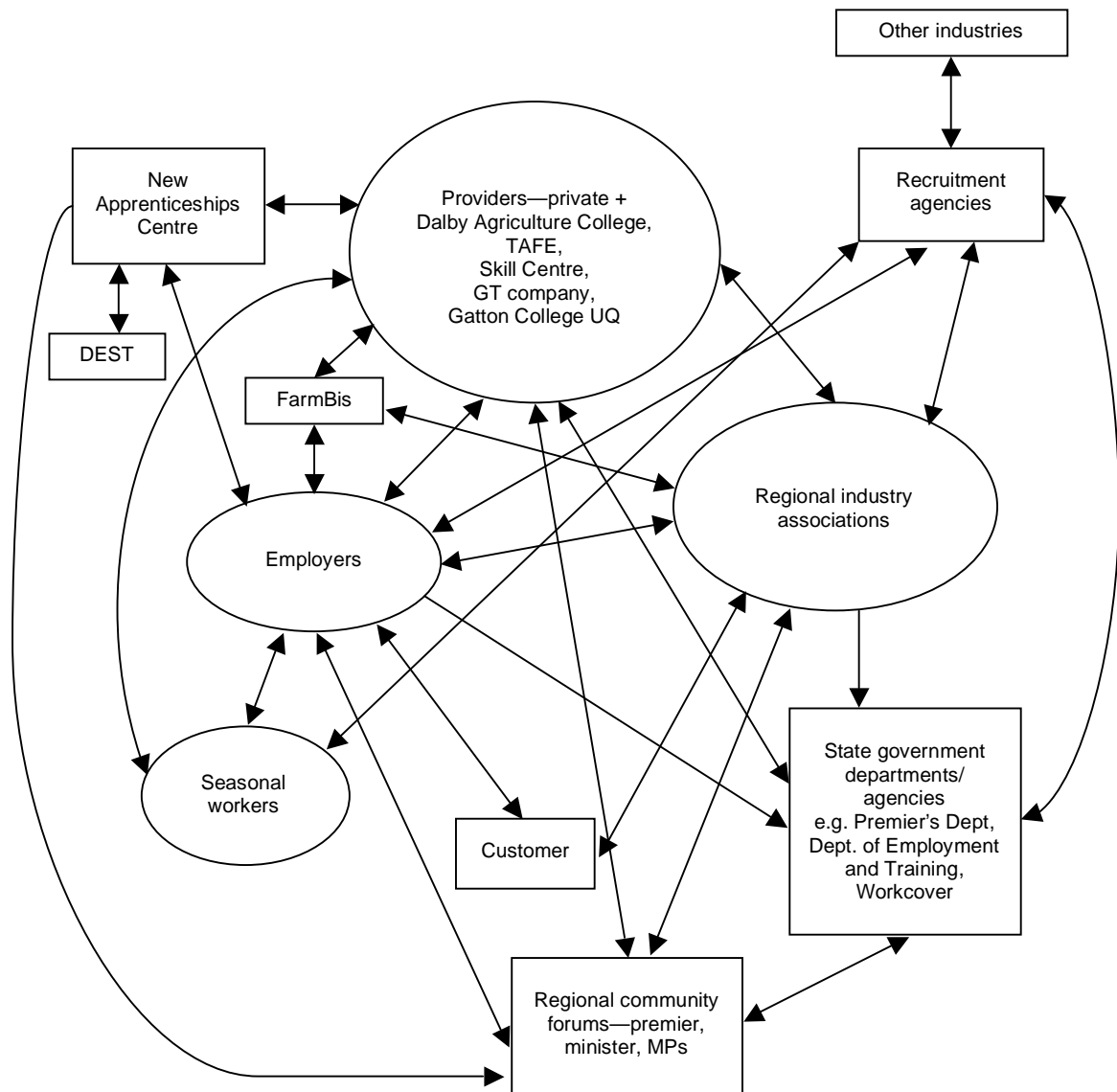


Note: DEST = Department of Education, Science and Training; TFGA = Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association; OPCET = Office of Post Compulsory Education and Training; WLS = Workforce Learning Services; TOP = Targeting our Productivity Program, ECEF = Enterprise and Career Education Foundation

Employers and stakeholders in Wide Bay–Burnett

In Wide Bay–Burnett, a much larger region than Circular Head, there was also extensive networking with both horizontal and excellent vertical linkages to outside the region (see figure 3). Data from this region did not include small growers, but larger growers gave examples of providing formal training to workers and inviting nearby growers to take part, thereby sharing resources. In this region there are a greater number of training providers, both public and private, than in Circular Head. The regional industry infrastructure was strong, with two members of the local fruit and vegetable cooperative being part of the Regional Community Forum, which provided direct contact with the premier, ministers and members of parliament and, through them, state government departments. As a result of these connections, a dialogue was established between the industry associations and government departments to address problems and develop solutions. Regional Community Forums are a part of the Queensland State Government’s Smart State Policy Initiative. This region operated more as a regional industry cluster than in Circular Head. The Skills Passport, discussed in the following chapter, is an outcome of regional networking that gives seasonal workers in Wide Bay–Burnett access to the formal VET system.

Figure 3: Wide Bay–Burnett networks of employers and stakeholders



Note: DEST = Department of Education, Science and Technology; UQ = University of Queensland; GT = group training

Summary

Many seasonal workers choose this type of work, as it provides flexibility and control over their lives; others work at seasonal work to earn an income to assist their studies, or as a temporary means of gaining an income. Decisions about seasonal work are affected by the ability to make and afford childcare arrangements and access to transport.

Seasonal workers, particularly those who have chosen this lifestyle, prefer informal, on-the-job learning, especially learning-by-doing learning, often relying (as does the employer) on experienced peers as a source of learning. Waged workers have the opportunity to learn as they work; however, pieceworkers, particularly gunners (fast, competent workers), have no interest in learning or teaching others, as it is time away from earnings. This finding was consistent across both regions. Regional differences were evident in the needs and opportunities for formal training, with the larger Wide Bay–Burnett region having greater access.

Networks of employers and other regional stakeholders are indicative of information flows, and are strong in both regions. It is notable that seasonal workers lack access to information from institutions or individuals that can provide information about training and employment opportunities—that is, vertical networks. The implications of networks and the different outcomes for each region will be discussed in the following chapter.

Key actions and relationships

Introduction

This chapter develops the descriptive information discussed in the previous chapter. The focus is on factors that enhance and/or inhibit the use of structured training to meet the needs of seasonal workers and their employers, and the roles regional industry and government personnel play in meeting the training needs of seasonal workers. Following a discussion of the enhancers for on-the-job learning and formal training there is an analysis of regional networking that considers regional structures and collaborative infrastructure.

Encouraging on-the-job learning and formal training

Motivations and prompts for training

Prompts for learning on and off the job include legislation relating to workplace health and safety, quality assurance and product quality feedback processes, and work organisation, including supervision arrangements. Legislative and quality assurance requirements motivate many employers to learn themselves, and then go on to establish arrangements for their workers to learn on the job. Many employers and workers do not explicitly recognise this as training; rather it is just part of the job. Other employers are made aware of the desirability of training, usually by industry bodies and/or recruitment agencies.

Legislative and quality assurance requirements also prompt recruitment agencies, training providers, industry bodies and some larger employers to arrange appropriate structured training. Figure 4 illustrates that the provision of formal training is facilitated by providers being flexible in their place, time and style of delivery, and having a good knowledge of the enterprise and the industry. This knowledge then allows the provider to customise training to meet the needs of the employer and suit the learning needs of seasonal workers. Subsidies to employers to assist with costs facilitate the provision of formal training. Seasonal workers very rarely seek out work-related training for themselves, except in some cases where training is clearly linked to a career path.

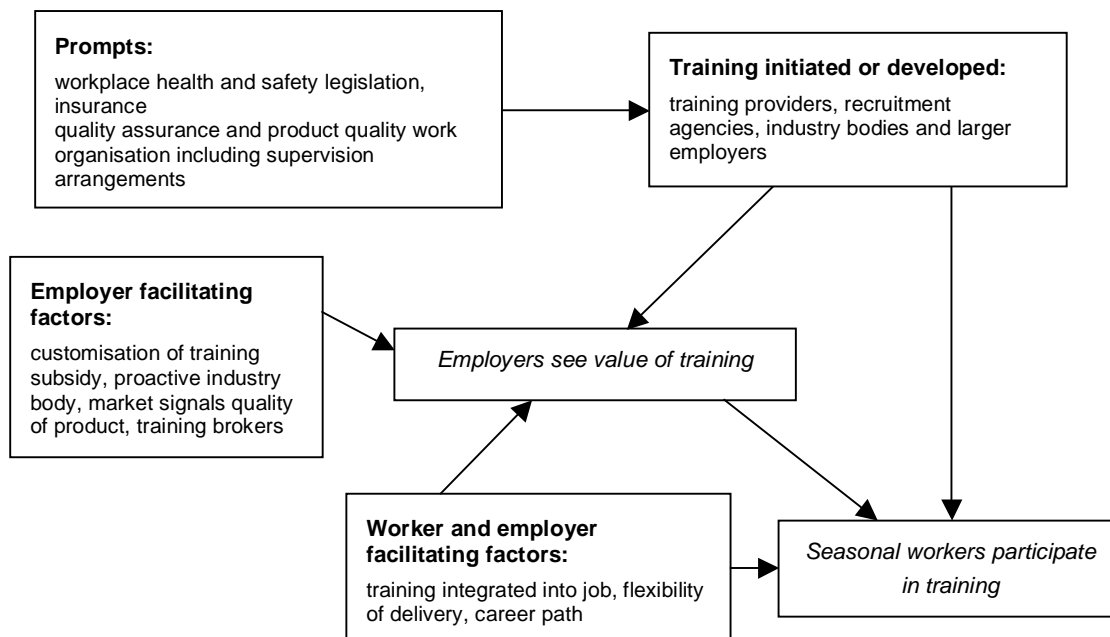
Following figure 4 is a vignette that illustrates the process that has led to one seasonal worker participating in several structured training programs from the points of view of Gladys, the seasonal worker, and her employer. The vignette points out that not all seasonal workers are base grade, low skilled workers. There is a need to train supervisors, who are often also seasonal workers.

Several common employer motivators for encouraging learning and training are shown in the vignette. Quality assurance processes encourage learning, although often the learning is informal and on the job. Where teamwork is required, the organisation of the work encourages technical and generic skill development, and employers are encouraged to foster the development of communication and other people management skills.

This is linked to pay arrangements—hourly hire rates or piecework. The former tends to encourage training, and the latter discourages training since workers and employers claim they have no need for training. This is the claim made by ‘professional’ seasonal workers in the fruit industry. New workplace health and safety legislation has been an impetus for employers to ensure that their

workers have the necessary certification, and for stakeholders such as industry organisations and providers to organise this training.

Figure 4: Prompts for training



A vignette: Gladys and Donald

This is the story of Gladys, who is a supervisor in a vegetable packing shed, and her employer, Donald, for whom she has worked every season for the last ten years. Gladys is the shed quality assurance officer, first aid officer and workplace health and safety officer. She conducts induction sessions for new seasonal workers. Gladys left school at the end of first year high school.

Gladys talks of informal learning on the job ‘all the time’ as well as learning from fellow workers, her supervisor and feedback reports on the quality of the produce when it reaches wholesalers:

I like to learn on the job; yes I think you learn more.

Gladys has done a lot of learning for her work. Some of it has been through structured training—much of it accredited; she has done first aid, workplace health and safety training, an Australian Quarantine Inspection Service training course, and a course on the computerised quality assurance packing system used in the shed. She liked the practical parts of her training courses—things she can use ‘straight away’. Although Gladys could be considered an experienced and successful participant in structured training, she does not consider structured training unless it is directly and immediately applicable:

I’d love to be able to do that [learn to type fast] so then I’d be able to use the computer a lot better than I can, but we’re learning.

Interviewer: So you might like to do computer training?

Gladys: Well, see we’re not doing a great deal of it, so there really wouldn’t be much point, we’re sort of just learning as we go along.

Gladys's learning journey has been prompted by changes in work practices in agriculture and horticulture. These changes are in response to market demands for quality produce, including food safety (Australian Quarantine Inspection Service course and learning from feedback on product quality from the wholesaler); expectations for a safe working environment, manifested in government regulations (first aid and workplace health and safety courses); and changes in technology (computerised quality assurance packing system).

Gladys's employer operates a family farm that employs up to 200 people at the peak of the harvesting and packing season. Unlike many smaller employers in the two regions, Donald is enthusiastic about training as a means of managing change. Donald uses accredited and non-accredited training, depending on the level of skill needed to do the job. He notes that:

Training is a high cost and a very large section of our business, we're training all the time ... we can provide the training that's necessary for [seasonal workers] to carry out their work, at different levels. If it's a picking job, that's fairly simple and we're doing that on an ongoing daily basis, the packers are the same, and for any training of a technical sense there's probably two levels of that, we have a train the trainer [informal on-the-job training and learning], and then if that person is required to know more about their duties we will send them off for special training.

The recruitment agency that supplies seasonal workers for Donald's farm runs customised induction training on the farm. The induction covers how to perform job-specific tasks such as picking fruit and workplace health and safety. Donald pays the cost of the induction. He is well aware that the training he provides benefits his workers and other employers in the industry. His seasonal workers have a career path of:

... about five or six or seven different levels of pay rates for different skills ... they have to have their accreditation to move up ... Everyone has accepted that training and accreditation certificates are all tangible benefits that they can take to the next employer to better themselves, bottom line probably to get a better pay rate and maybe more of a challenging job.

Donald explains that FarmBis—a government program that subsidises management and related training in primary industry—has been a major factor in the farm's adoption of new technologies, namely the computerised supply chain management system that includes the quality assurance packing system that Gladys has learnt to use. FarmBis has made the cost of training for the new equipment and systems affordable for Donald. The flexibility of the VET system that facilitates customised workplace training is another important factor, allowing training that is immediately applicable, again as in the example of the computerised supply chain management system.

Customised training

Because employers and seasonal workers value training that is on the job, and on an as-needs basis, training needs to be customised and highly targeted. Some stories told in this study were of training delivered in a standard format, during times that suited the trainer and in very teacher-centred formats. In other cases, only a whole qualification is offered, as this reflects the requirements of VET funding. As discussed in the following Skills Passport vignette, seasonal workers want relevant units, although they may, over time, work towards a whole qualification. The lack of career pathways in the industry is a barrier to the valuing of training.

The following example, in contrast, tells of highly customised provision by a TAFE team—Workplace Learning Services—that provided training for a large food processor in Circular Head. The provider's philosophy had two planks: first, to improve work practices, and so benefit the employer, and second, access and equity for workers.

A vignette: Underneath the left armpit and flexibility

One of the trainers explains how they made sure they understood the specific work practices before they delivered training or developed assessment items:

We wrote a Sunday night cold start-up procedure that had never been written in the workplace before, ever. And all I did was document what was in, oh, three people's heads; they did it on each shift.

I call it being underneath the [worker's] left armpit. I stand, I document what they do, and then when I've got it I look at it and then I'll give it to somebody else who is reasonably proficient at it, the reason I use someone proficient is so that if they've made a mistake they'll know to self-correct, and so they'll do exactly what I've written down there and verify that yep this is right, nup I do this before I do this. And so you go and re-word-process it, change it and put it in and then just check.

They are able to use their detailed understanding of the work to suggest improvements to work practices, and thus increase productivity:

Linking the seasonal workers and the standard operating procedures or work instructions is probably the critical area where we can say and we have evidence to show that we do improve work practices ...

Workplace Learning Services understands that many of the workers whom they train have low literacy skills and, thus, is flexible in delivery and assessment:

Our assessment procedures, our documentation, emphasises that access issues ... If the standard doesn't require someone to write things down then we would ensure that that never happens, our assessment procedures are all based around verbal communications, about learning the job first.

Workplace Learning Services caters for the workers' needs beyond the skills they require for their current job by making sure the training they provide links to the national VET system even though the training is funded by Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL), and not mainstream VET system funding:

Our belief in access and equity is that everybody in the workplace should have a right to training to be able to access training and assessment and get nationally recognised through training package qualifications.

Costs, subsidies and alternative funding sources

Seasonal workers, employers and stakeholders, consider the cost of training as a barrier. As one employer explained, the 'beauty' of receiving a subsidy for training means employers do not pay for the off-the-job training; instead they pay for replacement workers and wages of workers training off the job. Where training is provided on the job, costs for employers are minimised. For workers on low wages or unemployment benefits, paying for training, the cost of transport to attend off-the-job training and childcare costs are all impediments to accessing training. Confidence to access training and the need to explore if they would enjoy a different form of work are also issues.

The training observed in the two regions drew upon a number of government funding sources, in addition to the VET system funding that flows through state training authorities such as purchase agreement hours to training providers. Funding sources included Workplace English Language and Literacy, as in the vignette above, Queensland Regional Communities, the joint Australian–State Government FarmBis program, accessed by Donald above, and funding for training for the unemployed, managed by Jobnet providers.

Individual seasonal workers and employers, especially small employers requiring only five or ten workers for a few weeks each year, are not well placed to negotiate the complex web of funding for training. Funding that could develop skills for seasonal work is available in industry, training and employment programs, and at Australian Government and state government levels, with each program having different eligibility criteria. Regional grower groups and FarmBis coordinators were important ‘training brokers’ in the two regions. They supplied information about training to employers and were a point of contact and source of information about training needs for providers; they were part of the regions’ interactional infrastructure.

Accessing funds requires both horizontal networks and vertical networks; a good example is the Bundaberg Fruit and Vegetable Growers Horticultural Skills Development Project. This project provided funding of over \$220 000 for workers to gain formal qualifications, largely through recognition of current competence. A total of 548 people completed 120 different courses, including farm safety, first aid, forklift tickets and chemical accreditation (Queensland Government Department of the Premier and Cabinet 2002). Workers accessing this training and/or recognition of current competence included both ‘permanent’ workers and seasonal workers. The project was implemented through a group arrangement involving a group training company, skills centre and TAFE. The project was a result of two large growers (who were active members of their industry association) being members of the Queensland Government Ministerial Regional Community Forum. This provided growers and their industry association with direct access to members of parliament, ministers and the premier, and tapped the Bundaberg Fruit and Vegetable Growers into a state government program.

The state government grant accessed by the fruit and vegetable growers’ cooperative has helped make the cost of training more closely match the benefits employers receive from their training investment. The training provided under this grant was relevant, flexible, appropriately delivered and convenient for employers and their seasonal workers:

[The] beautiful thing about that fruit and vegie project is that they structured it so that it was 99% on farm, the trainers did their homework on the industry and made sure the topics they covered were relevant, and by doing it on farm it was less of an inconvenience for us to get staff away and they were out of the classroom environment which generally they don’t like.

In contrast, the small farmers in Circular Head were not aware that there were any resources (the VET system or other resources) that could help them upskill their seasonal workers.

Summarising barriers and enhancers to training

The discussion above can be summarised into barriers and enhancers of training for seasonal workers, as in table 4.

Table 4: Barriers and enhancers of training

Barriers	Enhancers
<p>Inappropriate training delivery, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ delivery of a standard package ✦ delivery of whole qualification ✦ lack of industry or enterprise-specific customisation ✦ classroom delivery. <p>Access barriers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ for workers—costs of training, transport and childcare costs ✦ for all stakeholders, including workers—difficulties of identifying and accessing training, especially from sources outside the region ✦ for employers and other stakeholders—systemic funding arrangements that make it difficult to resource training for seasonal workers. <p>Limited understanding by employers and other regional stakeholders of how structured on-the-job training can be used flexibly to enhance outcomes for enterprises and seasonal workers.</p> <p>Lack of career pathways in seasonal work:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ piecework. <p>Workers who:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ stay in seasonal work for short periods ✦ have poorly developed learning-to-learn skills. 	<p>Collaborative arrangements among regional stakeholders to address the training needs of seasonal workers, their supervisors and employers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ accompanied by strong external networks. <p>On-the-job customised delivery leading to improved work practices, facilitated by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ providers with a deep knowledge of the industry, the employer(s) and the workers ✦ selection of appropriate competencies ✦ recognition of current competence ✦ on-the-job customised delivery. <p>Access to nationally recognised relevant competencies, e.g. chemical handling, fork lift driving, occupational health and safety.</p> <p>Pay structures:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ payment by wages ✦ pay levels structured to training. <p>Employer training orientation, fostered by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ membership of relevant industry association with an interest in training ✦ training participation by employers/managers or supervisors of seasonal workers. <p>External business, policy and legislative factors including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ quality assurance processes, especially with feedback loops ✦ legislative requirements, such as for occupational health and safety ✦ insurance penalties and incentives ✦ accessible funding which can be used to tailor training to meet needs ✦ assistance to cover training costs for seasonal workers and employers.

Encouraging training for seasonal work—key messages

- ✦ Seasonal work is crucial for the many rural regions reliant on seasonal industries such as agriculture, forestry, aquaculture and tourism.
- ✦ The seasonal workforce is diverse and has diverse training needs. Like others marginally attached to the workforce, seasonal workers have difficulty accessing formal training and having their informal learning properly recognised.
- ✦ Much of the training is informal. There is an argument for a more formal approach for those who work for several seasons and make a career of seasonal work, particularly those who are supervisors and informal trainers of other seasonal workers.
- ✦ Barriers to formal training for a section of the workforce include a low commitment to work, unfamiliarity with cooperative and teamwork, and low literacy and numeracy skills.
- ✦ Barriers for employers to providing formal training include a lack of awareness of available training and funding for training and a low value placed on formal training.
- ✦ Funding arrangements are complex and difficult for employers and seasonal workers to negotiate.
- ✦ Enhancers to formal training include training providers with in-depth knowledge of regional industry and enterprises who customise training for particular workplaces and to meet the diverse needs of seasonal workers; and employers who encourage and reward training and good practice.

Regional structures and infrastructure provision

Networking gives access to different perspectives and resources. As discussed in the previous chapter, networks among employers and stakeholders are extensive in both regions, with the Wide Bay–Burnett region accessing more vertical networks than Circular Head. Vertical networks in the Wide Bay–Burnett region provided access to decision makers that resulted in the funding of the Bundaberg Fruit and Vegetable Growers Horticultural Skills Development Project. As a result of the Queensland Government Ministerial Regional Community Forum contacts were made with relevant government departments. Thus, a dialogue has been established where government department personnel contact forum representatives and ask for their input on developing solutions to problems identified through the regional forum initiative. The regional/industry approach to training in Wide Bay–Burnett has encouraged fruit and vegetable growers to train seasonal workers. As workers move around the region, all employers benefit from a pool of skilled labour.

In Circular Head, interactional infrastructure (organisational and physical infrastructure for collaboration) is present. However, it is not as effective in responding to the training needs of the region's seasonal industries. Although there is access to government department personnel, many are regional-based people without sufficient access to the information, resources, authority and power to allocate funds. Employers and industry associations are not well linked to the training interactional infrastructure (Kilpatrick et al. 2002). Thus the vertical networks are not as effective as in Wide Bay–Burnett. Another key difference between the two regions in terms of interactional infrastructure is the activity of industry bodies. As Tasmania is a small state, both geographically and in terms of population, industry associations tend to operate on a statewide basis and sometimes on a 'regional' basis (south, north or north-west). The peak industry body for dairy farmers—Dairy Tas, a subsidiary of the Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association (TFGA)—had gained funding to promote career paths in the dairy industry. This was a state-wide initiative, involving extensive horizontal and vertical networks. The program was piloted in the north-west of the state, including Circular Head. As identified in figure 2, this program involved partnerships between many stakeholders to deliver a program to promote careers in the industry. This program and the Bundaberg fruit and vegetable project indicate that where stakeholders have access to a range of resources and perspectives through networks, there is the potential to deliver outcomes that meet the needs of a region, industry, employers and workers.

The following vignette provides an excellent example of strong vertical and horizontal networking in the Wide Bay–Burnett region. There is effective interactional infrastructure in the region which links seasonal workers, growers, industry associations, government agencies, registered training organisations, educational institutions and recruitment agencies. Actions by Dalby Agricultural College, located outside the region, are significant in linking seasonal workers to the VET system and accredited training.

A vignette: The Skills Passport

The Skills Passport, currently being piloted in a number of regions in Queensland, is a collaboration between Dalby Agricultural College, the Queensland Government, and two industry associations—Queensland Cotton and GrainCorp. It is funded by the Queensland Department of Employment and Training (DET) as part of the Smart State initiative aiming to break the unemployment cycle. The purpose of the Skills Passport is to provide training and recognition of current competencies for seasonal workers through on-the-job training and assessment. As workers undertake training or gain recognition of current competencies, they are issued with a card listing units of competency or, where appropriate, whole courses completed. Training content is linked to the national training packages in agriculture and horticulture.

Dalby College initiated the Skills Passport in response to an agricultural industry facing employment challenges of large numbers of unskilled labour, high staff turnover, an inability to attract young people into the industry and the perception of the lack of a defined career path. ‘These factors have a significant impact on industry performance, financial viability and growth’ (Dalby Agricultural College 2003, p.1). The Skills Passport is flagged as a priority in the Regional Strategic Priorities 2003–04 for Wide Bay–Burnett and several other Queensland regions.

Figure 5: Skills Passport

 <p>Skills Passport</p>  <p>Mary Worker</p>  <p>Student ID: DA99999</p> 	<p>TDTF197A 10/11/2002</p> <p>Follow OHS Procedures</p> <p>TDTD297A 24/03/2003</p> <p>Use Manual Handling Equipment</p>
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The college mapped timing of crop maturation in each region and identified skills sets required to pick, process and pack the crops. Training in skills development covers both generic and specific industry sub-sector skills. Generic workplace skills include an industry overview, occupational health and safety, emergency first aid, work ethic, teamwork and cooperation in the workplace, and industry requirements. Specific workplace skills such as ladder management, load lifting, bag filling ergonomics, tractor operations and handling snips were identified for Wide Bay–Burnett. Other regions growing different crops identify different sets of specific skills.

Working with employers to overcome scepticism and negative past experiences of training, Dalby College identified the need for training to be highly customised and flexible according to changing circumstances. Delivery of the Skills Passport requires partnership arrangements with a range of providers, and varies according to what was available in each region. Dalby has worked closely with TAFE, mentoring highly customised delivery and developing linkages with, for example, local government, community organisations, employers and employer groups, labour hire companies and employees.

Choice of providers is critical to the success of the passport. A Wide Bay–Burnett provider, for example, was selected because of long experience and contacts in the industry, and because the deliverer is well respected by stakeholders. As this provider suggests, acceptance takes time and engagement in the activity:

There was a lot of knockers with it, but we got them in, they came and sat in on a class, and one fella told us he, oh he might stay there till 10 o'clock, but he ended up staying there till the end of the course ... When we started off there was limited acceptance ... and the general feeling was towards the end of it that we'd won them over and they were quite happy to accept it.

Although content reflects what growers want, it is not fixed; as ‘rules and regulations change we are going to have to expand it’. A number of growers have been so impressed with the passport that they now insist that workers must have the passport before they commence work on their properties:

If they haven't got it, the farmer doesn't want them, because they don't have the basics in the workplace health and safety which is very important and they haven't got the basics in picking the fruit.

The passport illustrates the array of linkages and partnership arrangements necessary to meet the training of seasonal workers and the needs of industry. The passport is organised at a state level, but delivery is customised for each region, recognising regional variation and that 'one size does not fit all'. Other Skills Passport-type programs have been discussed in the region but have not yet been able to successfully bring together the network of connections that the Skills Passport has successfully developed.

The apparent importance of regional collaborations and partnerships in facilitating structured, effective training linked to the national VET system suggests it is important to understand how such collaborations are initiated and sustained.

Skill ecosystems

The structure of the work, the size of enterprises in the region, or mix of sizes, client–customer relations between, for example, grower and customer, the extent of regional training infrastructure and legislative requirements are major influences on the extent and effectiveness of learning through structured training. Table 4 uses the skill ecosystem concept to identify differences between the two regions.

Table 5: Wide Bay–Burnett and Circular Head regional skill ecosystems

Skill ecosystem feature	Wide Bay–Burnett region	Circular Head region
Business settings	Large growers, concentrating on one or two major crops Alliances between customer and grower, with growers marketing to niche markets. The feedback loop established between customer and grower assists (e.g. quality assurance) growers and workers learning on the job	Small growers, range of crops and farming activity, some small tourism enterprises and large food processing factories Loose alliance, with very limited feedback between customer and grower
Institutional and policy frameworks	Stakeholders accessed state government initiated community forums and gained funding from state program Well-developed infrastructure of industry bodies, training providers and recruitment agencies accessed Smart State policies and community forums support possibilities Policies that relate to training are dissipated across portfolios	Partnership between local and state government established regional education committee Limited regional institutional frameworks (tend to operate at state level). Tenuous links with state government agencies at lower levels Policies that relate to training are dissipated across portfolios
Modes of engaging labour	Highly mobile seasonal workforce, engaged through recruitment agencies and in some instances at the farm gate	Seasonal workers tend to live and work within the region. Seasonal workers generally engaged at the farm gate
Structure of jobs and level	Need for experienced workers capable of supervising large numbers of seasonal workers	No organised, formal provision of training. Where workers did engage in formal training it was through their own resources
Type of skill formation	On-the-job training, sometimes structured and linked to qualifications, e.g. the Skills Passport	

Wide Bay–Burnett has extended seasons, large growers, and established feedback loops between grower and customer. Stakeholders are well established and operate effectively at the regional level, with good access to decision makers. Policy frameworks that support developing solutions to regional issues are in place. The workforce is highly mobile, skilled workers are required to

‘supervise’, and training is often delivered on the job. This contrasts with Circular Head, where small size is a major limitation to regional access to training programs. The drivers for training are not as well established—for example, most customers are not demanding high quality produce from small producers. Although there is strong collaborative infrastructure, the range and size of training and recruitment agencies reflects the small population base, and there are very limited links to decision makers. There is limited movement of workers in and out of the region, and no organised formal training through employers.

Government policy must have a strategic, coordinated approach across departments and agencies, while ensuring flexibility for regional differences, if the analysis frame of the skill ecosystem is used and it is recognised that regions have localised capabilities, histories and identities (Maskell & Malmberg 1999). Setter and Eddington (2003) highlight the need for an integrated approach:

What is emerging is an understanding of the need to consider skilling and skills issues within the context of economic growth and development, along with the need of enterprises and industries to create competitive advantage; and the realities of industry ‘attractiveness’—or lack of it; labour market regulation; work organisation, job design and the quality of working life. In essence, strategy to address skills shortages must be approached through the integration of work and skills policy. (Setter & Eddington 2003, p.2)

Historically, the approach to identifying training needs has been through identifying skills shortages. This model does not reflect dynamic production processes, evolving relationships and future possibilities. An approach using the skills ecosystem concept provides a framework for developing individuals, industry, region and community using an integrated approach.

Collaborative arrangements among regional stakeholders, coupled with strong external networks, have the potential to put in place programs and initiatives to address the learning and training needs of seasonal workers, their supervisors and employers. Regions need to develop interactional infrastructure that has the ability to recognise changes in skill ecosystems and use this knowledge to facilitate customisation of training to meet regional needs. A collaborative, integrated regional approach to training must be matched by an integrated policy approach to training.

Regional structures and infrastructure provision—key messages

- ✧ Collaborative arrangements among regional stakeholders, including local government, development bodies, industry and employer associations, training providers and labour market agencies, are of critical importance in accessing funding and customised training provision, as are strong external networks.
- ✧ Training brokers assist employers to access training. Trusted training brokers are able to work through specific access issues and ensure training is customised.
- ✧ A collaborative, integrated regional approach to training must be matched by an integrated approach in education and training, employment, recruitment, community development and industry policies.

Regions should plan together to meet regional training needs by, for example:

- ✧ identifying and involving all stakeholder groups within the region, including local government, development bodies, industry bodies, major employers, recruitment and labour market agencies, training providers and unions
- ✧ identifying and involving external stakeholders who may be state industry bodies, state and federal government agencies and training providers who do, or could, deliver training in the region
- ✧ establishing a forum for sharing information to encourage cross-sectoral linkages and sharing of resources
- ✧ collecting data on training needs of seasonal workers, employers, industries and the region
- ✧ identifying internal and external resources, including funding sources

- ✧ building a vision and a plan for regional training
- ✧ putting the plan into action and evaluating progress regularly.

Conclusion

Collaborative arrangements among regional stakeholders have the potential to put in place programs and initiatives to address the learning and training needs of seasonal workers, their supervisors and employers. This study has shown that training must be integrated into industry and community processes and planning at a regional level to ensure that training is beneficial to and accepted by seasonal workers, and employers. Only then can we be reasonably confident that those at the margins of the ‘standard’ workforce, including seasonal workers, will have easy access to the Australian VET system.

The apparent importance of regional collaborations and partnerships in facilitating effective, structured and formal training that is linked to the national VET system suggests it is important to understand how such collaborations are initiated and sustained. Further research is required into the ways in which effective collaborations operate in planning and negotiating training. The role of community and external agents in partnerships deserves further exploration.

Training for seasonal workers must be customised to take account of the skills ecosystem of the region and its industries. In particular, the nature of the industries, needs and characteristics of the businesses in the region, and characteristics of the seasonal workers who work in the region must be considered in the design of training. Training providers must not lose sight of seasonal and other non-standard workers in designing training.

The systemic funding arrangements for training make it difficult for enterprises and other interested organisations—such as recruitment and job placement agencies—to resource training for seasonal workers. There is a diverse and confusing array of funding sources that can be used to facilitate training for seasonal work. Expertise and resources in accessing funding are required. Regions with strong networking arrangements are best placed to tap these funding sources.

A collaborative, integrated regional approach to training must be matched by an integrated policy approach to training. There must be a consistent approach to training in education and training, employment, recruitment, community development and industry policy.

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Seasonal work is crucial for the many rural regions reliant on seasonal industries, such as agriculture, forestry, aquaculture and tourism. This report examines the diverse nature of the seasonal workforce in two locations and the approaches used in their training.

The report finds that the seasonal workforce is diverse and has diverse training needs. Like others marginally attached to the workforce, much of their training is informal. Seasonal workers have difficulty accessing formal training and having their informal learning properly recognised. More formal training approaches are particularly relevant for those making a career of seasonal work. Barriers for employers to formal training include lack of suitable customised training programs to meet regional, employer or individual needs, a lack of awareness of available training, cost, complex funding arrangements, and a low value placed on such training. Enhancers to formal training include employers who encourage and value training for their workforce, using brokers to assist employers to access training, using training providers with in-depth knowledge of regional industry and enterprises to meet the diverse needs of seasonal workers, and legislative requirements.

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