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Primary Industry Management



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Agriculture training and education Spoilt for choice but is it hitting the mark?

As an employer of farm staff in New Zealand we are spoilt for choice for training and education options for new and current employees, with more offerings on the boil. However are they hitting the mark and resulting in the productivity our agriculture sectors aim for?



For many years we have had access to basic training in skills such as riding an all-terrain vehicle or using a chainsaw. These are critical skills for all farm staff to master. Recently, government-led changes have placed greater expectations on industry training organisations and training providers to more clearly align their products and services to industry strategies.

At the same time industry bodies such as Beef + Lamb, the Deer Industry and Young Farmers have recognised the role they need to play in educating farmers if we are to have a productive and sustainable industry. From the days of the Federated Farmers cadet scheme we have seen more technical, farm, business and people management training evolve. Today there are few roles, experience levels or required skills on-farm where an employer is not able to obtain formal training as a stepping stone to meeting the need. The table on the next page highlights the range of education and training options available to prospective and current farm staff.

Lost focus

Most industries would envy us being able to cater for such a large proportion of our workforce. However, while this suggests we are all singing from the same hymn sheet and happily sharing the bus, let us not confuse the offering of numerous education and training options with farmers being able to access a work ready, capable and knowledgeable workforce.

As the options increase, do we move further from the implementation and execution of current knowledge and new skills and more towards ticking another box that we have trained and educated our staff this year? As employers, we have lost a critical focus on ensuring we have full uptake and execution of the basics and core programmes already in place. There is still much work to be done.

The starting point is a shared vision and strategy. The dairy industry is leading the way with their Strategy for Sustainable Dairy Farming 2013–2020. For other sectors, establishing an industry strategy is in progress and we are still a long way from a confident clear direction and alignment of education and training options.

Refinement needed

Results of agricultural education and training efforts in New Zealand are still very variable and our measures of hitting the mark need refining. Qualification achievements are an important measure, but by no means the only one, and for most employers they are well down the list of how they measure the value of training. This is the case even though qualifications are important for the recognition of a course completed, of new learning acquired, and to secure funding from the Tertiary Education Commission.

Training statistics –

- In 2012 almost 1,000 more people working in the dairy sector enrolled in ITO training than in 2011, with 54 per cent of trainees gaining their qualification
- Similar results were achieved in the sheep and beef sector, with 952 trainees enrolled in ITO training in 2012 and 57 per cent gaining their qualification compared with 797 in 2011
- The number of trainees in the wool harvesting industry has been steadily declining over the past few years with 1,455 in 2012 compared with 1,561 in 2011 and only 33 and 39 trainees respectively achieving their qualification.

This is mainly caused by the reduction in sheep numbers, with the consequent significant decline in the number of shearers. Tectra, New Zealand’s largest provider of wool harvesting training, say they are not seeing new entrants to the industry. With fewer new entrants coming into it, the number of trainees progressing through the different levels is reducing.

Our education and training sector in the future needs to produce training which is relevant to the needs of the farmer and is consistent across the country. How can various providers all produce graduates with the same graduate profile on exit? One can be a hands-on programme with trainees living full-time on the farm and out working in the real world, while in another, trainees are lucky to have 10 weeks of practical experience for the whole year.

Training providers and employers both need to recognise what can be achieved within the given timeframe. What does work ready really mean? Talking with providers and farmers there is a clear disagreement within what the graduate is capable of, at all levels of training. Over-promising and under-achieving is not helpful if we are to bridge the gap and have employers and their staff value the qualifications on offer.

Applicants for on-farm roles

Most employers today would agree that it is challenging to find good quality staff for positions in agriculture. This is shown by relatively high agricultural wage inflation since 2008, particularly in the dairy sector. In terms of farm roles, applicants for entry level positions in New Zealand come from two main sources – graduates from the various programmes shown in the table and who are mostly young people or career changers.

All of the programmes after secondary education are operating at full capacity each year and all report an over-subscription for places by more than 50 per cent. This poses the question – have we a problem attracting people into farming, then training and educating them, or is it more a case that we are not catering for the masses wanting to get involved?

In addition, perhaps some farmer employers are their own worst enemy. A number of graduates from these programmes say they struggle to get their first job as they

Farm-based training and education options

Potential and current employers	Training and education available	Future opportunities
School students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NCEA – Agriculture for Years 11-13 • Primary ITO Trade Academy now working with 27 schools • Correspondence courses through Open Polytech and other providers • Young Farmers of NZ, with support from industry bodies, running TeenAg and Agrikids competitions • ‘Food and You’ Career Experience days for 8 to 13-year-olds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More schools offering agriculture via the Trade Academy • Greater numbers participating in existing programmes • Mentoring students expressing an interest in a career in agriculture to help make it a reality
School leavers	Range of options from – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full-time including Landcorp’s Future Farmer, Smedley, Waipaoa, Land Based Training, Telford and Taratahi programmes • Massey and Lincoln Universities – diploma and degree programmes. • Primary ITO Modern Apprenticeship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ITO and providers to spend more time understanding what employers need their entry level applicants to have to be work ready – skills, experience, knowledge of dogs and so on • Recognition of when a trainee is ready to take on new learning – the return on investment for an employer will be nil unless they can apply the training
Career changers	Many of the above cater for career changers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing guidelines for career changers to assist them into the industry • Working with employers to help them recognise the highly valuable transferrable skills this group bring to our industries rather than just focusing on the skills they appear not to have
Farm staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Certificates in Agriculture (Levels 2-5) • Short courses in areas such as rural staff management and effluent management • DairyNZ Career Pathway Tool • Primary ITO farm training plans which identify skill gaps and how to fill them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A workforce capability matrix has been developed with Learning Continuum for the Dairy Industry. Work is being done to develop the same for sheep and beef and other primary industry sectors
Farm owners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DairyNZ, Beef and Lamb NZ, Deer Industry NZ and others run field days and workshops to support information transfer from research to farmers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the sheep and beef sector, a major success has been a pilot project to improve access to subsidised training for farm owners

do not have experience. This is a particular problem for the sheep, beef and deer sectors. As asked earlier, what is it fair for an employer to expect from both the applicant and of any prior training of an entry level graduate?

Applicant characteristics and trends at present show that more women are entering various roles in agriculture and there is an increase in people from other industries looking for the good life on a farm. It goes without saying that bringing an ex-plumber or mechanic into a farm team has benefits. The dairy industry in particular has a third of entry level employees via migrant workers, with Phillipino, Dutch and South African staff adding significant value to their workforce.

Literacy and numeracy

Like most hands-on industries, New Zealand agriculture is not alone in finding that a concerning proportion of applicants and employees have not acquired skills in basic literacy and numeracy. Our education and training sector has invested significantly in establishing programmes to reduce the barriers that literacy and numeracy problems have on learning and the contribution staff make on the farm.

In 2012 the Primary ITO took 6,600 trainees using adult literacy and numeracy assessment. Almost 200 trained mentors are now available throughout the country to provide support to those experiencing difficulties completing their qualifications for literacy and numeracy reasons. For employers this is a great help, as well as a growth in confidence and competence it gives our future farmers.

Applicants for off-farm roles in agriculture

Taking a glance at off-farm roles which support our primary producers such as fertiliser representatives, consultants, bankers, researchers and agribusiness managers, applicants for these roles have been short in numbers as well. However, trends from Lincoln University for students undertaking Bachelor of Agricultural Science and Bachelor of Commerce (Agriculture) programmes would suggest we are making up ground here. For example –

- Over the past five years an average of 180 to 200 students enrolled in the Year 1 management paper and has hit a high in 2013 with 260 students enrolled
- By Year 3 a total of 95 to 100 students complete capstone management papers 316 and 317, most of whom enter the workforce looking for roles in agribusiness
- Enrolments for diploma courses are fairly consistent, with an average of 81 students studying the Diploma in Agriculture over the last five to seven years and 45 the Diploma in Farm Management.

The Primary ITO also recognise the opportunity to encourage development of management skills in the industry. In 2012 they initiated the professional land managers project which incorporates four separate sub-projects based on the idea of a conveyor belt of learning. This opens the opportunity for graduates from this programme to move into off-farm agribusiness management roles when their days of

hands-on farming are over. With the average age of farmers still around 58 years, having career options for experienced farm owners and managers must be the start of a wider pathway for industry succession and is a critical way ahead.

From an employee perspective, the information in the table represents a big incentive to enter and stay within New Zealand's agricultural sector. The dairy industry is well ahead in offering a clear pathway from entry level to management and farm ownership in its various forms. At the same time it has high staff turnover compared to the other sectors. This suggests that there are fundamental reasons why staff leave and this is not due to a lack of training and education being available. They work too many hours and accommodation quality is still a problem on many farms.

Summary

New Zealand's primary industry has taken full responsibility for educating and training our own to secure a productive and sustainable future. There is a wide range of programmes with more being developed to cater for various needs. Having recognised the seriousness of labour and skill shortages, and realising no-one else can fix our problems, we are seeing much more collaboration and pooling of resources between sectors. As levy payers, any collaboration now is good news. However we need to heed the words of John W Garner, author and educator, who said –

Much education today is monumentally ineffective. All too often we are giving young people cut flowers when we should be teaching them to grow their own plants.

We should not lose sight of those crucial basics and identify for the future the areas of critical competence before we announce a person is work ready or able to contribute in their respective roles. Progression can come too fast, and many employers see that training has actually reduced our practical skills for a gain in theoretical knowledge.

We need to ensure employers are integral in the design of programmes which promise to help them achieve their production aims. Skills and knowledge have to be applied to be valued. There is no point putting staff on courses when they cannot apply their training in their job. This is called a day off, not a good return on investment.

Be aware of how fear influences the openness of employees to new ideas. While not easily admitting it, many farm managers and employers are concerned that staff may be smarter than they are. Farmers forget they already have qualified by experience and no whipper-snapper can take that experience from them. However, the combination of experience, new ideas and knowledge will be very powerful if people are able to learn how to have the conversations which will harness this power.

A lack of education and training options for our primary sector will not be a barrier to our industry progress. However implementation of the new lessons of this training may well be.

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