

Changes in Horticultural Training Delivery

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There are seven major changes that have impacted on horticultural training. Those of you who have either personally attended courses or have had staff members as apprentices, trainees, etc. during the past 10 years will be aware that there have been what seems like a never-ending stream of changes. We all know how difficult these can be to deal with. The bad news is that the changes haven't stopped yet. The good news is, and most of us would agree, that most of these changes have been for the better.

COMPETENCY-BASED TRAINING

The first seeds of dramatic change that took place 6 or 7 years ago for us was the change from "chalk and talk" classroom delivery to Competency-Based Training (CBT). We have moved out of the classroom and into workshops, practical field areas, and sometimes sheds to teach horticultural skills. The concept is that students should learn practical skills in a "hands on" environment and be assessed on what they can do as well as what they know. This meant a large outlay for equipment, so that students could use this themselves, rather than having only one piece as a demonstration model. And teachers needed to have better teaching skills — a good move.

RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING

Next came the recognition that many people acquired skills and knowledge at work, at home, through hobbies and interests and these should be able to be credited to a formal course of study, if appropriate. This is called Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). An alternative term that is preferred in some areas is Recognition of Current Competencies (RCC), as this term suggests the person should have up-to-date knowledge and skills. This is now widely available, although it does tend to be a bit of a paper chase for the applicant because, as could be expected, there is a requirement that they provide proof of competence in the area they are claiming.

INDUSTRY INVOLVEMENT IN COURSE DEVELOPMENT

Industry is now steering horticultural development in Australia. Industry is involved in the determination of courses, subjects, industry-specific course streams, skills required, and the levels that students enter and exit courses — linked to employment positions. The teachers are no longer dictating what is being taught. Industry working groups for several years now have decided what people in their area of industry need to know and the standard they should attain. In many instances the industry groups have invited the participation of the training sector and this has proved a rewarding partnership.

COMPETENCY STANDARDS

The result of CBT, RPL, and industry involvement has been a set of competency standards for seven horticultural industry groups, over level 1 (basic level) to

advanced diploma (just below university entrance level). These seven groups are arboriculture, floriculture, gardening, nursery, landscaping, production, and turf. The first set of competency standards has subsequently been revised and we are now awaiting the final version.

NATIONAL HORTICULTURE CURRICULUM

The fruit of this work is what is known as the National Horticulture Curriculum. This is a set of courses and the syllabi for them, over six levels of training for seven horticulture industry sectors. The idea to standardise training levels and courses was seen as an advantage to both industry and the students, providing portability and cross recognition of qualifications from coast to coast. Most states adopted some or all of these courses at the beginning of the year.

HORTICULTURE TRAINING PACKAGE

The latest development, and one that leads us to the immediate future of horticultural training, is the Horticulture Training Package. It is based on the revised version of the competency standards which have been rewritten by industry groups.

The concept of a training package is not as easy to understand as the current system of courses, modules, and qualifications — and there is a completely new terminology to come to grips with.

It does however encompass the concepts developed and put into place over the past few years such as:

- Being national, so there will be consistency of qualifications across the country,
- Assessment for competency will be carried out by a qualified workplace assessor, and the assessment may be conducted in the workplace, if appropriate.
- The workplace assessor must also have competence in the area being assessed, i.e., have the appropriate industry experience, or work in partnership with someone who has.
- For training that is conducted away from the workplace, e.g., at TAFE, the assessment, and presumably the training, will be conducted in a closely simulated workplace situation.
- The old method of teaching to a syllabus, which is a very prescriptive guide to a particular subject or module that is tied to a number of hours of delivery, is no longer appropriate. The end result of the student gaining competence is more important than how long it took to achieve.

The Training Package for Horticulture is expected to be endorsed by the training ministers of each state in June 1998. After that it will be up to the training bodies, both government and private providers, to implement it. At this stage it would appear that the timing will differ considerably between states because of the differences in their readiness to change to a completely new system, e.g., getting the new computer systems, funding models, etc. changed to meet the new requirements.

This too will give the trainers a time frame for planning the implementation stage at the coal face. Communication to industry groups, employers, students, parents, and schools of the new system as to how these changes will effect them

is vitally important. Intuition tells me that I will be spending much of my time in the near future explaining how we at South Metro TAFE will be implementing the Horticulture Training Package.

The Training Package may not, however, have all the competencies in it that you require. It is up to industry groups to ensure that anything missing is added, otherwise the skill will not be taught or more importantly recognised. The one that concerns me in the area of plant propagation is that there are no competencies for seed collection or seed extraction methods. The current competencies are based on sowing clean seed. In WA we have a small number of professional seed collectors, people working in minesite rehabilitation, farming, and urban communities who are involved in bushland regeneration projects, who all need to know how to collect and extract seed. I am sure that other states will have similar groups. If you agree that there should be competencies developed for this area please get together and lobby to have them incorporated.

CHOICE OF TRAINING

The final change is "choice" in training. For several years now you have been able to choose who will provide your horticultural training needs. There are choices between TAFE and independent providers. Now that some recognised training takes place in the workplace, high schools are jumping at the opportunity to teach horticultural skills as part of their final-year programs.

There are choices between traineeships, new format apprenticeships and old format apprenticeships, and certificates of six levels in seven industry streams in horticulture. As well there are land care /land management courses which overlap horticulture in some areas.

How do you know which course suits your needs? The only answer is to work through the maze carefully; research, question, and compare. Just as with any major purchase, you don't just buy the first thing you see. Remember that you are the customer. Where the initial dollar commitment may not seem large compare the time spent in training related to your dollar, and always be mindful of the effects on your profit margin if the training has been good, or if the training has been poor.

CONCLUSION

We are ploughing through a period of rapid change in horticultural education and training, and it isn't over yet. We now have industry involvement in the development stages of training. We have training based on the skills required. We have recognition of prior learning and the development of a national standard for horticultural training. You as industry representatives have many choices to make. Not only in which areas of training you choose for your staff and yourselves, but who will deliver the training and also what the competencies gained through that training should be. No one expects change to be easy, but I'm sure that having input into ensuring the relevancy to your industry of the skills taught is a welcome one.