

Supplying skilled agricultural workers: A system issue affecting all Australians

Summary

This paper addresses some of the labour force issues facing the rural and agricultural sectors that Federal Government must address immediately. Evidence from peak industry body surveys and others indicate that if action is not taken immediately, Australia's agricultural sector cannot sustain current levels of productivity due to 30% of current agricultural workforce retiring before 2017. During this period, it is also estimated half of the teaching staff from agricultural colleges and the 13 universities that specialise in agriculture will also retire.

Coupled with this, Australian citizens and permanent residents are increasingly reluctant to leave urban areas and work in rural Australia. Many of those that do so choose to fly-in-fly-out or drive-in-drive-out to lucrative mining positions as opposed to lesser paid agricultural occupations. Replacement of workers in agricultural positions from overseas is constrained by the occupational classification system used for migration purposes. Actual skill profiles rather than notional or inappropriate national job titles, are not adequately defined and do not adequately reflect the skills required at various levels i.e. managerial, technical or trades, semiskilled or unskilled.

Skills Australia on behalf of the Government last year called for submissions to justify changes to Skills Occupation List (SOL). Before any occupation can be included on a skills occupation list for migration purpose, the occupation must firstly be included on Australian and New Zealand Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO) list.

Three draft positions (see attachments) Horticulturalist, Agriculturalist (for want of a better name) and Animal Technicians are drafted for approval to be included within ANZSCO.

The inclusion of these new occupations (as opposed to redefinitions) seems a simple and cost effective measure and will go a long way to fill the gap between agricultural managers, scientists, consultants (what ANZSCO already provides) and the “all-inclusive” category, Agricultural Technicians, the only existing skilled agricultural occupation available between a manager or scientist and semiskilled workers.

Introduction/Background

The lack of skilled agricultural workers in Australia is a symptom of Australia's lack of integrative national planning, the urban-regional divide, as well as being grounded in broader issues of rural development and population policy.

Regional and rural Australians comprising two-thirds of the Nation's population are custodians of around 99% of the nation's land mass. This power-base is often lost in urban societies' "system complacency" and a lack of understanding about where food comes from.

These regional and rural Australians feed not only Australia's population but also export 60% of surplus agriculture produce to feed less endowed nations as well as making substantial contribution in financial terms to Australia's GDP and keeping the Australian culture and economy alive.

Australian farmers continue to develop agricultural technologies, land-care and production systems that are envied globally. Much of this innovation has stemmed from the ground roots of agricultural based families developed over generations on the farm along with a combination of input from neighbours, academic and collaborative research organisations. This body of knowledge has already passed the point where it can be passed on to future generations. Currently fewer and fewer people exist for the knowledge to be passed to.

Given that Australian citizens and permanent residents have become increasingly reluctant to be attracted to a career in agriculture, Australia has no alternative but to go back to the beginning and encourage migrants to settle in rural Australia and pursue a valued career in agriculture. For this to happen, all agricultural occupations need to be updated within ANZSCO to adequately reflect the skills and qualifications required by Australia's modern agricultural industry, an issue already being suggested by peak industry bodies.

Australia's agricultural industry in perspective

View from Federal Government - Australia in the Asian Century

In the White Paper, *Australia in the Asian Century*, the Government sees the agriculture and food sector "needs highly skilled people who understand and can respond to the changing demands of modern agriculture and food business operating environment and global marketplace"(DPMC 2012). From this base:

"Together with industry, we can build the capability and responsiveness of the sector's workforce and improve the sector's attractiveness as a career. We are building flexible and high-quality universities and vocational education and training systems and we have appropriate migration policies. We will ensure that skills and training systems create the pathways that Australia's agriculture and food businesses need. Through AgriFood Skills Australia, we support industry-led skills agendas and workforce development in the agriculture and food sector. Industry needs to complement these platforms to build on-the-job training and career opportunities in the sector" (DPMC 2012).

These forward looking global desires have been reproduced in Figure 1.

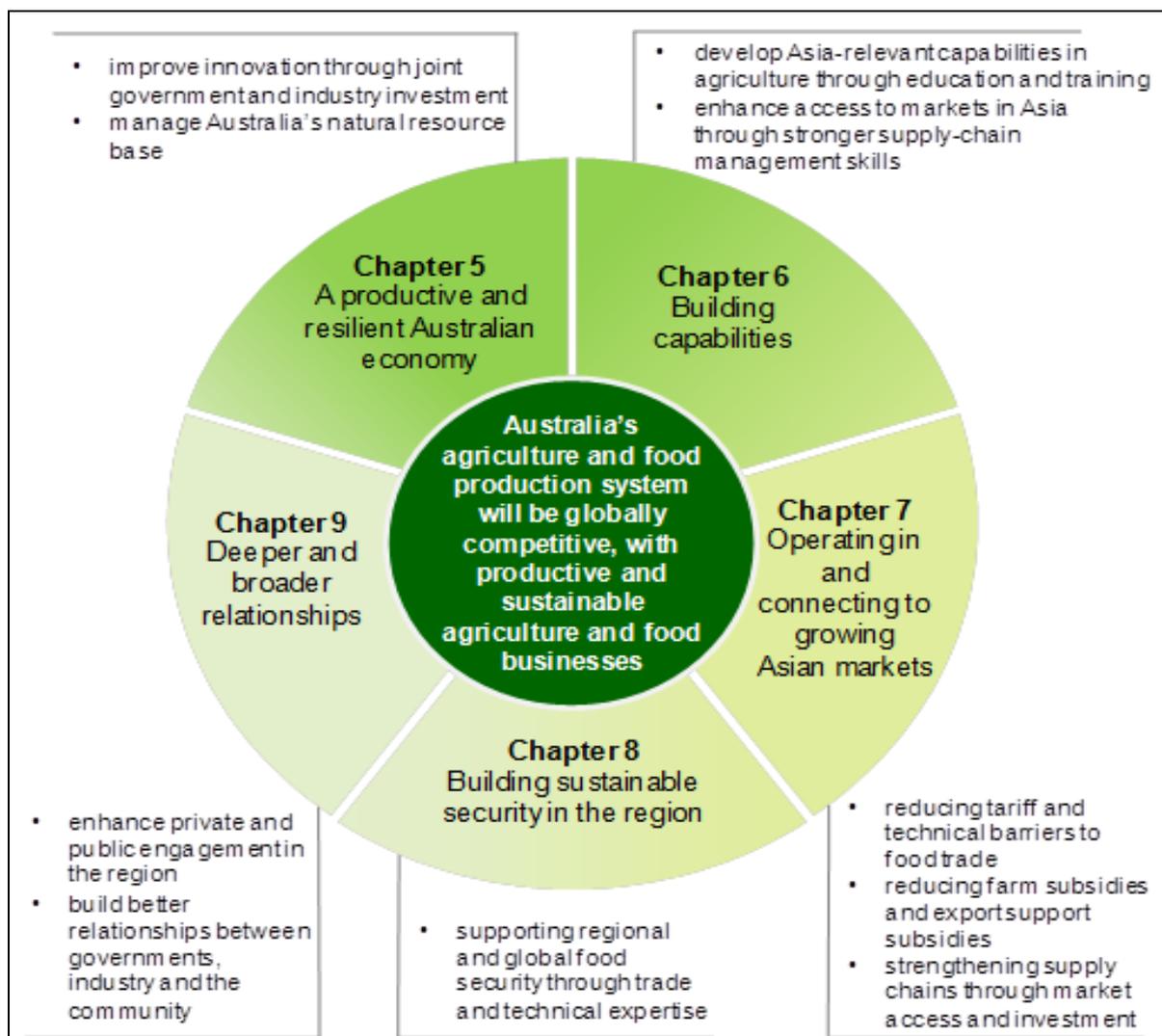


Figure 1: Australia's agriculture and food sector in the Asian century (DPMC 2012)

The reality is Australia is a long way from achieving these governmental desires unless it truly engages with peak industry bodies and farmers now to incorporate labour force strategy within a long-term regional and rural economic and food security development plan.

The issue of providing Australian farmers sufficient access to skilled agricultural workers within the next four years is a critical concern facing all Australians, not only to ensure food security but also interconnected with sustainable security in the region.

Skilled agriculture, forestry and land-workers - the supply side

During 2008-2009, Australian farmers produced \$41.8 billion on-farm agricultural produce (ABS 2009). About 60 per cent of this produce was exported. The farm sector employs over 290 000 people (AGRIFOOD 2009). Across the Australian population, employed men aged 55 years and over are twice as likely to work in Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing (7.8% compared with 3.4%) (ABS 2010). Up to 30% of this workforce will need to be replaced due to ageing over the next 5 years.

In July 2009, the Australian Government announced accelerated work across Australia on environmental and sustainable farming projects. As a result, \$403 million was committed under the landmark \$2 billion “Caring for our Country” program (DAFF 2009). In order to deliver the outcomes envisaged by this program, an increasing number of agricultural technicians will be required over the coming years.

This proposed program also aims to improve the skills and knowledge of up to 42 000 land managers and farmers that are required for sustainable farm and land management practices under the proposed program (AGRIFOOD 2009). In addition, the Government has allocated \$464 million of the 2009-2010 International Development Assistance Budget to support Asia-Pacific and African nations in addressing food insecurity. This program will also require agricultural professionals, skilled in the application of modern production improvement technology, to continue to increase yield from available land, plants and animals.

These programs are already challenged by a current and future skilled workforce shortage within the agricultural sector evidenced by the decline in the number of students enrolled in tertiary agriculture and agri-skills development courses.

The continuing decline in the number of Australian students attending agriculture and rural science courses is of serious concern to both tertiary and industrial sectors. Some agricultural learning institutions in Queensland have recently been forced to close through lack of student numbers (Emerald and Dalby), at direct odds with the amount of positions that still require filling.

Education of overseas students and agriculture

Amidst fierce competition for the international student dollar, the Australian Education of Overseas Student sector grew to \$18.6 billion in 2009 (Figure 2). This growth was fuelled by linking Australian education to a permanent residency outcome, where students chose to study courses that maximised their chance of permanent migration as opposed to career choice.

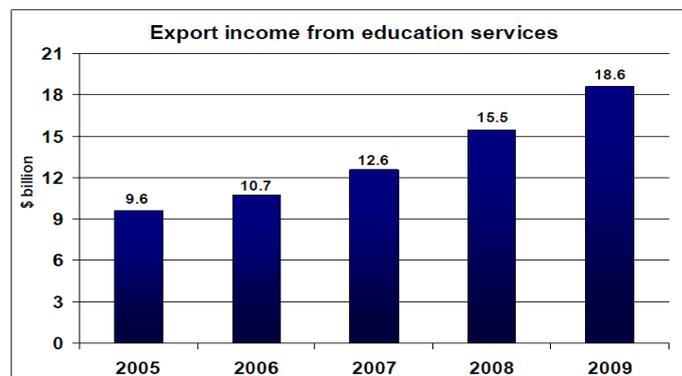


Figure 2 Export income from education services
Source: AEI, IRAU Service Id: 1057

The ‘extraordinary’ growth in Australia's education services sector from 228 119 students in 2002 to 491 565 students in 2009, resulted in this sector becoming Australia's fourth-largest

export earner worth \$17.2 billion in 2008-2009 (Baird 2010). Baird also found and reported “Australia was distracted by money”.

Of the total 467 407 international students studying in Australia as of 30 June 2009, 374 826, or around 80% were from the Asia-Pacific region – home to two-thirds of the world’s chronically hungry. Furthermore, of this overseas student total, only 450 students were studying agricultural related programs. Table 1 shows a breakdown of international students by country, studying agriculture in Australia.

Table 1. International students studying agriculture related courses in Australia as of 30 June, 2009

Source: AEI, IRAU Service Id: 1057

Asia-Pacific	Agriculture	Other	Africa/ME	Agriculture	Other
Malaysia	60	19,779	Iran	12	1,715
India	53	89,511	Iraq	10	150
China	52	111,803	Botswana	5	370
Vietnam	24	16,884	Kenya	4	1,746
Pakistan	16	5,400	Saudi Arabia	4	9,104
Indonesia	13	13,372	South Africa	3	706
Bangladesh	12	5,428	Israel	2	457
South Korea	11	27,515	Jordan	2	621
Nepal	8	18,910	Oman	2	597
Sri Lanka	8	7,042	Turkey	2	1,747
Thailand	8	18,543	Uganda	2	65
Bhutan	6	157	Egypt	1	1,776
Taiwan	6	6,661	Ghana	1	108
Singapore	5	7,912	Kuwait	1	198
Hong Kong	4	11,210	Lebanon	1	850
Philippines	4	2,780	Mauritius	1	4,223
Brunei	3	580	Tanzania,	1	163
Fiji	3	400	UAE	1	1,282
Japan	2	9,441	Zimbabwe	1	1,902
East Timor	1	98	Total Africa/ME	56	27,780
Myanmar	1	752			
PNG	1	572	Western/Other	92	47,845
Solomon Islands	1	76	Total	450	466,757
Total Asia-Pacific	302	374,826	Grand Total		467,407

According to the Australian Council of Agricultural Deans, the decline in agriculture and related food student enrolments between 2001 and 2006 was 18% (Greenfield 2010) with the number of Australian agricultural students continuing to decrease to this day.

A causal constraint for overseas students wanting to study agriculture in Australia revolves around the current definition of agriculturalists. The category is not adequately defined to include an appropriate standard for professionals and technicians on the skills migration lists that drive Australia's migration programs. Agricultural related positions defined on the various classification and skilled occupation lists do not offer the same migration opportunities as many non-agricultural positions and remain less attractive to potential students.

The reality is the Australian farming community is the ground roots and driver behind the continuing development, innovation and experimentation of Australian agriculture to find new and more innovative ways of improving production.

Farmers need agricultural technical support on-site to advance their own production improvement research and innovation, servicing, product quality control and marketing.

The classification of occupations system

In 2011, Chamber Of Commerce and Industry Queensland (CCIQ) made the following submissions for the annual update of the Skills Occupation List (SOL):

“As previously communicated to Skills Australia through submissions during the development of the SOL, CCIQ has significant concerns about the methodology applied in determining occupations for inclusion. Furthermore, CCIQ is concerned that it does not adequately reflect the skills needs of Queensland's small and medium sized businesses and the needs of regional and remote areas.

Making a judgement on the relative value of particular occupations and skills to the Australian economy is a highly subjective process, made even more complex by the diverse and regional nature characterising Australian industry. Consequently CCIQ seriously questions this process and the impact it will have on Queensland businesses through an opportunity missed.” (CCIQ 2012).

This questioning of the methodology and process is understandable and justified. The following helps to understand some of the elements within the current process of updating the skills occupation lists.

Australian and New Zealand classification of skilled occupations (ANZSCO)

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) is the Government agency responsible for coverage of Australia's occupation classifications. ANZSCO was developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Statistics New Zealand (Statistics NZ) and the (then) Australian Government Department of Employment and Workplace Relations primarily intended to provide an integrated framework for storing, organising and reporting occupation-related information in statistical applications.

Yet today, ANZSCO classifications of occupations together with qualifications and skills required to competently perform those occupations, are used as the cornerstone of Australia's migration system.

Irrespective of what industry and various government agencies want to have as a skilled occupation, the occupation, qualification and skills must be included by ABS on the ANZSCO list of available occupations before it is included on SOL or CSOL.

The difficulty with ANZSCO is in its' current inflexibility to be altered or changed. ABS is charged with its' maintenance but only has a budgetary allowance to do this on a 5 year cycle designed to coincide with the national census. Aside from conducting and funding an expensive private study, each industry must rely on the hope of there being sufficient data

evidence within this period to have a position classified and added to the list. Should the data be considered insufficient, the likelihood of having to wait for the next census period is nearly guaranteed.

New and emerging industries, or even well-established but evolving ones, are regularly creating additional or altered occupations types. In a period of labour shortage, waiting 5-10 years for ANZSCO to reflect required industry occupation definitions for migration purposes could be detrimental to business success.

Given the number of Government departments involved (ABS, DIAC, DEEWR, AWPA) a possible solution may be a budgetary pool to fund more frequent changes when required.

Skilled Occupation List (SOL)

In February 2010, the Australian Government asked Skills Australia to develop a new SOL for migration purposes, identifying occupations which are of “high value” and will assist in meeting the medium and long-term skills needed for the Australian economy.

Skills Australia used as its foundation “the framework for Workforce Development as outlined in (its own report) *Australian Workforce Futures*”.

The Australian Workplace and Productivity Agency (AWPA) are responsible for SOL to provide eligible occupations for migration under the Skilled Independent stream of Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC)’s skilled migration program and not the sponsored skilled programs.

In September 2011, Skills Australia (& AWPA) sought stakeholder input and evidence to inform the composition of the 2012 update of the SOL. As part of this external consultation process, Skills Australia invited submissions from Industry Skills Councils, industry peak bodies, government agencies, professional and trade organisations, education peak bodies, unions and the public and received a total of 144 submissions to inform the 2012 update. The updated 2012 SOL contains 192 available occupations. No provision has been made to accommodate National Farmers Federation and Agrifood Skills submission requests.

Consolidated Sponsored Occupation List (CSOL)

A separate occupation list, CSOL, applies to the Employer Nomination Scheme, State Sponsored Migration, Temporary Business Long Stay (457), and Occupational Trainee visa categories. AWPA is not involved in the development of this list.

The CSOL was introduced from 1 July 2012 as part of Australian Government’s major reform to the migration legislation in particular the skills area. Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) and Department of Education Employment and Industrial Relations (DEEWR) are responsible for compiling this list.

Perhaps in the future, there may be stakeholder engagement but it appears at the moment consultation is between these two departments using the occupations on the existing ANZSCO. It is expected that the CSOL will be reviewed for the 2013/2014 program year.

Regional Sponsored Migration System (RSMS)

The RSMS system received a major overhaul effective 1 July 2012. A part of this overhaul was the change whereby ANZSCO skills level 1-3 together with a competent level of English skills could only be used for RSMS direct entry applications as opposed to pre-1 July 2012 applications where skills level 4 were included together with an English language test score of the average 4.5 as opposed to the English language test score of now 6 in each of the four test components. This requirement of 6 excludes most overseas trades and technical people unless they come from the six exempt English language speaking countries.

Some Agricultural industry views

According to Mr Jock Laurie, president of Australia's National Farmers Federation (NFF)

“The growth in the farm sector over the past 20 years has consistently outperformed other sectors, and was a key reason Australia avoided a recession during the global financial crisis. Agriculture has an enormous uptake of new technology, we have thousands of jobs available, we contribute \$32 billion in export income to the economy and we produce the clean, healthy, fresh food that Australian families, and indeed families across the world, enjoy.

The prospects for agriculture are huge, with the need to feed, clothe and house a booming world population. World population growth will continue to expand to over nine billion by 2050, driving demand for both quality and quantity of food and fibre, as well as the availability of arable land and water. We are entering the ‘Asian century’ and we are well placed to capitalise on this. As the Prime Minister, the Hon. Julia Gillard said in a video address to the NFF Members’ Council in November 2011: “We have the potential for a new golden era of Australian agriculture, given the rise of Asia.”

At the same time, a period of great opportunity also brings with it difficult challenges – everything from climate variability, to the challenge of meeting this world population growth with increased productivity. Farmers are facing a myriad of issues that impact on their ability to continue as world leaders in sustainable food and fibre production including; the carbon tax, the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, land use changes, labour shortages, an ageing farm workforce, insufficient infrastructure, and the lack of awareness from the wider community about agriculture.” (NFF 2012).

Views from agriculture peak bodies - SOL 2012 survey

The Australian Institute of Agricultural Science and Technology (AIA), Agri-Science Queensland along with National Farmers Federation and AgriFood Skills Australia are increasingly concerned that little or no action has been taken by governments on numerous studies and submissions regarding the chronic skills shortages facing Australia's agriculture and agri-food industries. These studies range from major agricultural education and training issues, replenishment of the ageing workforce (30% loss of labour by 2017 due to retirement alone) (NFF 2012) and need for migration supplementation of skilled agricultural positions.

According to AIA in its submission to the Senate enquiry on higher education and skills to support demand for agriculture and agribusiness in Australia "the situation facing the industry

has become progressively worse" (AIA 2012). The AIA in its submission states "In fact we are now at crisis point where the shortage of appropriately trained people in all aspects of agriculture..... threatens the ability of agriculture to continue to play its crucial roles in food security, natural resource management, bio security, social change and as a major contributor to the economy itself.....it is as if agriculture has been forgotten at Federal and State levels in favour of the more popular and voter attractive areas of health, education, welfare and law and order. There is a preoccupation by governments with things which spends our wealth rather than those which create it such as agriculture, mining and innovation".

During the second half of 2012, the Government through Skills Australia asked for submissions from all industries across Australia regarding the appropriateness of the Skills Occupation List (SOL). In this round of 2012 submissions, the National Farmers Federation has called for the creation of new positions as "a large number of the occupational definitions under ASCO no longer reflect the skills level, the complexity of the skills (skills pyramid structure) or the actual industry nomenclature" (NFF 2012).

This is not surprising. ANCO (now Australian and New Zealand Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO)) was initially developed and is still maintained by Australian Bureau Statistics (ABS) with the prime purpose of providing classifications for national statistical purposes. It is a catalogue of occupations numbered by levels systematically in a similar way as the world classifies maintenance spare parts inventory. Yet, the ANZSCO is now used for many purposes not previously intended including being the cornerstone for Australia's skilled migration system. Because of its complexity and many purposes of use, it is not easy to modify this ANZSCO list.

ANZSCO also uses broad categories that mask the importance of skills required to perform a diverse range of tasks using different production methods. Within this occupation categorisation framework, according to ANZSCO, "Agricultural Technicians perform tests and experiments, and provide technical support to assist Agricultural Scientists". Yet, the Horticulture Industry in Australia contributes \$9 billion to the national economy. In Queensland alone, it is the 2nd largest primary industry with 100 000ha of the state under horticultural production. It is a very diverse industry with 120 crops grown alone. Each crop has a different production method and requires different locations and climates (ASQ 2012).

"In the case of irrigationists, there are several levels, a person who simply connects pipes together on a small horticulture plot, a relatively lower skilled task which is in nearly all cases part of a mainstream horticultural role (horticulturalist), a person who sets up irrigation lines, positions complex equipment and estimates delivery load in conjunction with computer controlled water management, and an irrigation designer who programs computer systems, designs complex water delivery systems and monitors delivery and plant growth. The skills are markedly different at each level and are not reflected in the two classifications listed under ASCO. In practical terms we have a balanced supply of the first level, a shortage of the second level and a severe shortage in the higher technician level." (NFF 2012).

Agricultural scientists help; but farmers, assisted by technicians do the work and in the majority of the cases, apply the know-how passed down through generations as well as on-farm experimentation and talking to their neighbours and others in the industry.

The fact is the majority of farm workers employed as technicians, whether as agricultural technicians, animal technicians, horticultural technicians, broad-acre farming technicians or whatever, provide technical support to on-farm management, not to agricultural scientists in laboratories as provided in the ANZSCO definition.

However, currently any farmer who wants technical support on-farm and envisages using migrant workers for migration purpose must use ANZSCO 311111 - Agricultural Technician as there is no other alternative on the ANZSCO list.

According to NFF, "clearly there is a need for some major reforms of ASCO but previous attempts to influence the ANZSCO work had no effect as the ABS did not consult with our industry in the review at either a national or state level" (NFF 2012).

The occupational classifications and actual skills profiles required must be adequately defined under ANZSCO as DIAC case officers have been instructed in policy to refuse agricultural technician nominations and visa applications where technical support is not provided to agricultural scientists as opposed to farmers or farm management as per the ANZSCO definition.

Migration system issues

Some Migration industry challenges

Migration industry players include:

- Federal Government; who set broad migration goals and population policy and enact required legislation for the migration industry.
- Minister for Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC); who formulate strategy and policy to achieve desired government goals.
- DIAC staff; who administer the Minister's direction for strategy and policy.
- Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR); who work in conjunction with DIAC and advise on the interconnection between education (both higher and vocational), industry employment, and sustainable relationships, including the education sector, employers, and employee unions representing the interest of members.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS); who publish Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO). The interpretation of ANZSCO forms the basis from which DIAC decision-makers approve or refuse visas allowing migrant workers to participate in Australia's development.
- Migrants; who seek to live or work or make Australia home on a temporary or permanent basis.

- Registered Migration Agents (RMA's); who seek to assist migrants in obtaining the required visas, thus enabling migrants to legally enter or stay in Australia's migration zone.
- Migration Institute of Australia (MIA); who, as the peak RMA professional association in Australia, dedicates its' time to improving RMA's professional standards.
- Office of the Migration Agents Regulation Authority (MARA); who regulate RMA's activities.

This complicated mix of integrative players accept social and economic responsibility, not only for maintaining Australia's current population and demographic mix of urban and rural dwellers, but also for replacing Australia's ageing population. Passing the baton to future generations will enable Australia's continuing social cohesion and economic success.

It is not surprising that within this integrated mix of migration industry players there is potential for misunderstanding and lack of awareness about agriculture and needs of farmers, and the agricultural industry in general.

The importance of ANZSCO to DIAC decision making

DIAC case officers used the ANZSCO definitions to decide whether or not to approve or exclude visa applicants under the RSMS. In the case of agricultural technicians the relevant ANZSCO definitions are as follows:

AGRICULTURAL SCIENTISTS studies commercial plants, animals and cultivation techniques to enhance the productivity of farms and agricultural industries.

AGRICULTURAL TECHNICIANS perform tests and experiments, and provide technical support to assist Agricultural Scientists in areas such as research, production, servicing and marketing.

The intention of these positions is to provide technical support for farmers to improve production of farms and increase food production productivity. The emphasis is on farms and farmers and has nothing to do with laboratories and CSIRO as case officers have based their past refusal decisions. In most cases, all of the work providing technical support is done on-farm.

In addition, many of the skills required to provide this technical support can be acquired on-farm without need for the agricultural technician to attend university or other educational institutions. This has been recognised in the ANZSCO definition where three years relevant experience can substitute for formal qualifications.

Processing of agricultural technician nominations and visa applications has been transferred from Parramatta to Melbourne to reduce Parramatta's workload following the fourfold increase in RSMS applications leading up to the system reforms implemented in July 2012.

Since this transfer, nominations and visa applications are being refused, all seemingly through a misunderstanding of what an agricultural technician does.

DIAC case officers' refusal reasons were mainly as follows:

- As per policy section 37.3 “assessment as to whether the nominated position can be approved, involves comparing the functions of the nominated position and corresponding qualifications/experience (as detailed in form 1054) against the functions/ qualifications for that or similar occupations in the ANZSCO Dictionary.
- Agricultural technical officers are usually employed by state, territory and federal government departments, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research organisation (CSIRO), pastoral companies, agricultural chemical manufacturers and farm consultancies.
- The salary offered for the nominated position can help establish the true skill level of the nominated position. A salary that is lower than the entry-level or industry standard could be an indication the nominated position relates to work that is less skilled”. The current market rate for this occupation is \$45 000 to \$60 000.
- There is no evidence on file to substantiate the claims that the position involves someone who follows any protocol to prepare, analyse or store crop samples, examine crop samples to identify any pathology, compile and analyse data that goes into charts, presentations and reports, prepare and operate complex equipment to perform laboratory tests, signs off on the chemical/fertiliser spray diary. Nor is there any evidence on file to substantiate that this position requires someone who uses the following equipment:
 - laboratory ware
 - laboratory equipment
 - scientific/statistical software.

Attempts were made by Registered Migration Agents in Queensland to turn these decisions around. Standard case officers' response has been “take the refusal decision to Migration Review Tribunal (MRT) if you disagree”.

Applying to MRT for review is a very costly exercise for both the business nominate and the visa applicant and is avoidable if case officers had more closely aligned agricultural positions upon which to base their decisions. The process also places further burden on MRT members who are already overloaded with review applications.

In all fairness, the case officers have their hands tied because they must follow policy and interpretation of what is available to them through ANZSCO.

One senior DIAC manager in Melbourne has responded to RMA e-mails regarding
“Radically inconsistent decision making on RSMS visas for Horticultural Technical Officers”

“We apologise if there has been an inconsistency with decision making and I appreciate the sponsor's frustration in regards to this. Unfortunately I cannot comment on previous decisions. Melbourne is applying a consistent approach across the network for all businesses requesting an Agr Tech. As per ANZSCO this occupation is very specific and science based.

In some cases we have not been satisfied that the position descriptions are for a position that consummates with an Agr Tech. There are some similar tasks but not the majority. In each case we have carefully considered whether there is a need for a full time Agr Tech (HTO) on that particular farm. We are of the opinion that only large farms require a HTO, as med/small farms would not require the services of a full time HTO as this is usually performed by an agronomist who is employed as a consultant.

We don't dispute there is a genuine need for a position, but we were not satisfied that the position nominated was that of an Agr Tech - HTO. We are of the view it falls somewhere between a HTO and a Farmer Worker nec, unfortunately there isn't an ANZSCO for this. As with other agricultural positions in the same circumstance, I believe a labour agreement for these positions is more appropriate and the industry should petition the ABS to have this occupation ANZSCO classified.”

Response from a migration agent in Cairns was as follows:

“Thanks ‘name of officer’,

I understand what you say. However there should be consistency across all offices not just one particular office. It becomes a lottery then as to whether the case is decided in Parramatta or Melbourne.

Whilst I understand the intent of what you say about the Ag Technician it cannot be logically argued that it can apply to large farms (by field area or turnover presumably?) and not small farms. There are huge cattle stations in the NT with high turnover that would not require an ag technician, and there are small intensive highly technical farms and nurseries (by size and possibly turnover) that rely on ag technicians as the work is highly technical and intensive for example herb farms.

Banana Farming is very intensive, very different from Broad acre cropping for example as experienced in Victoria and NSW. Bananas are grown on small plots but with intensive input of skills, materials and labour. The comparison is that there would be several, up to 10 workers per hectare on a banana farm compared to 2 per 1,000 hectares of broad acre cropping for example. A ratio differential of 5,000:1. Based in Victoria I can understand the rationale, it simply does not apply to Banana Farming in Queensland.

This is the problem with city based personnel assessing farming based activity with NO or LITTLE knowledge of what really goes on in the real world of modern farming and

particularly in rural and agricultural, horticultural pursuits. Whilst they may think that you just stick a few banana plants in the ground and wait swinging in a hammock until the beautiful yellow bunch of bananas is ready to be picked this is far from the reality of a high risk, intensive, high labour and material intervention (fertilisers, pest eradication and control, water management, sucker management, ripening control and compulsory quality assurance practices) farming practices that must exist on the modern banana farm.

A farm employing 20, 30 and often many more persons requires a technician to determine the work needs, monitor the quality control, and to plan the work of the casual and seasonal labourers. This is based on technical soil, conditions, plant management, fertiliser and pesticides needs at the time, most of which is done on farm. Banana farms employ personnel literally by the bus load for farm labour. However they need technically trained and skilled people to prepare the work plans, monitor the outcomes and manage the crops on a daily basis. This is technical work.

Apart from the very obvious inconsistency in decision making the basis of decision is fatally flawed and will be proven so. In the meantime dozens of farms employing hundreds if not thousands of people are going to suffer.

I do appreciate your reply but cannot agree with the logic – it is perhaps based on lack of relevant information.

Kind regards”

According to NFF website there are around 120 000 farms in Australia that employ 318 000 Australians directly. This is around 2.65 people per farm. These farms collectively “underpin \$155 billion per year in production(NFF 2012) and produce 93% of Australia's domestic food supply. In addition, 94% of these farms are actively practice natural resource management. This is all scientific based and practised on farm where most farmers don't engage agronomists as consultants. It's in their head developed in many cases and passed down over generations. In fact it is the universities and the CSIRO who tap into this knowledge base.

DIAC proposed solution

“As with other agricultural positions in the same circumstance, I believe a labour agreement for these positions is more appropriate and the industry should petition the ABS to have this occupation ANZSCO classified”.

Whilst entering into a labour agreement is an option, in reality the cost of setting up a labour agreement for an individual farm is prohibitive. What may be practical is a Regional Migration Agreement covering all farms on a regional basis.

The case officer is correct that the industry should petition the ABS to have ANZSCO occupations relating to agriculture reclassified and rewritten. Other agricultural occupations that need to be addressed are Crop Farmers, Pig Farmers, and Horticultural Farmers etc. where these whole groups require Skills Level 1, i.e. a bachelor's degree or higher, which is ridiculous. Skills gained within these groups are mostly developed on-farm where farmers

continually research, innovate and experiment to increase productivity and that is what has led to Australian farmers being world class innovators and producers.

Conclusion

The lack of skilled agricultural workers in Australia is a symptom of Australia's lack of integrated national planning and reflects the importance the Federal Government places on agriculture, rural development and associated population policy. AIA argues agriculture in Australia has been forgotten; it seems also rural and regional Australia has also been forgotten in the government "national planning process".

Providing sufficient skilled agricultural workers is the cornerstone for Australia to realise what is desired by Government documented in the White Paper *Australia in the Asian Century*.

Given the reluctance of Australian citizens and permanent residents to settle and take up agricultural positions in rural and regional Australia, Australia seems to have no alternative but to go back to the beginning and encourage migration from overseas with a particular emphasis on providing skilled agricultural workers willing and able to settle in regional and rural Australia. This strategy is also interconnected with ensuring Australia's food and national security.

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