

Career Development in Horticulture - an Australian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Horticulture is defined as the science, technology, business and management of intensive plant cultivation for human use. Three categories of career have emerged in recent years - that of food production horticulture, amenity/environmental horticulture, and the associated support and service sector operating within individual supply chains. Food production careers incorporate those businesses involved in the production and processing of horticultural commodities such as fruit, vegetables, and other fresh and processed products, whereas amenity/environmental horticulture careers involve the production, sale and management of plants used for environmental, recreational and leisure purposes. Careers associated with the support services involve supplying the non-plant products and services such as manufacturing, programs and activities, sales and service, and research, education and training. The paper explores the availability of trained horticulturists in the service and vocational components.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last 20 years Australia has experienced a decline in student and staff numbers at the postgraduate and baccalaureate levels (Pratley, 2014, this Proceedings). The question is to what extent this trend has occurred at vocational levels. At the same time, there has been an increase in the range and diversity of employment opportunities and horticultural labour shortages have been pervasive across all of Australia's regions, industry sectors and occupations. This paper discusses the shifts in the Australian horticultural vocational workforce as reflected in the trends in vocational education. The coverage does not extend to the horticultural food processing sector which is worthy of its own analysis.

The horticultural industry is highly diverse and operates to different industry structures. This paper briefly considers the agribusiness sector, the amenity/environmental horticulture industry and the food production sector all with different *modus operandi*. The data suggest that greater consideration be given to a comprehensive study of workforce needs and an associated strategy to address the needs. Part of that exercise is the need to engage with the general community and create the positive image needed to be attractive to new entrants.

AGRIBUSINESS

In this discussion agribusiness refers to the pre and post-farm gate sector which provides the inputs and manages the outputs of the businesses, including fertiliser, chemical and seed inputs, finance, processing and marketing. Because of the demise of horticultural education in the universities (Pratley 2012 and 2014) most graduates are agriculturally trained and are often servicing both horticulture and agriculture. This employment market is buoyant with up to six jobs being advertised for every graduate exiting university in this field. This has produced a market response where starting salaries are in the top 10 starting salaries for graduates at around \$52-\$55K often plus car, Ipad/computer and phone. Recent survey of agricultural industry salaries by Rimfire Resources® showed the average salary paid to agriculturists was around \$80K which compares very favourably with the national average salary in May 2014 of \$74K (ABS, 2014). It seems that the market is working in relation to

supply and demand, the main deficiency being that young people have been unaware of the opportunities available.

VOCATIONAL HORTICULTURE

A study of horticulture education and training in the 1980s (Greenhalgh, 1988) identified that the amenity horticulture industry had been ignored and needed to be addressed in terms of its education and training needs. It is pleasing to note that this has taken place with strong emphasis on qualifications. The University of Melbourne Burnley campus still produces 30-40 associate degree graduates in this area and the numbers receiving qualifications in the vocational area are very healthy and increasing. Figure 1 shows that there is a strong record in Certificate II and Certificate IV and there is a discernible upward trend in these qualifications as well as in the diploma offering.

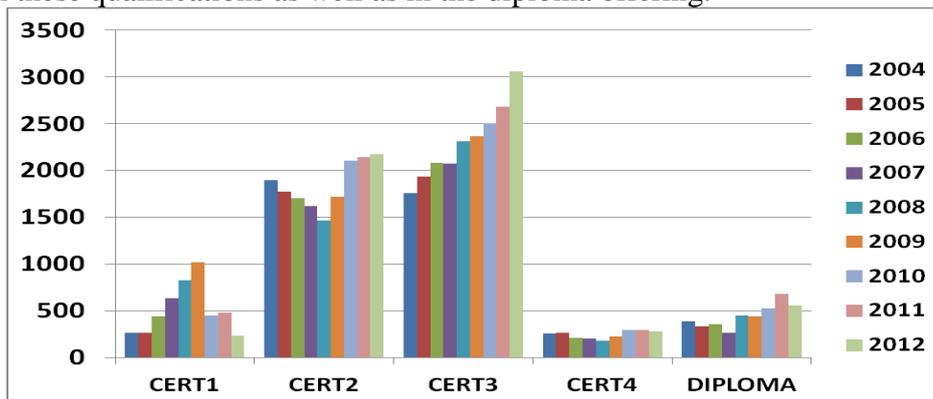


Figure 1 Qualification completions in VET horticulture, Australia 2004-2012 (NCVER 2014)

The picture changes when the production horticulture data are extracted. Figure 2 shows that there is activity at all levels but numbers are only about 5% of the total. This suggests that the production industry has not particularly fostered the attainment of qualifications and reflects its dependence on casual labour. It is encouraging to note, however, movement upwards since 2010 in attainments in Certificate III, Certificate IV and in diploma programs. It remains to be seen whether this is an established trend. The acceptance of qualifications is in stark contrast when the data are compared (Figure 3), with high values for the amenity/environment and low values for production.

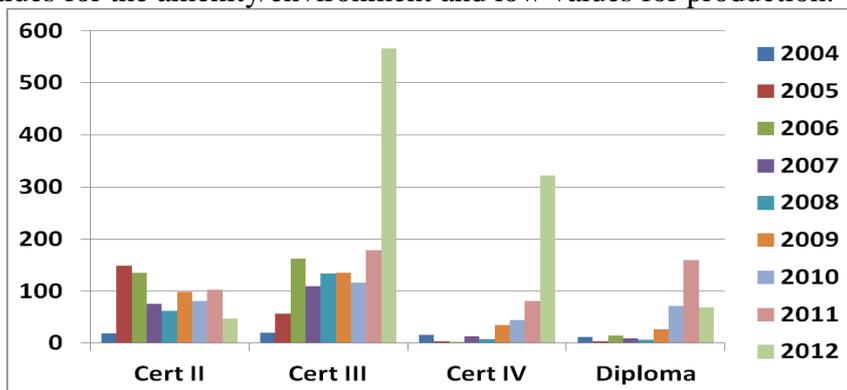


Figure 2 Qualification completions in VET production horticulture, Australia 2004-2012 (NCVER 2014)

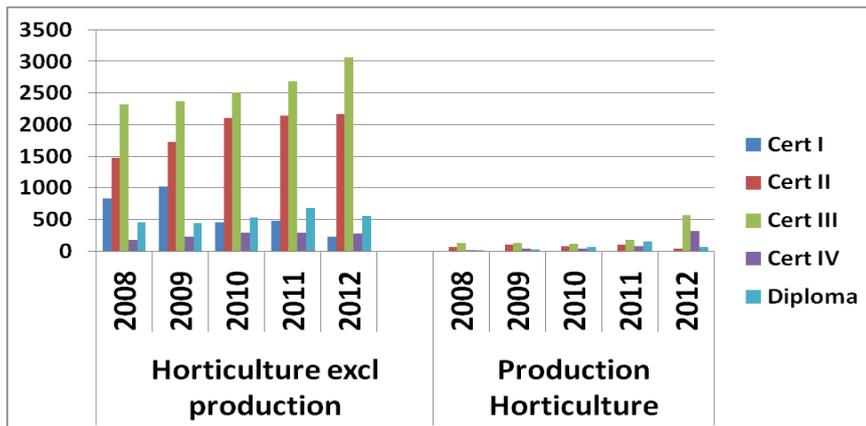


Figure 3 Comparison of qualification attainment between amenity and production horticulture industries, 2008-2012 (NCVER 2014)

A component of the qualified workforce is the acceptance by employers of apprentices and trainees in its workforce. It is shown in Figure 4 that apprenticeships and traineeships have been embraced by the amenity/environmental industries but in contrast has been ignored by the production industry. It has been a policy position by the agricultural industries nationally, through the National Farmers Federation, not to embrace apprenticeships because of the time and cost commitments.

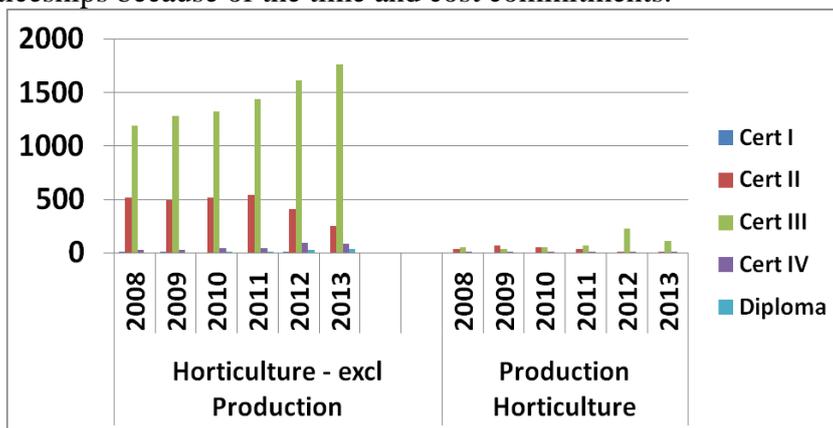


Figure 4 Completions of apprenticeships and traineeships in horticulture and production horticulture 2008-2012 (NCVER, 2014)

VOCATIONAL CAREER PROSPECTS

It would appear that the amenity horticulturists have relatively stable career prospects with there being a constant demand for improved amenity, potential for 'water-wise' gardens and the ongoing needs for flowers and shrubs. The environmental horticulturists however have a high reliance on government funding and so are at the mercy of the governments of the time. While there remains much environmental work to do, both in urban and rural localities, the priorities of government will be highly influential.

Production horticulture remains a challenge for new entrants. The lack of emphasis on qualifications is indicative of the lack of interest in attracting young folk. In 21st Century Australia, qualifications are the currency of career movement and so there appears to be no incentive for young people to see production horticulture as attractive. Instead the industry has been strongly focused on casual labour provided by 457 visas (short term overseas workers, usually unskilled) and 417 visas (backpackers). While this approach seems to be providing the necessary labour needs, it remains a tactic at the whim of the political climate. Should unemployment of young Australians rise, pressures will be exerted on the Minister at the time to restrict overseas workers and replace by local people. Thus the presence

workforce arrangements represent a medium to high risk strategy and ought to be tempered by consideration of a more stable approach comprising local workers and appropriate education and training.

A complication with production horticulture is the high seasonality of production, and hence seasonality of labour needs. This calls for more innovative ways of employing labour such that there is security for the worker without the impost of salary for the employer during down times. Higher skill levels will be needed as production practices become more sophisticated. It makes sense that efforts should be made to retain those people with the relevant skills. Options for achieving this include: diversifying enterprises to spread the work needs more evenly; sharing workers between complementary businesses; or encouraging the establishment of a work hire company employing skilled personnel who can then be hired by businesses for required times of the year.

CONCLUSIONS

Vocational education and training options exist across Australia. The attainment of qualifications has been embraced by the amenity/environmental sectors but not by the production sector. The consequences of the latter is that young people do not see a career in production horticulture and look elsewhere leaving a workforce which is aging and dependent on imported casual labour. The production horticulture industry does need to address its workforce strategy if the workforce of the future is to be engaged.

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