Ms Kerryn Riseley,
Executive Officer
Education and Training Committee
Parliament House
Spring St
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002
via email: etc@parliament.vic.gov.au

Dear Ms Riseley

RE: G21 SUBMISSION FOR THE PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN VICTORIA

Please find attached a submission prepared by G21 Geelong Region Alliance for the above Parliamentary Inquiry.

If you have any queries regarding our submission, please do not hesitate to contact the undersigned on (03) 5227 4000.

Yours sincerely

ELAINE CARBINES
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

Att:
cc: Georgina Ryder, Acting Leader of the G21 Education & Training Pillar
Parliamentary Inquiry into Agricultural Education and Training in Victoria

Submission by G21 Education and Training Pillar

G21 – The Geelong Region Alliance (G21) welcomes the opportunity to prepare a submission into the Parliamentary Inquiry into Agricultural Education and Training in Victoria.

INTRODUCTION

The Victorian Parliament has referred four considerations related to agricultural education and training to its Education and Training Committee. These include:

a) an evaluation of the current extent of agricultural-related courses delivered in Victoria;
b) an evaluation of the effectiveness of current agricultural programs;
c) whether the workforce training needs of agriculture are being met; and

d) an overview of well regarded agricultural education in other Australian States and Territories, or other countries.¹

The Committee has written to G21 inviting a submission². The Committee specifically invited G21 to comment upon:

- any agricultural education and training courses you consider to be best practice;
- key benefits and issues surrounding agricultural education and training courses, including any identifies gaps in existing educational opportunities;
- any relevant projects currently underway specific to agricultural education and training;
- and new skill sets and competencies that should be incorporated into agricultural education and training courses to ensure courses meet the future needs of the agricultural sector; and,

- how to improve public perceptions around pursuing a career in agriculture, and potentially increase the enrolment of young people in agricultural education and training.³

The following submission by the G21 Education and Training Pillar is made in response to aspects of the above considerations.

BACKGROUND TO G21 – GEELONG REGION ALLIANCE

G21 was established in 2002 by five Geelong region municipalities (Geelong, Queenscliffe, Surf Coast, Golden Plains and Colac Otway) with the support of the Victorian Government and a wide range of local organisations. Membership now spans all three levels of government, non-government organisations, businesses and community groups.

Under the G21 Regional Alliance we have brought together our region’s leaders to develop a regional plan, determine regional priority projects and advocate for their implementation. We represent the voice of the G21 region and have a formal role, as the Regional Strategic Planning Committee, in advising the State and Federal Governments on regional issues and priorities.

¹ www.parliament.vic.gov.au/etc/inquiries
² Parliament of Victoria Education and Training Committee letter dated 28 July 2011
³ ibid
G21 is funded by five regional councils: City of Greater Geelong, Borough of Queenscliff, Colac Otway Shire, Golden Plains Shire and Surf Coast Shire. These municipalities geographically define the G21 region. Although regional population (285,000) is dominated by the Geelong conurbation (216,000), land use is dominated by agriculture and forestry.

Since its creation in 2002, G21 has stimulated major regional projects and development plans through unprecedented levels of community engagement and regional advocacy. G21 works through eight themed 'Pillars', each of which brings interested stakeholders together to consult and co-operate on matters of mutual interest. These Pillars are essentially voluntary organisations driven by their participants’ desire to improve the regional quality of life.

COMMUNITY CAPACITY

Community capacity is a collection of characteristics and resources which, when combined, improve the ability of a community to recognise, evaluate and address key problems that affect the physical and psychological well-being of its members. The G21 region possesses attributes that, suitably harnessed, will aid the creation of a resilient community that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. In doing
so, these features contribute to the community’s self confidence and its health and wellbeing. They include:

- a high degree of regional identity;
- a prominent, integrated regional governance framework – through G21 - capable of dialogue across all sectors, communication with government and which possesses grassroots links;
- extensive networking and partnership arrangements, formal and informal, across all spheres of human endeavour within the region;
- education and training resources of considerable range and depth (notwithstanding some pockets of relative disadvantage);
- multiple and diverse research facilities; and,
- natural and built infrastructure.

At a local level, there is community awareness of contemporary and emerging environmental issues leading to a desire to participate in efforts to diminish inimical effects. Assistance to communities and small businesses to adapt and respond is important.

**AGRICULTURE IN THE G21 REGION**

Agricultural\(^4\) production contributes $818M towards a gross regional product of $32.1B.\(^5\) Agricultural exports amounted to $270M in 2009/10. Approximately 2,700 people are employed directly in agriculture.\(^6\)

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\(^4\) Deemed to include agriculture, forestry and fishing.

\(^5\) Regional Economic Indicators Bulletin 2009/10, City of Greater Geelong, p30.

\(^6\) 2006 Census of Population and Housing, (ANZSIC06) (IND06P) by Local Government Area (LGA), ABS.
The rich and expansive rural areas in the central and western parts of the region are highly productive and enjoy relatively high rainfall compared to other parts of the State. The region exhibits considerable diversity in agricultural production and related industries:

- broad acre cropping,
- wool and lamb,
- diary,
- viticulture,
- forestry,
- fishing,
- poultry,
- pork,
- market gardening,
- equine,
- horticulture.

In addition agricultural related industries sustain related value adding production of $448M, largely based in the cities of Geelong and Colac, and a substantial component of the regional retail and service operations (fertiliser, farm vehicles, transport, etc).

The growing of food in the region supplies local communities and the whole state, as well as local industries that employ a substantial workforce. Many areas with productive soils are under pressure because of stressed water supplies and because many of them are in areas of high rural amenity landscapes and near towns with high value heritage assets. With climate change many areas, particularly in the western third, are more conducive to grains and oilseeds production and this has implications for storage and transport of product. Opportunities for intensive animal production that can provide for buffers and supply of feed have been identified by local governments.
SKILLS SHORTAGES

A 2010 study of regional skills shortages predicts minor numbers of vacancies in agricultural machinery technicians and parts managers, agricultural technicians (piggery). Anecdotal evidence or perceptions suggest, however, that broad acre farmers in particular are experiencing difficulty in obtaining shearers and unskilled labourers, the age of which is said to be increasing. This is noted as a particular problem for smaller family farm operations and farms that exhibit lifestyle characteristics.

EDUCATION ATTAINMENT IN THE G21 REGION

Educational attainment levels recorded in the 2006 census show marked variations between the Victorian averages and those of the Barwon South West region of which G21 is a part. Aspects of educational attainment in rural and regional Victoria generally, have been extensively researched and analysed:

‘Unfortunately, while overall higher education participation in Victoria is high, there are substantial and long-standing differences in the rate of participation across different areas and social groups. These differences arise from a complex mix of interrelated geographical, socio-economic and cultural factors, which begin to affect students well before the transition from school to university’.

In December 2009 an Expert Panel reported to the Victorian Government:

‘….. other studies of participation, that take the home address of students at age 14 and then look at the institutions in which they were studying five years later, demonstrate that the educational participation of students varies considerably with their geographic location. It is well established that educational participation is lower in regional Victoria than in Melbourne overall, with substantial variations within different parts of regional Victoria…..’

Rural and regional students are disadvantaged because of the high correlation between low socio-economic status and the access implications of living in a rural or regional area. Retention and hence ultimate completion of a degree is lower than for non-rural and higher socio-economic status students because of factors other than academic achievement. With regard to higher education, there are higher rates of deferment of offers among rural students but frequently they do return to study after establishing themselves financially in the year away from study. These factors are evident in the Barwon South West Region.

The 2009 On Track Report confirmed this theme in following the 2007 cohort of Year 12 or equivalent students. Environmental Scans undertaken by regional Local Learning and Employment Networks in early 2010 quantify the attainment disparity across the region. The education department notes that Year 12 attainment across 2007-9 is substantially below state

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7 Geelong Region Skill Shortage Report 2010, City of Greater Geelong, October 2010.
10 Prof Sue Kilpatrick, Deakin University submission to the State Parliamentary Inquiry into Geographic Differences in the Rate at Which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education, 26 March 2008, p12.
11 Smart Geelong Region Environmental Scan, Researching Futures, March 2010.
averages in Golden Plains Shire, Colac Otway Shire and the City of Greater Geelong, with the two most agricultural municipalities showing the lowest Year 12 attainment rates.\footnote{Attainment Rates Year 12 or Equivalent at Age 19, DEECD, December 2010.}

**CURRENT EDUCATION & TRAINING IN AGRICULTURE**

Regional tertiary education institutes offer a broad range of relevant courses - some examples include.

**Marcus Oldham College**
- Bachelor in Farm Management
- Advanced Diploma of Farm Business Management

**Deakin University**
- Bachelor of Fisheries and Agriculture
- Bachelor of Environment Science

**Gordon TAFE**
A new training package AHC10 (Agriculture, Horticulture, Conservation 2010) has just been released which brings together a range of related courses into one.
- Certificate III Agriculture
- Certificate III Rural Business
- Certificate IV Agriculture
- Certificate IV Rural Business
- Certificate II Agriculture (Dairy SBNA)
- Certificate II Agriculture (Equine)
- Certificate II Agriculture Chainsaws
- Certificate II Chemicals
- Certificate IV Agriculture Chem risk management
- Certificate IV Agriculture Phosphine in grains
- Certificate IV Agriculture (Adv Spray grains)
- Certificate III Irrigation

Student numbers have dropped significantly in recent years… a significant skills shortage is likely to emerge in the agriculture sector. The challenge is to rebuild the capability and capacity to deliver Agriculture training in the future if this capacity is lost or depleted. The other challenge is attracting young people to the sector.

**University of Ballarat**
- Diploma of Agriculture
- Certificate II Agriculture
- Certificate II Rural Operation
- Certificate III Agriculture
- Certificate III Agriculture (Beef Production)
- Certificate III Agriculture (Grain Production)
- Certificate III Agriculture (Sheep and Wool)

**South West TAFE**

- Agriculture Equine and Racing
- Diploma of Agriculture
- Diploma of Agronomy
- Diploma of Horticulture

**Trade Training Centres.**

Neither of the TTCs being developed in the G21 area (Northern Bay College and Colac) propose to provide agricultural related training.
G21 RESPONSE

BEST PRACTICE AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING COURSES

There are a number of examples of good practice in the delivery of training and education in Agriculture that government may seek to examine further:

- WestVic Dairy - promote careers in the dairy industry in collaboration with local farmers, processors and service providers - with the objective of encouraging students to undertake a VET agriculture or relevant university pathway.

- Cotton Industry - RTOs worked with industry to develop tailored accredited training which provided additional skills sets for seasonal workers working during harvest times in the cotton industry. Additional skills sets were offered in transport, sales / retail, and basic construction activities - these were based on skills sets required in other local employment opportunities. Acquiring these additional skills sets enabled seasonal workers to remain in the community and undertake other work once harvest was completed. This reduced the annual retrain costs involved with a large new batch of casual workers whilst supporting workers to remain in the community and contribute to the regional economy.

- Wool-classer training package - redesigned to incorporate specific skill sets around career pathways in the industry - ie classing procedures and information about the role of wool classifiers as a quality manager in the supply chain.

- Establishment of agricultural education precincts by RMIT in Hamilton - to deliver a wider and more flexible range of training programs.

TRAINING AND EDUCATION - WHAT IS WORKING?

- Evidence indicates that Industry driven training responses that include partnerships between peak bodies, producers and training providers are proving most successful.

- Acquiring specific skills rather than completing qualifications is also leading to better employment outcomes. eg: high level technical skills associated with new machinery and equipment. There is also an increasing focus on business skills, OH&S, use of chemical, agronomy and pasture management.

GAPS IN TRAINING PROVISION

- Targeting business skills training to farmers wives who often carry out business management tasks for farming enterprise and require basic business, financial and IT training.

- Other considerations in training delivery is the need for the best available expertise for specialised training and particularly the need for hands on training and practical application. The need to attract 'high level technically skilled' trainers is often a challenge. *This opens up the possibility for promoting more auspicing opportunities for RTO’s to utilise specialists in some course delivery.*

- Consideration could be giving more flexibility to new entrants wishing to undertake an apprenticeship or traineeship - ie offer the same eligibility requirements for VTG funding (given age limits on the latter) This reflects concerns about the ageing farm owner / worker population. This would provide more encouragement for mature age workers and migrants to consider employment in the agricultural sector.
• Developing additional skills sets to enable workers to pursue other occupations during ‘off season’ in their main areas of employment.

• Need to better utilise existing facilities - ie facilities exist but are currently underutilised for training purposes.

• Given the geographical spread of farming enterprises and difficulties in delivery into ‘thin’ markets (distance and travel demands, seasonal production factor and costs for participants, while viability of providing delivery is a legitimate concern for provider - there needs to be more focus on innovative and blended delivery including on-line and flexible courses delivered together with practical field demonstration. Increasingly more technology and larger machinery is involved in training delivery and this compounds effective delivery problems. It is important that peak bodies and farm organisations are engaged in identifying these needs and participating in designing appropriate workforce development strategies and course contented to respond to these needs.

• Education and training focusing on sustainability from both a business improvement perspective (i.e. reducing costs, waste and impacts on the environment) and from a new business opportunities standpoint (e.g. business opportunities around carbon sequestration, sustainable cropping) are areas of emerging skills requirements.

• Also some farmers are beginning to diversify farms to better manage risk.

IMPROVING PERCEPTIONS OF AGRICULTURAL INDUSTRY

Changing traditional perceptions of the industry - particularly the view that it is principally a manual, male dominated occupation with log hours and little technology. Poor perceptions of agriculture as a career path have been exacerbated over the past decade due to drought and more recently, floods.

Much of the industries today are significantly different to traditional perceptions. Tasters and introductions to industry have been methods that have to used to varying degrees to address the myths. Many of these industries employ new technologies - ie. computer operated irrigation systems, GPS controlled mechanical equipment and sophisticated milking systems.

Government may need to provide $ incentives – both for agricultural employers and for agricultural workers who need more skills – maybe paid cadetships or a financial incentive for employers to release workers for training, or to make it easier for RTOs to deliver training on-site (like SMEs need), or maybe a top-up of wages to help retention. It is not seen as an attractive career by many people, long hours, hard work and the chance of boom to bust in one season. Targeted funding might make it more attractive.

IMPLICATIONS OF A MARKET DRIVEN TERTIARY EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT

A market driven tertiary education environment is influenced by basic supply and demand principles. Demand for specific skills in an industry sector is generally met by a supply of appropriate qualified workers. Demand for skills is one side of the equation the supply of these skills is the other important aspect (i.e. the supply of workers ready and able to undertake training and begin work)

If the industry sector is viewed as low paying unskilled, vulnerable to the economic shock and not offering career opportunities the ability to meet industry demand is limited no matter the quality and range programs that may be supplied by a training organisation.

Vocational Education and Training organisations are placing increased emphasis on financial viability of programs in addition training outcomes in a contestable market where funding follows
the student. If student numbers are low the financial viability of a course or program may come under question.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- **increased technology and information base for agriculture** - All industries are becoming more technology based. Training Packages needs to reflect this trend.
- **climate change and the trend towards cropping south of the divide** - This is a major issue as over time traditional areas for agriculture activity may no longer be viable.
- **implications of ageing in traditional family farms** - There is competition for skills across all industry sectors. Those industries that have image issues or do not offer good wages and conditions will be impacted particularly hard.
- **implications of the loss of family members who leave the farm to gain higher education and do not return** (see Kwong Lee Dow et al)

There is a trend towards corporate farming in some sectors. However the VFF believes this will not be a widespread trend.

- Impact of the strong Australian $ on exports (local produce is not as competitive as when the dollar was under $1US, for example – meaning possible job losses and employment instability.
- Free Trade agreements and trade liberalisation policies meaning that agriculture producers now compete with imported products (e.g. Aussie Apples versus NZ apples)

CONCLUSIONS

- Peak bodies and employer groups should play a lead role with training providers. to visit schools and provide career days and ‘practical’ demonstration. This might also extend to school tours to visit various farm enterprises, as well as businesses involved in downstream activities such as processing, logistics, sales and marketing, equipment sales and maintenance, research and development.
- It would be helpful if an audit of all current agricultural training course could be undertaken to understand what is currently available and to ensure that industry peak bodies and employer groups are fully informed.