

The Australian Experience of Propagator Training

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INTRODUCTION

There have been many changes in the way the Australian nursery industry trains its propagators and other nursery staff during the past 10 years and there are likely to be continuing changes into the foreseeable future. The industry in both Australia and in Great Britain and Ireland share the challenges of being more receptive and aware of the new skills and knowledge base propagators need. In Australia, the Nursery Industry Association is taking on the responsibility of ensuring that the next generation of propagators is able to produce quality plants in a seemingly more sophisticated and demanding world.

Until a few years ago, the Australian Federal Government fully funded post secondary vocational training, including university courses. This was achieved by funding state-owned training organisations. These organisations designed and accredited their own courses and also offered and controlled qualifications. They had no requirement to liaise with the industry they served.

The graduates of these institutions had a broad theoretical knowledge but there were some in-built inefficiencies which needed addressing, including:

- Lack of industry ownership of the process. The training organisations were not required to seek industry views on training content.
- Lack of equity and moderation between training organisations. Many would not recognise the qualifications of others in the same state which meant that students transferring from one organisation to another were forced to re-learn work they had already completed.
- Decline in uptake of apprenticeships.
- Escalating costs to the state associated with 100% state-funding model.

DEVELOPMENTS TO DATE

In 1989 the Australian Prime Minister instigated the National Training Reform Agenda to address these problems and produce a smarter, better trained, and more modern workforce for the country as a whole.

For example, in Australia this year it is a requirement for gaining a qualification that competency be shown. To accommodate this there is a single National Set of Competencies for horticulture, numbering just over 200 and covering skills from basic worker to manager. They have been developed with industry input and although they are not perfect they do reflect fairly accurately the skills required.

In addition, Australia has a National Horticulture Curriculum which is used by nearly all training organisations. It is now possible for a student to move from one state to another without disadvantage.

A major change has been the introduction of what the Government calls "user choice". This simple title involved the creation of competition among providers of vocational training, not all of whom now receive the high level of public funding they

once had. It is now common for training organisations to actively recruit students and to tender for training provision. It is possible that user choice could see the end of some of the longest established training organisations and the rise of privately owned colleges with an interest in profitability.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE NURSERY INDUSTRY ON TRAINING PROVISION

A strong input from the nursery industry is considered to be vital if it is to receive entrants of the right calibre. The Nursery Industry Associations in Australia consist of seven state and territory organisations, affiliated to a national umbrella organisation. Together they have a strong network of industry committees all providing input on training issues, as well as employing a national training manager as an overall co-ordinator.

The Nursery Industry Association (N.I.A.) has established its own training organisation and can offer qualifications in its own right. It delivers training and its presence in the market creates a benchmark on the quality of training delivery. The Association's input is aimed at ensuring that those who seek a qualification end up with skills that are relevant to current industry needs.

The N.I.A. has also instigated programmes to update and advance the professionalism of the industry. It collects an annual levy on sales of containers which is used to fund marketing and research. The research funding is matched by government and is expected to reach Australian\$1m in the current financial year. The research that has been funded has resulted in significant cost savings in nursery stock production. Details and results of some of this work can be found on the Association's Internet Web Site (www.niaa.org.au). Workshop notes are also available on CD-ROM disks. Both the web site and the CD-ROM disks help overcome a problem we have in Australia where time and distance for travelling are major barriers to attending courses and workshops to improve skills.

One interesting off-shoot from this research is that the Association is using training workshops as a way to feed technological advances into the industry. Attendance at the workshops earns points (or "marks") towards higher qualifications.

IMPROVING THE PROFESSIONAL IMAGE OF PROPAGATION

Plant propagation and production is yet to be viewed in Australia as a true profession and the Association considers that this perception limits opportunity. It also believes that increasing the perception of professionalism could help lift profitability and become a way of differentiating the high quality producers and retailers.

To address this issue the nursery industry in Australia is establishing a programme that will identify and support professionalism. This programme will be national and will be linked to formal training opportunities. An aim is to have the wider community, as well as the industry, recognise the skills needed to become a professional propagator as well as to give new recruits a career goal to aim for, emphasising that plant propagation and production is a worthwhile career option. The future of our industry rests with encouraging people who can build a skilled and more viable industry.