



# AGRIFOOD SKILLS AUSTRALIA'S INTEGRATED REGIONAL INITIATIVE

In July 2009, AgriFood Skills Australia in conjunction with the Northern Inland Regional Development Board hosted the Regional Jobs Summit in Narrabri, NSW. The summit attracted over 90 people from a range of enterprises and industries as well as job network and training providers.

The consensus from the summit was that the region was well placed to develop its own solutions based on a cross-industry and community partnership approach. In order to maintain the enthusiasm generated at the Summit the North West Advisory Group was formed (NWAG) and a Development Manager was appointed by AgriFood Skills Australia, jointly funded by AgriFood and Industry and Investment NSW.

NWAG set its sights high. They take the approach that businesses, regardless of industry sector, should work together with community and local government bodies, to contribute to the region's prosperity. This bold modus operandi is reflected in its brand, Make It Work™, through which its initiatives are promoted.

The programs developed by the NWAG with the support of AgriFood Skills Australia addressed the four challenges to emerge from the Jobs Summit. These challenges are common across the North West region:

**Professional development for business owners and managers** – especially in the areas of contemporary Human Resource Management (HRM) practice, job design and recruitment recognising the different circumstances of the permanent and seasonal workforce.

**Retention and up-skilling the existing workforce** through skills recognition, up-skilling and developing cross-industry skills sets that address common skills and labour need.

**Career opportunities for young people in the region** – developing strategies that give students, young people in their gap year and the underemployed an appreciation of the range of jobs that are available in the region.

**Skills demand calendar** – due to the seasonal nature of work in regional areas local businesses are well placed to identify both seasonal labour demand and the common skill sets required across industries. With peak demands plotted on a timeline, businesses can schedule work to take advantage of the skill sets available in the local labour market.

The first major activity undertaken was to produce the Regional Skills Utilisation Strategy focusing on developing the region's human capital and the common skills needs of enterprises and industry sectors. This led to the development of a Regional Skills Demand Timeline that is increasingly being used by industry to plan major activities around seasonal labour demands. The timeline is a useful tool for Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) to plan training delivery so that skills development can precede the time it is required by industry.

Recognising the need to support professional development among local businesses, Employer of Choice was the theme of a workshop presented by Dr John Buchanan from the Workplace Research Centre at Sydney University. As the first Make It Work™ public event, the workshop was held in December 2009 attracting over 60 delegates. John spoke of the pressures that would result from the region's labour market becoming more competitive. He encouraged businesses to think how they could retain their existing employees and attract new staff when required, suggesting that becoming an Employer of Choice would be a good start.

The concept of the Employer of Choice resonated and was greeted enthusiastically by the Narrabri Chamber of Commerce including Employer of Choice as a new category in its 2010 Business Awards. However, it soon became apparent that employers were struggling as to how they could measure and assess their own performance as an Employer of Choice. AgriFood Skills Australia, in consultation with the NWAG, devised a questionnaire which focuses on six key areas where improvements could be readily identified:

- Jobs and job design
- Procedures and workflow
- Responsibility, accountability and engagement
- Mentoring, internal and external support
- Training and skills gaps
- Reward and remuneration.

The survey is a unique blend of questionnaire, technology and facilitation and identifies the differing perspectives of business owners, managers and employees across these key areas. By comparing the responses, the results either endorse or challenge the Employer of Choice attributes exhibited within the business. The survey has undergone limited beta-testing and is currently being enhanced by Agrifood in consultation with the Workplace Research Centre.

Even in these early stages, the Narrabri regional initiative has demonstrated the power of well

supported and empowered local communities to make decisions that underpin the sustainable skills and workforce development of regions. The initiative recently won the Education and Research prize at the North West Regional Innovation Awards in 2010.

A cross-industry training strategy covering the agriculture, mining and local government sectors was also developed as a Make It Work™ initiative. The first program will roll out early in 2011 with Narrabri Shire Council just last week agreeing to become the regional group employer for the participants in this innovative cross-industry skills training strategy.

Recognising the outcomes that had been achieved over a short time period through these grass root initiatives, AgriFood Skills Australia commissioned ACIL Tasman to prepare an ex ante impact assessment of the Make It Work™ initiatives. This study was conducted in late 2010 and the analysis looked at two broad parts: how the Initiative was likely to produce an economic impact, and the potential scale and scope of that impact. ACIL Tasman identified two potential quantifiable impacts of the initiative:

- An improvement in the productivity of the local labour force of potentially as much as 3.2 per cent per year (Labour productivity only)
- A 33 per cent reduction in net migration of workers in the target labour market (Labour productivity plus reduced outward migration).

There have been no shortcuts in the development of these initiatives. Against the backdrop of an increasingly competitive labour market, the NWAG through the Make It Work™ initiative has begun the important task of moving employers from being competitors for workers to partners in building a flexible and broadly skilled workforce in North West NSW.

With the North West now well and truly in recovery from drought, and the world's insatiable appetite for food, fibre, minerals and fuel on the increase, the region is poised to significantly grow its role as a major contributor to the country's economy. The key to unleashing this potential rests largely with the NWAG's capacity to go on developing a robust, flexible and highly skilled workforce.

AgriFood Skills Australia is now working with government to seek to extend this integrated model more broadly across other Australian regions.