

Media Release

AGRIFOOD
SKILLS AUSTRALIA



11 BILLION REASONS TO IMPROVE NATIONAL ADULT LITERACY

Raising Australia's adult literary and numeracy skills by as little as 1 per cent would boost the nation's GDP by up to \$11.5 billion a year, AgriFood Skills Australia said today.

AgriFood CEO Arthur Blewitt said that current research found that 7 million adult Australians did not have reading skills to cope with everyday life. Almost 8 million had sub-standard numeracy skills and could not add up, complete time sheets or read accurate measures. Many were unable to read and understand written instructions and could not use emails.

"Literacy and numeracy clearly form one area where the agri-food industry can make a very big difference and help to offset the current economic downturn," Mr Blewitt said.

"We believe that improvements to literacy and numeracy capabilities are among the most important factors to affect workforce development and business success.

"Many Australians would be shocked to find that so many people do not meet even the most minimal and basic standards of literacy and numeracy. In an industry that employs some 880,000 people the overall effect can be disastrous."

AgriFood (formerly the Agri-Food Industry Skills Council) has launched a web based survey in order to test industry perceptions of literacy and numeracy in the workplace. Mr Blewitt said the findings from the survey would be evaluated by the AgriFood Board in order to set strategies for the future of skilling and workforce development.

"Our findings over a four year period show that the impact of improved literacy and numeracy on business success are not widely appreciated or understood," Mr Blewitt said.

He said one prominent Queensland company seasonally employed from 700 to 1800 people. A company survey showed that 30 per cent of its employees came from a non-English speaking background, and that 40 different languages were being spoken at work.

“The positive side to this is that we have a very competitive industry with a terrific history of innovation and competitiveness. If we can raise the bar for literacy and numeracy we could see our rural and food processing industries rebound from this very difficult economic climate.

“We encourage as many people as possible to fill take part in our survey to help us to tackle workforce literacy and numeracy rates across the agri-food community.”

Mr Blewitt said the 2004 OEDC report - *Literacy scores, human capital growth across 14 OEDC countries*, *Statistics Canada* – found that raising a country’s adult literacy level by just 1 per cent would lead to a rise in productivity of 2.5 per cent and a 1.5 per cent increase in GDP.

Australia’s GDP in 2007 was \$773 billion (purchasing power parity, estimate) and that a 1.5 per cent increase in GDP would add \$11.6 billion to Australia’s GDP.

In a 2006 survey of 9,000 people, the Australian Bureau of Statistics assessed literacy and life skills against the minimum requirements needed to function effectively in the workplace. The survey found that more than seven million Australian adults did not have reading skills (46 per cent) and 8 million did not have numeracy skills (53 per cent) considered necessary for everyday life.

The literacy survey

AgriFood Skills Australia is conducting a survey about perceptions of language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) in the workplace. AgriFood is inviting views from the agri-food industry and the feedback will enable the council to inform the improvement of training products, resource development and special projects on skills and workforce development.

AgriFood is providing a Discussion Paper and feedback questionnaire, which can be completed on line. We are seeking to obtain specific data and anecdotes from its various industry sectors about LLN aptitude in workplaces.

Background

AgriFood’s recent Environmental Scan - *an industry in transition...* suggests that many job roles within the agri-food industry are evolving, and that people need to have higher-level skills across a greater breadth of functions.

The Environmental Scan notes the importance of increased skills and knowledge in new technologies and management practices through engagement with research and innovation.

Yet, unless we have a working population with the requisite ‘core skills’ of language, literacy and numeracy then engagement in ‘higher order’ activity such as research and innovation may be limited.

AgriFood’s Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) research in 2006 found a high proportion of production level workers - the backbone of food processing plants - who do not speak English as their first

language or who may have had limited educational opportunities in the past and have limited literacy skills.

Many of these workers entered the industry in an era when well-developed language, literacy and numeracy skills were not always required – yet the increasing demands of technology, the introduction of quality assurance and compliance systems and a push for formal training outcomes have meant that many now struggle to progress or take on new roles.

Our research highlighted the important role that indigenous Australians play in conservation and land management and in rural industries - yet language, literacy and numeracy skills are often an inhibiting factor for many when it comes to successful participation and completion in formalised training.

ABOUT AGRIFOOD SKILLS AUSTRALIA

AgriFood Skills Australia is a private sector company that works in collaboration with the agri-food industry and governments to support the development of quality training products and services, including training packages. AgriFood is funded through the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

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