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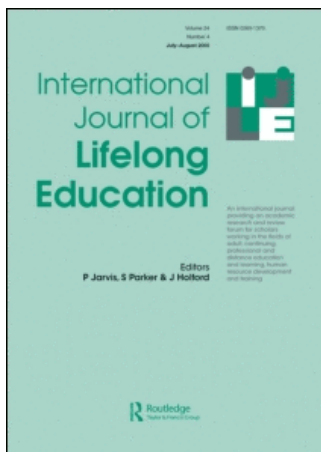
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# Matching training needs and opportunities: the case for training brokers in the Australian agricultural sector

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Lifelong learning has been linked by policymakers to economic and social wellbeing. This paper introduces the concept of training brokerage as an efficient way of meeting the needs of learners, industry and education and training providers. It presents findings from a study of the features, processes and outcomes of training brokerage arrangements within the Australian agricultural and natural resource management sectors. The purpose of the study was to identify and promote effective brokerage arrangements and models. The study used multi-method, multi-site techniques, comprising a telephone survey, case studies of good broking practice and stakeholder participation through workshops and a reference group. Training brokers act as facilitators or intermediaries in identifying and matching training needs and opportunities. They have close links with industry, and extensive networks that include reputable training providers. Brokers work with others to identify training needs and engage participants, and to identify, negotiate and plan appropriate training. Evaluation and further training are a key part of the process. Effective broking activity is underpinned by a series of ten generic principles. Brokerage has implications for the agricultural sector in developed and developing countries, in terms of improving the match of training provision to training needs, communication, coordination and collaboration across regions and industries. It also has broader implications for facilitating participation in client-driven lifelong learning, particularly for disenfranchised learners.

## Introduction

Traditional post-compulsory education and training systems were built around a steady flow of school leavers and so must be revised to meet the needs of mature age lifelong learners who come to education and training with different levels of

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knowledge and skill. Potential mature age learners are not as easily visible to education and training providers as the cohort coming from the school sector. Further, many potential learners are confused about which education and training opportunities would best suit their needs. This lack of coordination of systems to accommodate lifelong learning has been noted in a number of countries, for example by G8 Education Ministers (Faris 2005). Recognition of the need for people to return to education and training throughout their lives has prompted a variety of systemic and policy responses, ranging from learning cities and regions, as described in OECD (2001), through the UK's University for Industry (University for Industry 2005), to Australia's flexible vocational education and training system that awards qualifications for a combination of recognition of current skills and on the job learning (Australian Qualifications Framework 2005). This paper considers a complementary response to this need for systemic change to better accommodate lifelong learning: a third party facilitator, or broker, who acts to match the needs of potential learners with appropriate learning opportunities.

Previous research by the authors indicates the need for better matching of training needs and opportunities in the Australian agricultural sector (Kilpatrick and Bound 2001, Kilpatrick *et al.* 2002), which has been characterised by traditionally low levels of participation in education and training (Kilpatrick 1996). This is important given that more than one third of the changes to management and marketing practices reported in Kilpatrick and Johns (2004) drew on an education or training course or activity as a source of learning. Government agencies and agricultural industry organisations (such as farmer commodity groups and research and development corporations) are well placed to meet this need by acting as training facilitators or brokers for their clients (Kilpatrick *et al.* 2002, Kilpatrick and Johns 2004). Such a role is needed in developing countries, where non-government organisations can also mediate and negotiate between local farmers, and extension and training providers (Oladele *et al.* 2004).

Within Australia, and in line with international trends in supporting lifelong learning (see, for example, the learning brokers research project in the UK, reported in Thomas *et al.* 2004), the time is ripe for further exploration of a brokerage model. The recent Australian policy document *Shaping our Future: Australia's national strategy for vocational education and training 2004–2010* (Australian National Training Authority 2003) identifies a range of strategies that support training brokerage. These include assisting clients as they navigate the vocational education and training (VET) sector, enabling training providers and brokers to partner with industry, and strengthening the role of industry in identifying skill needs and developing products and services to meet those needs. In addition, Australia has a strong client-driven training culture, as well as a strong market of training providers which provide greater client choice than ever before.

The term 'broker' may be contentious for some readers, however, its usage aligns closely with recent literature from the education, training, health and natural resource management (NRM) sectors. We read of learning brokers in education (Midgley 2004, Yarnit *et al.* 2005), of information or knowledge brokers in the health sector (Canadian Health Services Research Foundation 2003, Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council 2004) and NRM sectors (Land & Water Australia 2005). What most of these examples have in common is their focus on bringing individuals and groups together to 'communicate and understand each other's needs and abilities ... [and] exchange information and work together ...' (Canadian

Health Services Research Foundation 2003: i). In many instances they enable participation in learning by acting as advocates for their clients. There are also a number of examples of service and knowledge brokerage concepts in international education and training arenas which describe electronic portals as brokers (for example, Lindquist 2003, Schrey-Niemenmaa *et al.* 2003). These electronic solutions tend to provide a service that relies on the users to make their own sense of online information. The training brokers featured in this paper are proactive and very much agents of change, like the learning brokers identified by Thomas *et al.* (2004), rather than providers of a service.

While the concept of brokerage is recognised at a policy level within Australia, there is debate amongst stakeholders in some areas such as the agricultural sector, as to whether brokerage is a legitimate function that should be resourced separately from training provision. Some believe training brokerage is an extension of the training provider's role, and do not perceive the need to separate the two. This paper argues that training brokerage is a critical enabler of lifelong learning through a collaborative process involving client, broker and training provider, and other stakeholders as appropriate.

For the purposes of this paper, the role of a training broker is defined as follows:

A training broker plays an active and purposeful role in identifying training needs. A training broker considers the whole suite of present and potential training opportunities and actively matches needs to training, acting in the best interests of the client.

Of course, training provision is also about matching needs to training, and good training provision is also likely to be a collaborative process. However, it differs from brokerage in two key areas: the extent to which training providers research training needs, and the extent to which they consider the whole suite of present and potential training opportunities when matching needs and opportunities. Some training providers also undertake a wider broking role; many do not.

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### **Brokerage in the learning and training literature**

Most of the writings about brokerage in the sense used in this paper are found in the practitioner literature. Findings suggest that learning brokerage is effective in engaging marginalised adult learners as well as those who may not previously have participated in workplace learning (Yarnit *et al.* 2005), as well as encouraging a learning culture (Kilpatrick *et al.* 2001, Yarnit *et al.* 2005). It also creates support networks for learners and employers to assist them to navigate an increasingly complex post compulsory education system (Gientzotis Consulting 2003, Andrew *et al.* 2005, Coutts *et al.* 2005, Yarnit *et al.* 2005). At a broader level, research by Kilpatrick *et al.* (2001) on training brokerage in the rural sector, identifies the benefits as increased industry innovation and competitiveness, and increased social and economic community wellbeing through greater levels of cooperation and collaboration.

Brokerage is still a relatively new concept in the education and training sector, particularly within Australia, and the research base is limited. A review of existing research classifies training brokerage according to the characteristics of those involved; its purpose; the scope of the broking activity; a brokerage framework and brokerage enhancers.

### *Characteristics of different broker organisations*

Yarnit *et al.* (2005) note that brokers can be either individuals or organisations, and identify four key groups as important in the learning brokerage chain: dedicated brokerage and signposting bodies (such as Sector Skills Councils); planning and funding bodies (such as regional development agencies); learner support organisations (such as the government-funded Sure Start programme in the UK which facilitates parents to undertake study) and learning providers themselves.

Kilpatrick *et al.* (2002) identified industry organisations and government agencies as having the characteristics required of effective brokers in rural industry, in terms of their ability and capacity to match training needs and opportunities. Miller (2001) found that because industry associations operate vertically, they have the ability to promote connections within a single industry or groups of industries across the country. Kilpatrick and Bound (2001) identified a key attribute of government agencies as the ability to facilitate a coordinated approach to delivering activities that meet the training needs of clients and employees.

The literature indicates a rapidly growing but under-researched group which has the potential to significantly impact on the development of capacity within the agricultural and NRM sectors, and that is agribusiness (Stone 2005). Stone includes training providers and rural consultants in this group, and emphasises the value that innovative farmers place on consultants as 'honest brokers', in terms of consolidating information and providing independent advice. Although Yarnit *et al.* (2005) identify learning providers as part of the brokerage chain, they identify a limited brokerage role for this group.

### *Purpose or drive of the broker*

Brokers can be grouped according to their purpose, with two broad classifications identified in the literature: firstly, market-focussed and client-focussed brokers (Kilpatrick and Bound 2001); and secondly, Gientzotis Consulting's (2003) enterprise and industry demand, community demand and government policy and legislative requirements models.

As the name implies, market-focussed brokers are commercial operators, for whom brokerage is a core business. They are driven primarily by financial viability and competitiveness, or the requirement to cover costs (for example, group training companies). Market-focussed brokers have a strong customer service focus, and use multiple marketing strategies to secure new clients. The focus of these brokers is more on delivering the training requested, than on empowering the learning processes of clients.

By comparison, client-focussed brokers comprise a diverse range of groups and organisations with a variety of purposes and roles. Included in the grouping are small

and large organisations, and not-for-profit as well as government agencies. Kilpatrick and Bound (2001) described the key driver of this group as capacity building of the target client group, focussing on the process of arriving at the end result (creating lifelong learners), rather than just the end result itself (acquisition of skills).

The focus of research by Gientzotis Consulting (2003) was narrower, in that they considered only the broking activities of Registered Training Organisations<sup>1</sup> (RTOs). They identified three classifications according to the purpose of the broking activity: enterprise and industry demand, community demand and government policy and legislative requirements. The first model describes broking services established specifically in response to enterprise and industry demand, and comprises strategic partnerships and resource sharing. The second model, brokerage driven by community demand, is characterised by a focus on access and equity issues, including employment and skills development. The third broking model evolved in response to a range of policy and legislative requirements regarding VET in Australia. Because of the increasing complexity of the VET system, the purpose of this broking model is to explain and help clients negotiate these changes.

### *Scope of broking activity*

A scan of the Internet suggests that a third way of classifying learning and training brokerage arrangements is by scope: one-off project-based brokerage, and ongoing brokerage. In recent years the Australian government has initiated several VET programmes designed to upskill targeted groups within society, such as *Vocational Education and Training Priority Places* (Department of Education, Science and Training 2004). This project-based brokerage is characterised by the specified, limited-term appointment of a training broker who is also the project manager, and who has clearly defined roles and contractual responsibilities in terms of timelines and delivery of outcomes.

Ongoing training brokerage may be funded from a variety of sources. The model most commonly identified in the literature and Internet search was the commission model, where training providers paid a commission to brokers for each successful client match (for example, Business Training Partnership; My Training Broker). Other models include core funding or specific funding for brokerage activity, most often provided by industry associations and government agencies. For example, Yarnit *et al.* (2005) note that brokerage with employers, in order to develop employee skills, attracts dedicated funding in the UK under the National Employer Training Programme (NETP). At the other end of the scale, Yarnit *et al.* point out that there is no dedicated funding for community-based brokerage, which aims to link clients with learning providers. This means that there is reduced opportunity for the resourcing and training of learning brokers, because this type of brokerage falls outside mainstream activity. Anecdotal evidence suggests a similar scenario in Australia, and points to a considerable amount of broking taking place 'off the side of the desk'.

### *A brokerage framework*

An analysis of the limited material on brokerage conducted by Thomas *et al.* (2004) identifies a six stage brokerage process framework: understanding the current



situation; gaining entry and building trust; making learning meaningful; identifying the right learning opportunity; promoting learning success and addressing organisational issues. The sixth stage also includes monitoring and evaluation of the brokerage process. Research conducted by Yarnit *et al.* (2005) further refined this framework into a five-phase learning brokerage chain: strategy; infrastructure and capacity building; brokerage, learning and skills delivery, and continuous quality improvement. In this framework, infrastructure and capacity building are key stages that precede the actual process of brokerage and learning and skills delivery. They focus on securing high-level commitment to the brokerage system at a local or regional level, as well as training and resourcing brokers. Both frameworks highlight the importance of monitoring the process. Yarnit *et al.* (2005) also make the point that while brokerage and delivery are different activities, they need to be planned together as part of the brokerage chain.

### *Factors that enable brokerage*

Mutual trust is identified as a critical element of partnerships in general, and of broking partnerships in particular, with trust between client–broker–provider identified as a key attribute of effective brokerage (Crombie 2002, Greer and Scudds 2004, Canadian Health Services Research Foundation 2004). Effective brokers have been found to build trust by displaying a good understanding of the different contexts and cultures of stakeholders (Kilpatrick and Bound 2001) and developing skills in working across the different producer–industry–education sectors (Kilpatrick *et al.* 2002). Sensitivity to the needs of learners is a critical part of the trust relationship (Crombie 2002).

Mitchell (2004) identified four key enablers of effective networks: high level facilitation skills and a thorough knowledge of the VET system; processes for sharing ideas; processes for accessing information and resources; and evaluation of network outcomes using a range of strategies. Given that effective broking is about building and utilising networks, these enablers are key attributes of the brokerage model.

At a broader policy level, in addition to the need for dissemination of good practice, training and career development for brokers and adequate and dedicated resourcing for brokerage (Thomas *et al.* 2004, Yarnit *et al.* 2005), those involved in developing a broking culture call for support at a national level, in the form of a brokers' network (Canadian Health Services Research Foundation 2003). This aligns well with research into communities of practice which focusses on the developmental aspects of people working together to facilitate their learning (Wenger 1998).

### **Methodology**

Multi-method, multi-site techniques were employed to investigate effective training brokerage arrangements in rural Australia, and to link these to individual and industry outcomes. Enhancers and inhibitors to brokerage were also identified. The multi-stage methodology comprised a telephone survey of potential brokers, case studies of good practice, and input from stakeholders through workshops and a reference group. The study intentionally focussed on good practice models of training brokerage. One of its limitations is that it does not consider examples where

brokerage has failed. However, the inhibitors to good practice brokerage identified during the project suggest reasons why brokerage may fail. These relate to processes, resources and policy.

### *Survey data*

The purpose of the telephone survey was to identify existing broking arrangements in Australian primary industry by contacting approximately 100 organisations and agencies of the types that were found to assume the role of broker in previous research discussed above. Potential participants were identified using the investigators' extensive database of contacts. The sample was expanded using a snowballing technique. The sample included all agricultural industry sectors and the NRM sector, and all Australian States and the Northern Territory.

Data were analysed with the aid of SPSS computer software. A two-step cluster analysis procedure was employed to analyse common patterns of broking behaviour by the sampled organisations. Two-step cluster analysis is an exploratory tool designed to reveal natural groupings (or clusters) within a data set that would otherwise not be apparent (SPSS Version 12.0 Help File). Further analysis was conducted to determine differences in broking arrangements according to location, industry, and organisation type.

### *Case studies*

Six in-depth case studies of good broking practice were identified from among the 100 organisations surveyed. Potential case studies were identified to represent the variety of broking arrangements identified from the telephone survey, and were not necessarily the most active brokers. Data for the case studies were collected by individual interviews with brokers, clients, training providers and other relevant stakeholders. Interviews were audio taped and later transcribed. Transcripts were analysed manually for themes. To enhance transferability of findings, case studies included thick, rich, narrative description (Stake 1995).

### *Stakeholder involvement*

Stakeholder involvement was facilitated by the formation of a project Reference Group, presentation of three interactive stakeholder workshops to validate project findings and provide input into the development of a step-by-step manual, and by the presentation of case studies of good practice brokerage at workshops.

### **Training brokers: who are they and how do they operate?**

Training brokers were classified according to their organisation type: not-for-profit, commercial, and government. Over half the sample (n=51) were not-for-profit organisations, such as agricultural industry organisations, and natural resource management and catchment management associations. A number of those engaged



in brokerage activities also identified the provision of training as their core activity or one of their core activities. This group was further divided into training providers who used brokerage principles and training providers who also acted as brokers. By identifying this second group of training providers we have expanded the work of Yarnit *et al.* (2005), who did not explore a full brokerage role for learning providers. A third broad group of brokers was identified as 'other' brokers. Organisations in this group had no involvement or pecuniary interest in the provision of training.

Cluster analysis revealed that broking activity occurred in three spheres: client activity, training provider activity, and other stakeholder (network contacts and network behaviour) activity. Only seven of the 98 organisations surveyed were in the most active category for all of these clusters. The seven included a wide range of organisations: two state industry training bodies; one state farmer association; one commercial training provider; an agricultural college; one government primary industry department commodity section and a university rural research and development centre that is not focussed on primary industry.

### **What does training brokerage involve?**

Training brokerage represents a continuum of activities designed to better match training needs and opportunities. The activities are: inform providers and potential clients about needs and opportunities; refer clients and providers to each other; modify training; negotiate content and /or delivery between potential clients and providers; develop training programs to fill gaps, but for others to deliver; and to invest financial and human resources in training brokerage. The focus of the current study was on those individuals and organisations who actively and purposefully brokered training. These included farmer organisations and groups, government extension providers and other government programs.

### **Why might brokerage fail?**

While the study concentrated on good practice in training brokerage, some general comments were provided by case study interviewees and telephone survey participants, regarding inhibitors to brokerage. In terms of processes, a breakdown in communication processes at a critical but late stage of development, negatively affected the quality of the training, and suggests that brokers should not become complacent when collaborative processes are working effectively, because this could well be the stage when problems arise. Not surprisingly, the issue of insufficient resources (financial, human, time) was identified a number of times as an inhibitor to brokerage, particularly in terms of the effects on continuity of staffing and programs. Lack of continuity of programs subsidising training drew attention to the potential impact of policy on brokerage.

### **Case studies of four training brokers**

The process of broking was tracked in the six case study sites. Selected findings from four of the case studies only are presented here because of restricted space. To

reflect the survey sample, two of the cases are not-for-profit organisations, one is a government department and the other is a commercial business.

Case study 1: Department of Primary Industries Water & Environment (DPIWE) Dairy Branch

This branch of a Tasmanian State government department provides extension services and brokers mainly non-accredited<sup>2</sup> training for its clients. This training is targetted specifically to the needs of dairy farmers.

The case study highlights the development of a non-accredited one-day workshop on Making progress for young dairy farmers. The workshop was specifically targetted at providing support for young dairy farmers to achieve success in the industry, and covered topics such as the business environment, creating wealth, building skills and net worth.

Case study 2: Solly Business Services (Solly)

This small private consultancy is a commercial business located in South Australia that brokers both accredited and non-accredited training for its clients. It has close links with key industry bodies such as Meat and Livestock Australia.

The case study highlights the development of a one-day workshop on *Growing the farm business*. It covered topics such as generating profit and wealth, options for expansion, business structures, people and succession planning and natural resource management. The workshop was not accredited and was offered to four different groups of participants.

Case study 3: Fitzroy Basin Association (FBA)

This natural resource management regional association in Central Queensland is a not-for-profit organisation that has multiple stakeholders. It acts as a third party broker to facilitate training that integrates NRM and cattle management practices.

The case study highlights the development of a *Cattle and Catchments*<sup>TM</sup> programme to integrate production and conservation objectives. The programme comprised a free introductory field day, a two-day workshop, a visit to each participating farm business and a follow up field day and bus trip to a grazing property and research station. The first offering of the programme was non-accredited, but plans are underway to seek accreditation before it is offered again.

Case study 4: Victorian Grains Industry Training Network (VGITN)

This not-for-profit grains industry training group has membership including farmers, training providers and other stakeholders. It is funded by a farmer organisation with in-kind support from the State department of primary industry. It employs a paid coordinator to broker both accredited and non-accredited training.

The case study highlights the development of an accredited *Header Operations* course targetted at young people, to meet an identified skills gap in the industry. The course included technical aspects of using machinery and crop harvesting, as well as occupational health and safety and workplace communication.

*Getting started: identifying training needs and engaging people*

The case studies showed that brokers worked closely with two key groups of players in identifying training needs: industry organisations and farmers. This ensured a focus on current and projected needs, and a balance between farm business and industry sector requirements. In the DPIWE case, training needs for young dairy farmers were identified at a dairy industry strategic planning workshop, and further clarified at a meeting between DPIWE, the peak industry body, the Share Farmers Association and a group of young dairy farmers. In the Solly case, the need for business training was identified by client requests. The broker then had discussions with associates and key industry stakeholders to determine how these needs could best be met.

In each of the cases, brokers targetted those clients who they knew would most benefit from the proposed training, and who they thought would be most likely to participate. This ensured good participation rates, relevance of content to the audience, and allowed training providers to better meet participant expectations. For example, Solly approached clients individually, as well as through its extensive networks within the agricultural training sector. The process of obtaining feedback on the possibility of offering the workshop was another key method for engaging people in the proposed course.

In the FBA case study, farmers in two specific catchment areas were targetted by the broker for training. These catchment areas were chosen because they already had well established catchment groups that could help to engage participants, and they contained a number of landholders who were likely to be receptive to the proposed training because of their age (30–40), and because they had undertaken other training in similar topics.

In the VGITN case, the paid coordinator has an excellent understanding of the training needs of the grain farming families that she serves. She has different email and fax lists for people at different stages of their learning journeys, and encourages them onto a new learning challenge when she thinks they are ready. The initial offering of the *Header Operations* course was oversubscribed due to the reputation and credibility of the training brokered by VGITN.

*Identifying, negotiating and planning appropriate training*

Selection of the right training provider to assist in planning and developing the programme was a critical decision for each broker. Training providers had to be credible, well respected, able to connect with farmers and have a thorough knowledge of their training topic. In all cases, the training provider was well known to the broker, and in the DPIWE and FBA cases had worked with the broker previously.

Brokers worked closely with the training provider, as well as other relevant stakeholders such as industry organisations, at appropriate stages of the planning process. For example, in the VGITN case a group of farmers, header contractors and three RTOs met to decide on the skills that were necessary for the new entrant group targetted for the *Header Operations* course. The coordinator then linked the identified skills to competencies for accredited training courses. The FBA case describes regular round table meetings between two or three representatives from the

training provider and broker organisations to define programme objectives, find common ground and negotiate content and format of the new programme, to meet the NRM objectives of the broker and production needs of farmers. In the DPIWE and VGITN cases in particular, industry legitimisation of the newly-developed course was important for course credibility and participation rates, as it ensured relevance of content, and compliance with industry guidelines and standards.

Brokers were also instrumental in ensuring good course participation rates by coordinating delivery of programmes to meet participant needs, in terms of location, time and timing. The workshops brokered by Solly were marketed and run early in the year when farmers had the time and financial confidence to take part, while the VGITN course in *Header Operations* was run in the winter when people were not needed for work on farms and the machinery was available for training.

### *Evaluation and further training*

Evaluation of the brokered training, and the ability to make changes as a result of feedback, was integral to the broking process. Brokers made changes to existing programmes before offering them again, and had adequate time, resources and capacity to identify and plan further training and support to meet participants' ongoing needs.

In the Solly and FBA case studies the broker worked with the training provider to adapt and develop workshops from one to the next, based on feedback and questions from participants. For Solly, strong demand from the first two workshops resulted in a further two being offered. In the VGITN case, the success of the *Header Operations* course in terms of client satisfaction and employment outcomes, led to plans to sell the course to training providers for use in different locations, as well as to run more courses locally. Income from the sale of the course will allow VGITN to broker further training for its clients.

In the DPIWE and FBA case studies, evaluation of the training indicated that participants required further support. DPIWE is developing a follow up programme for young dairy farmers to address this need. In the FBA case, government funding was sourced to increase localised support and training for farmers in production and catchment management.

### **The broking process: stages and principles**

The case studies and survey data indicate that broking activity does not differ significantly across industry sectors, locations or organisations. Each case illustrates the importance of relationships of trust between broker, client and provider. Trust is identified in the literature as a key attribute of effective brokerage (Crombie 2002, Greer and Scudds 2004, Canadian Health Services Research Foundation 2004). Supporting findings from Kilpatrick *et al.* (2002) and Mitchell (2004), each of the brokers has well developed facilitation skills which allow them to work across the provider–industry–training sectors. Within each case there is clear evidence of well developed processes for sharing ideas and accessing information and resources, as well as for evaluating outcomes of brokered training. These three process areas are identified by Mitchell (2004) as enablers of effective networks. Effective broking is dependent on building and utilising such networks.

From the case studies, three broad stages in the broking process were identified: (1) getting started, (2) matching training needs and opportunities and (3) evaluating the broking process. These stages have similarities with the five stages identified by Yarnit *et al.* (2005), and a significant point of comparison is the identification of evaluation of the broking process (referred to by Yarnit *et al.* as continuous quality improvement) as a discrete and critical stage. The models differ slightly in that Yarnit's first two stages focussed specifically on creating the institutional and policy environment for effective broking and on building the capacity of brokers, whereas these activities are incorporated into stages (1) and (2) respectively of the process observed in the current study.

The findings also indicate that good broking practice is underpinned by a set of ten generic principles. Brokers should (1) be learner-centred; (2) have links to, and build relationships of trust with local networks; (3) encourage a learning culture (nurturing); (4) develop and maintain a wide network of stakeholders to identify emerging needs and awareness of other training opportunities; (5) have links to, and cultivate a relationship of trust with training providers; (6) maintain a continual awareness of training opportunities and gaps; (7) have appropriate professional standards in place and comply with relevant legislation; (8) actively match needs to training; (9) assure the quality of the training provided as a result of brokerage; and (10) evaluate the broking process for credibility and quality assurance.

Although these principles are applicable across all broking contexts, different contexts may call for flexibility in their implementation. The stages in the broking process can be aligned with the ten principles. Principles 1 to 7 relate to the first stage (getting started), principles 8 to 9 relate to the second stage (matching training needs and opportunities), and principle 10 relates to the third stage (evaluating the broking process).

### **Benefits of training brokerage**

Training brokerage delivers a range of benefits for each of the stakeholder groups involved, namely individuals, broking organisations and training providers, and in the case of the current study, for the rural and NRM sectors. Overall, findings confirm that brokerage contributes to the development of a learning culture within and between those involved in the broking process. This supports research by Kilpatrick *et al.* (2001) and Yarnit *et al.* (2005).

#### *For individuals*

The findings indicate that participants receive training that is targetted to local needs and conditions, is accessible and affordable and is linked to specific outcomes. Specific outcomes included employment outcomes for participants in the VGITN *Header Operations* course, and receipt of incentive funding to implement NRM practices on their properties for participants in the FBA *Cattle and Catchments*<sup>TM</sup> course. Accessibility and cost effectiveness are also identified by Kilpatrick and Bound (2001) as immediate benefits of brokered training.

As part of the training brokerage process, individuals are encouraged to play an active role in their learning/training pathway, including the development of learning support networks. These longer-term benefits of brokered training are also

identified by Kilpatrick *et al.* (2001) and Miller (2001). Brokers assist by facilitating participation and by developing learning pathways for individuals and groups. This continuity of service to learners is clearly illustrated by the activities of the paid coordinator in the VGITN case study, and in the activities of the FBA sub-regional group in facilitating communication between farmers and linking them to relevant expertise within and outside the region. In particular, the benefits of brokered training extend well beyond the planning and delivery of the course, to include pre- and post-delivery contact, support and encouragement, as well as client advocacy. These key functions of brokers as agents of change are also identified in the literature (Miller 2001, Canadian Health Services Research Foundation 2003, Thomas *et al.* 2004).

*For broking organisations and training providers*

The benefits of brokerage for broking organisations and training providers include a range of resource-related issues, as well as organisational (and community) capacity building. For example, broking allows those organisations to pool their limited resources, and to deliver cost effective training by creating the maximum amount of leverage from the training budget. The VGITN case study is a good example, illustrating how a relatively small investment in a part time salary for the coordinator has resulted in the coordination and delivery of an estimated \$200 000 per year of training for farmers in the grains industry. Further financial benefits include plans by VGITN to sell course materials to training providers in other regions.

Brokerage provides opportunities for collaboration and learning, involving a wide range of individuals and groups within and external to the community. The DPIWE and FBA case studies describe a symbiotic relationship between broker and training provider, which enhances the capacity of both organisations, by building on each other's strengths and recognising and supporting each other's areas of weakness. Research by Gientzotis Consulting (2003) identified one of the key benefits of brokerage for training providers as an increased awareness of industry need and increased links with industry. The development of the course for young dairy farmers in DPIWE, and for header operators in VGITN, are good examples of linkages with the dairy and grains industries respectively.

*For rural industries, the NRM sector and rural communities*

Findings from the study support those of Kilpatrick *et al.* (2001) regarding the industry benefits of joint approaches to learning. Brokered training can lead to a more innovative and competitive rural sector, in terms of a better-equipped workforce and increased adoption of new practices. For example, the FBA case focusses on improving farm business performance and sustainability in terms of production and natural resource management, and the DPIWE and Solly cases deal with improving business management and profitability. The brokerage process focusses on quality assurance of the training, highlighting the importance of the selection of expert training providers, and the rigorous evaluation processes undertaken by brokers and providers. Industry and community benefits are illustrated in the VGITN case which provides a solution to ongoing skills shortages. In at least two of the cases



(DPIWE and VGITN) the brokered training also addressed issues of an ageing workforce and the need to support and train new and/or younger entrants.

### Conclusions

This study complements and extends the relatively small but growing body of research on the significant role that brokerage can and does play in lifelong learning. Although set in the Australian agricultural context, it is suggested that the findings are transferable to the wider education and training environment.

Training brokers are well placed to further develop a collaborative rather than competitive training culture. In terms of the agricultural sector, where resources for training are often limited, there is an urgent need for increased collaboration in identifying, developing and delivering training opportunities. Although training providers can and do form collaborations to increase the scope and relevance of their training, not all training providers have the resources or capacity to do so. It is argued that the role of training brokers is therefore critical to the process of matching training needs and opportunities.

Within the agricultural sector Australia is currently making a huge investment in research, development and extension, and NRM delivery. The broking model has significant potential for improving communication, reducing duplication, enhancing coordination and fostering collaboration across regions, industries and issues. Policy makers, industry organisations and other institutional investors in training have a responsibility to support and facilitate the implementation of good practice brokerage. Specifically, they need to promote good broking principles and practice, and initiate, trial and implement broking models to create sustainable systems for facilitating training within the rural and NRM sectors. As with any new area of activity, it will also be important to develop mechanisms for fostering communication and coordination amongst training brokers, including the development of communities of practice.

### *Implications of training brokerage*

There are a number of implications of the broking model, most of which could be readily translated to a range of industry sectors. For the individuals (farmers) featured in the case studies, broking provides a simple and supported pathway for identifying the training that is available to best meet their needs (compared to the necessity of having to navigate an increasingly complex vocational education and training system themselves). For training brokers, the broking model provides tools for matching training provision to client needs, and models for funding the training brokerage role. The implications for training providers are a simple pathway for making their training accessible to a greater number of farmers, opportunities to better adapt training to suit client needs, and better knowledge about competition in the training market, thus reducing duplication and enhancing the benefits of competition. For policy makers, industry bodies and institutional investors in training, the broking model provides a mechanism by which to reduce duplication of effort in assessing training needs and developing and delivering training. It is an opportunity to get a better return on investment in training by focussing on



brokerage that will promote training participation by ensuring training is effective in meeting needs.

### Notes

1. A Registered Training Organisation is an organisation/individual registered with an Australian State or Territory registering authority that delivers training and/or conducts assessments and issues nationally recognised qualifications.
2. In Australia, VET can be accredited or non-accredited. Accredited training is recognised under the Australian Qualifications Training Framework, and participants are issued with a Certificate or Statement of Attainment on successful completion. This Certificate is recognised across all Australian States and Territories and provides a training pathway (e.g. Certificate I, Certificate II, and so on). Non-accredited training is not formally recognised under the Australian Qualifications Training Framework and does not form part of a nationally recognised training pathway. Government funding is generally more readily available for the development of accredited training.

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