

Industry Workforce Engagement – is there a better way?

- A discussion paper on the State's Skills Formation Strategy program by a former SFS project manager

The Skills Formation Strategy (SFS) program helps Queensland industries and communities to work together to plan and develop their workforce. A key objective of Skills Queensland is to support workforce planning and development. The program provides seed funding to set up formal industry and community networks to identify common workforce needs and challenges. Short and long term strategies to address the identified issues are then developed and implemented. Each Skills Formation Strategy is funded to an amount around \$120,000 per year for a project officer and operating costs. The Skills Formation Strategy framework provides a forum for industry members to:

- lead the development of activities to address workforce issues and support business goals
- engage with key stakeholders to develop innovative solutions
- develop ongoing industry, regionally owned processes that are able to address labour and workforce issues into the future.

Since 2003 there have been over 50 strategies supported throughout Queensland and currently another 4 being supported. How many of these have successfully transitioned following the cessation of Government funding?

Whilst Skills Formation Strategies themselves are a good engagement “method” or “strategy”, they require Industry Leadership and Funding and to be established at a time to match skills demand. There is an argument that they could be part-funded, with an industry contribution, and operate over a longer period. It often takes two-years to build the collaborative relationships with industry before any actions can occur.

Whilst SFS' in Queensland, may have created a better match between people's skills and the requirements of their job, they have done little to increase the demand for high-level skills (which requires a concerted effort to support employers to make better use of their employees' skills, provide better information about the skills needed and available and facilitate internal mobility among local labour markets). This requires effort to:

- Help the economy move up the value-added chain
- Stimulate the creation of more high-skilled and high value-added jobs; and
- Foster entrepreneurship.

Many SFS' have achieved little to actually tackle unemployment and help young people to gain a foothold in the labour market. With many regional and industry strategies, unless the investment in Industry (Workforce) Engagement is matched with Job creation, Infrastructure projects (to help employ apprentices and trainees) and economic stimulus that flows to the sub-regions and Small-Medium Enterprise (SMEs) - then investment in Industry (Workforce) engagement is largely wasted. Workforce engagement needs to be timed when industry is best positioned to employ apprentices and trainees (i.e. the industry concerned or the economy needs to be in a growth phase to employ). Apprenticeships and traineeships require employers to take on employees. When economies are slow, employers are reluctant to do so, resulting in limited take up of initiatives and wasted resources.

The establishment of several Skills Formation Strategies was not at a time when industry was prepared to employ apprentices and develop skills. Some strategies appear to have been created in response to a political, rather than actual need (i.e. the initiation of the SFS was not demand-driven). Examples being the Atherton Tablelands SFS, and the current Far North Queensland (FNQ) SFS, the Transport-Logistics SFS, Sustainable energy SFS, The Film, TV and Digital Content Skills Formation Strategy and the Aquaculture. Some Skills Formation Strategies have been duplicative over Industry-led engagement processes. A case in point is Far North Queensland (FNQ) Skills Formation Strategy (SFS).

From 2008-2011 the Atherton Tablelands Skills Formation Strategy was funded as a result of the *Queensland Skills Plan 2008*. This Strategy was very successful in that it achieved a high degree of community “ownership”, meeting the third objective of “*develop ongoing industry, regionally owned processes that are able to address labour and workforce issues into the future*”. The Atherton Tablelands Skills Formation Strategy became the Tablelands Industry Workforce Group Inc. (TIWG) and has been industry funded since transitioning from Government support. It was one of the few strategies that were funded by Government for a three (3) year (rather than two year) period at a cost of \$360,000. This effort has been duplicated by the creation of a ‘whole-of-region’ strategy that also ‘covered’ the Atherton Tablelands with no linkage to the original, successful, sub-regional strategy. It takes up to two years to build collaborative relationships. As a result, duplication of effort and competition for scarce resources has occurred.

Skills Queensland claim that “*the workforce planning research done by these groups at the local and regional level helps to inform the broader needs across Queensland and inform the development strategies in other industries and regions of Queensland*” (Camm 13 September, 2012). However, engagement, in my experience, has been selective rather than broad. The true picture of what is required to achieve a skilled and sustainable workforce may not be gained through the Skills Formation Strategy process.

A Way Forward

Learning from the Atherton Tablelands Skills Formation Strategy was that the Scope and breadth of strategies work better at the more localised (sub-regional) rather than whole-of-region level to develop place-based solutions to employment and skilling. A larger, whole-of-region Strategy, does not allow for the development of sub-regional and industry/employer specific workforce development and skilling solutions.

Allowing local industries and communities to own the whole process and implement locally tailored solutions to their workforce challenges is a key element of the ongoing success of such programs and is one of the reasons why the Tablelands Industry Workforce Group has continued.

Government needs to not duplicate process where it already exists and streamline information-gathering processes (this includes Skills Formation Strategies). From the Tableland Rural Industry Workforce Survey Report, December 2010 “*Rural Industry feels both over-engaged and over-surveyed, particularly in the area of workforce - but not listened to. There is a feeling that information is collected for information’s sake but does not result in action to satisfactorily address issues. The regional horticulture sector alone has been surveyed at least six times in the last 12 months*”.

Whilst Skills Formation Strategies themselves are a good engagement “method” or “strategy”, they should be Industry (employer) led, Industry and/or employer-funded and timed to better match skills demand.

References:

Camm, R (13 September, 2012) International recognition for Queensland’s local skills and workforce development solutions <http://www.skills.qld.gov.au/Latest-News/International-recognition-for-Queensland-s-local-skills-and-workforce-development-solutions.aspx>

Spies, P.R. (December 2010) Tableland Rural Industry Workforce Survey – Report, Tableland Industry Workforce Group Inc. <http://www.tablelandworkforce.com.au/about/publications/>