



AgFutures

An evaluation of a place-based workforce
innovation project

Executive Summary

Kira Clarke, Madeleine Morey, David Longley
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Kira Clarke is the Principal Research Fellow, Madeleine Morey is a Senior Research Officer and David Longley is a Senior Research Officer in the Education, Skills and Training team in the BSL Social Policy and Research Centre.

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Brotherhood of St. Laurence
67 Brunswick Street
Fitzroy, Victoria 3065
Australia

ABN 24 603 467 024

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T (03) 9483 1183

www.bsl.org.au

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The Brotherhood of St. Laurence acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land and waterways on which our organisation operates. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past and present. In particular we acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which the AgFutures initiative took place, the Gunditjmara people, the Giraiwurung people, the Djargurdwurung people and the Gulidjan people.



Brotherhood
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty



Executive summary

The AgFutures project was developed in response to severe and long-term agricultural workforce shortages, and declining uptake and completion of entry-level agricultural programs among young workforce entrants in the Barwon South West region of Victoria that had been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Running from August 2022 to March 2025, the project brought together a team of six partners to design and test a new approach to collaborative workforce development that could more effectively meet the needs of young people experiencing disadvantage and unemployment, and agricultural employers. It engaged local employers, young people and community throughout the design phases of the project. The pilot of the AgFutures training product and delivery model took place in the Barwon South West region between July 2023 and October 2024.

The evaluation surfaces lessons on the benefits of sustained engagement with young people and employers to strengthen the design of pathways to entry-level work. It also shows the challenges of enabling innovation mindsets between partners, particularly when local conditions change and impact on project delivery.

A diverse partner group brought together local and national experts around a shared innovation ambition

Local partners included Brophy Family and Youth Services, South West TAFE and Food and Fibre Great South Coast. Two national partners, Dairy Australia and Skills Impact,¹ brought industry wide expertise to the design and delivery collaboration.

The Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL), a not-for-profit organisation based in Melbourne, was the coordinating organisation and led the operational and applied research components of the project. The six organisations came together to demonstrate the Foundational Capability Pathway (FCP) model. The FCP is a four-phase model that the partners used to guide the design of a training product and delivery approach aimed at setting young jobseekers up for entry-level work and multiple potential career paths within the agricultural sector.

¹ During the delivery of AgFutures Skills Impact transitioned from a Skills Service Organisation to one of the ten Jobs and Skills Councils (JSC), taking the name Skills Insight. For consistency they are referred to as Skills Impact throughout this evaluation.



Strong governance, a commitment to co-learning, and deep engagement with employers and young people strengthened collaboration

The partner group collaborated for 12 months to design a training product with units of competency that would prepare participants for entry-level on-farm roles. There were multiple components including extensive consultations with the local community, employer needs analysis, a community of practice (CoP) including local employment services and local government, and an employer and a youth reference group. The reference groups grounded the design decisions in the voices and insights of end users.

The training product design and model of delivery that resulted prioritised farm safety, wraparound support to enable young participants experiencing disadvantage to re-engage with education and work, and a delivery approach that aimed to build confidence and capability for increased work independence.

Strong project governance sustained partner investment and contribution throughout the project. Reference groups also strengthened the role of employers and young people in shaping the design of the AgFutures training and delivery model. Partners valued learning loops that drew on insights from monitoring participants during the pilot. These enabled real-time adaptations to the program.

Some limitations impacted the delivery of the pilot. They included challenges activating the TAFE as an innovation partner, and inconsistent contributions from local partners who were critical to understanding conditions impacting potential participants.

Piloting with young people and employers resulted in positive outcomes but was impacted by changing local conditions and structural barriers

There were significant positive outcomes for both the young people and employers who participated in the project. The young people reported a strengthened awareness of their career opportunities and increased confidence to stay engaged in education and employment. Critical enablers to the positive experience of young participants were supportive and flexible wraparound support from dedicated AgFutures support staff, and careful matching of employers to workers.

Employers who participated in AgFutures by hiring young workers were positive about both the breadth of skills developed through the TAFE training and the benefits of having a young worker on their farm. They also viewed the AgFutures operational staff, who supported them and the young people, as critical to helping them address the challenges and needs of young participants as they arose.

The project engaged 115 young people. Of this group, 38 were eligible for participation and 16 were onboarded to the pathway pilot. Several eligible and motivated potential participants were unable to take part due to a range of structural barriers, including insecure housing, a lack of transport and having significant health and wellbeing needs that limited their capacity to engage in work and learning.

Twelve young people employed by nine employers commenced a six-month combined employment and training pathway. Nine young people completed training and sustained six months of employment, with six continuing in employment post-pilot and six continuing further training towards their Certificate II in Agriculture.



In addition to the structural barriers above, there were also early challenges meeting the threshold number of participants needed by the TAFE to begin training delivery. This also affected completion numbers. Lessons shared between the TAFE and other local partners proved critical to building TAFE willingness to adopt a more flexible approach to minimum class numbers.

There were also notable contextual challenges to project implementation and delivery. Between initial project development and project delivery, local conditions changed significantly. Youth unemployment in the region reduced considerably and the priorities of local partners changed. In addition, drought conditions in 2024 and a reduction in milk prices affected employer engagement in the project. All of these changes made it much more difficult to recruit both young people and employers. Ultimately, they impacted the number of young people who completed the pilot pathway.

Sustaining strengthened networks and practices post-project requires local leadership and coordination

A final CoP convened in Warrnambool at the end of the project brought out shared enthusiasm for continuing to work in the joined-up, collaborative way established through AgFutures. Partners highlighted the involvement of young people and employers through reference groups, and enhanced local stakeholder awareness of the structural challenges young jobseekers face as key lessons that local partners can retain and expand on post-project.

At the conclusion of the project, both local partners were enthusiastic about carrying forward key lessons on working more effectively with young jobseekers who have high support needs. Partners were also pragmatic that the lack of ongoing coordinating infrastructure of the project would impact momentum and conditions for building on the project lessons. Key insights shared by partners, participants and local

employment stakeholders highlighted that there is a gap in the local coordination and leadership needed to sustain the strengthened networks and practices established through AgFutures.

There are further opportunities to demonstrate the joined-up practice and capability building components of the project

The project demonstrated both the impact of a dedicated support role for joining up the systems designed to support young people and the need for ongoing staff capability building in those systems.

The connector role played by AgFutures operational staff, alongside the sustained local governance that brought diverse local stakeholders together, offers potential systemic interventions for wider application in response to enduring youth unemployment and disengagement.

Local project partners, including the TAFE, agree that further staff upskilling is needed to build the capability of TAFE to engage, sustain and support young people with high support needs. This is a very encouraging takeaway from this project. An opportunity exists for both local partners and government to leverage the capability and insights of TAFE teachers involved in AgFutures to inform the design and trial of professional development for staff working with other learner groups that have high needs.



AgFutures: employers supporting innovation in local workforce development

Employers played a key role in the co-design and co-delivery of the AgFutures project. They wanted to invest in the future of the region's workforce. One said there 'hasn't been too many young people coming into the industry'. Participating employers wanted to create an industry where local young people could see a future for themselves on farms and build their own careers as farmers.

AgFutures presented a way to develop the professional skills that would aid a young person wherever their career journey took them. Employers saw AgFutures as an opportunity to develop their own skills to work with young people. They could gain management experience and be supported to build their capability to work with new employees.

Many attended workshops and completed surveys to help identify their workforce and skill needs, understand their expectations as employers and share insights on how a pathway for young people entering the industry should look. Employers were keen for young people to have a positive experience. They hoped to be role models, and support young people's connection to local community.

A range of farms employed AgFutures participants during the pilot. These included large-scale corporates through to small, family-owned farms. All employers who took on a young person agreed that the TAFE training aligned with their on-farm tasks. Employers were satisfied with the quality of the training, noting that young people who started work during the training were arriving on-farm with the skills required of an entry-level worker.

Employers found it rewarding to support young people who had no experience in the industry. They often found that teaching new staff benefited those already working on-farm; one noting that having someone younger around gave workers the opportunity to learn through teaching. Speaking about his young worker, another reflected it was, 'good to see his confidence grow', and that, 'my confidence is growing' as well.

Participating in AgFutures has led to changes in workplace practices for many employers. One, whose large farm employed three AgFutures participants, reported that AgFutures caused them to change recruitment and employee support systems, introducing a formalised mentoring system and regular HR check-ins for new employees. All employers said the supports provided by AgFutures operational staff helped young people build confidence and sustain employment, and they aimed to continue instituting similar supports across the workplace.

It's very rewarding seeing a young person excel

(AgFutures employer)



Case studies

Case study 1

Dev (AgFutures participant)

Dev, 17, grew up in Warrnambool and left school part-way through Year 11. He tried a few different things after school, but didn't find a fit. Dev enjoyed helping out on his girlfriend's father's farm, so when he heard about the AgFutures pathway at the end of 2023, he was keen to try it out.

In early February 2024, Dev met with AgFutures operational staff and shared his own long-term goal of owning a cattle and sheep farm. He started the TAFE training that month.

As an early school leaver with additional needs who was living out of home, Dev faced several barriers to work and study. He lacked financial resources, didn't have a licence and needed support to build his confidence. However, Dev had determination and used a support worker to help with study along with assistance from the AgFutures operational staff to address his practical challenges. Without this, he said would have found the training and navigating the pathway much harder.

With support, Dev felt able to speak up and ask for help when he needed it. At a meet and greet in March 2024, Dev disclosed to the farmer that he had ADHD. The employer said it was not an issue and offered Dev the job with flexible hours. With the support of AgFutures operational staff and his support worker, Dev was also able to access grants and funding so he could have the equipment he needed to work and study.

When his employer needed him to transition to a full-time job, he paused work, and with the support of operational staff, gained the driving hours for his provisional licence so he could drive himself to work.

Dev liked working on-farm because it was calming and he got to be outside with the animals. Although he preferred hands-on work, Dev said what he learnt at training helped him at work and he liked learning new things. AgFutures operational staff saw Dev's commitment to training change once he understood it would help him to become a farmer.

Participating in the AgFutures pathway made Dev feel confident that he had the skills needed to work in farming. Dev also said that through participating in the AgFutures pathway he felt more adult saying, 'I feel I have grown up and matured'.

At the completion of the AgFutures pilot Dev said that he wanted to finish his Certificate II in Agriculture and then go onto the Certificate III in Agriculture.



Case study 2

Matthew (AgFutures participant)

Matthew, 16, grew up in Warrnambool. He found returning to the classroom after COVID-19 challenging, and his mother supported his decision to leave school at the end of Year 9. Matthew joined a local work and study program. However, he had poor mental health and was unsure what to do. With support from his case worker, Matthew attended a farm visit and following that he signed up for AgFutures.

Matthew and his mum met with AgFutures operational staff in July 2023. Matthew did not have his driver's licence so it was agreed his mum would drive him to and from work. This meant Matthew would need an employer who would enable him to work on Fridays and Saturdays to fit around his mum's work schedule.

Matthew had a meet and greet with a farmer who showed him his dairy, calf shed and mill, and explained the different jobs involved in running the farm. The farmer was keen to support a young worker starting out in the sector and was willing to take Matthew on part-time. Matthew started work a week after the first meeting.

Starting out, Matthew felt that he was not as good or fast as the other workers at milking. He often felt unsure about what he should be doing each day. To address this, AgFutures operational staff asked the farmer if he could let Matthew know which tasks were coming up. Matthew started getting texts before his shifts listing what he needed to do. This helped reduce his anxiety.

Matthew said it took about three months to get the hang of the different jobs on-farm. Milking became easier and he felt less nervous asking his colleagues questions if he got stuck. Once TAFE training started, this also helped him build new skills, which he could then do on the farm without having to ask for support.

At TAFE, AgFutures operational staff observed that Matthew was withdrawn, did not speak in group settings and was not able to engage with the other young people. They found that working with Matthew one-on-one helped build his confidence. The 45-minute car rides with other young people to training also helped Matthew feel less anxious and he formed a strong friendship with two of other participants.

Matthew said that the TAFE training was 'way better than normal school and wasn't as stressful'. He said that he was nervous for the first couple of lessons, but having the AgFutures operational staff in the classroom was good because they helped when he got stuck on questions. He also said, 'they always stayed positive even if we were having a bad day.'

At the end of the AgFutures pathway, Matthew was working five days a fortnight. His main tasks were milking and cleaning the dairy. He liked everything about working on-farm saying, 'I'd rather be doing this than anything else.' Matthew said his role was now ongoing and he hoped to work for the same farmer long-term.

Way better than normal school and not as stressful.



Case study 3

Hilda (AgFutures participant)

Hilda, 19, grew up in Warrnambool. Having visited a cattle farm and worked as a stable hand briefly during school, she had developed an interest in agriculture. Hilda was connected to AgFutures through the local TAFE.

When she joined AgFutures, Hilda had been looking for farm work for several months, but found having no experience was a barrier. She also felt that it was difficult being a young woman trying to get into a male-dominated field.

Hilda was matched to a large corporate employer and began on-farm work in January 2024. She found the first week tough, but noticed that she was able to use habits and knowledge she had developed working at the stables. She found her experience with horses helped her understand the cows. Hilda started to develop a good rapport with the farm manager.

AgFutures training began in February. Hilda liked that lessons were interactive and not just in a classroom. Although some of the things she had already learnt to do were repeated, it was helpful when information was explained in a different way – such as learning why it was important not to stress the cows out in the dairy, not just being told not to.

Three months into employment, Hilda was excelling at work. She had started doing nearly all the jobs on-farm. This included administering medication, overseeing calving, updating data and doing paddock checks. Hilda found the farm manager patient as she learnt. Despite Hilda having had concerns about being the only woman on-farm, the manager had made her feel comfortable.

During training, Hilda found it challenging to attend on-site days at the TAFE because her farm was short staffed. On one of the training days, she got up for milking at four a.m. before travelling to class. Hilda also had some difficulties in the classroom. She had trouble focusing and found peers disruptive who she said 'could not concentrate'.

Over time, Hilda began to feel some frustration at work. The farm had a challenging calving season and they had to put down nearly 50 calves; broken equipment was not being fixed; and the drive between her accommodation and the farm had become tiring. AgFutures operational staff spoke to the regional manager who supported Hilda to stay in her job. Staff also helped identify and resolve communication breakdown.

At the end of AgFutures, Hilda was planning to continue working at the farm and hoped to move into a second-in-command role. This more senior position would give her more responsibility and a full picture of what happens on-farm. Hilda said participating in AgFutures had made her more hopeful about her future, 'It has opened a lot more doors, more than I thought that could be opened.'

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