Work Inspiration Case Study: Ag Inspirations

1. Pilot Name and Location
Ag Inspirations was the Work Inspiration pilot implemented in the Scenic Rim/West Moreton and Logan regions of Queensland (rural – urban fringe of Brisbane) and involved visits to seven local businesses and the Brisbane Produce Markets.

An Industry Specific Model – incorporating industry associations and peak bodies
A unique feature of this industry specific cluster model was the inclusion of two tiers of Employers: 4 Industry Associations and 8 Host Employers.

These two tiers facilitated the depth of industry immersion for teachers and students and harnessed industry association support, knowledge and expertise to support the design and implementation of this pilot. Eight host employers were empowered to not only design and plan their own employer driven programs but to engage leader Industry Associations as a platform for achieving sustainability beyond the pilot phase.

Formation of the Ag Inspirations Working Group
The Queensland Agriculture industry peak body (QLD Department of Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry) and Industry Associations (Rural Skills Australia, Growcom and Agforce) combined to provide industry specific support, and guidance consultation and coordination during the planning, design and implementation phase.

Training Queensland, Education Queensland, Emmaus College, Kooralbyn International School and the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (Regional Education, Skills and Jobs Planning Coordinator) and the Worklinks Partnership Broker were also members of the working group. Education Queensland was the lead for schools, and Rural Skills Australia who played a very important role from design through to implementation, was the industry lead during the Ag Inspirations Pilot.

The key Agriculture Industry contact person is Terri Henri at Rural Skills Australia (RSA): terrih@ruralskills.com.au
The Eight Host Employers
The eight host employers constituted a cluster of small and medium businesses. These businesses included the Scenic Rim Robotic Dairy; Kalfresh; Kengoon Farming; AJ Bush & Sons; Symbio Alliance; PEET Ltd and Brisbane Produce Markets (a large employer). They offered students and teachers insights into cutting edge technology, state of the art equipment and rural services, along with exposure to diverse aspects of their business. Collectively they allowed students to take the journey from the farm to the market, reflecting the character of a supply chain.

These local businesses have a commitment to their local community and they wanted to offer young people an inspiring opportunity to see and explore their world of work, and to learn more about their own aspirations, expectations and career directions.

In summary, partners sought to highlight the recruitment needs of the industry and to raise aspirations and manage expectations in young people to explore and make decisions about their career paths.

2. Students and Schools Involved
A mixed cohort of sixteen students (Years 9 – 12), representing six schools from the Scenic Rim and Logan Regions (including state, catholic and independent schools) participated in the Ag Inspirations pilot. The students, including both male and female, had mixed interests and academic ability. Approximately half of the group had already participated in agricultural or related science studies at school. The cohesion, peer to peer sharing and support across the schools was inspiration in itself.

3. Partnership Brokers and Evaluator
The Ag Inspirations Pilot and partnership was facilitated by Worklinks Inc, the Partnership Broker provider. Due to its exciting complexity (the cluster approach being developed, and the participation of students from six different schools), the cooperation of education as well as the eight host employer members of the cluster was of paramount importance. Effective coordination was required, hence the vital role of Rural Skills Australia and the industry bodies, in close collaboration with Worklinks.

The evaluation process and feedback/report was written by Ms Brenda Desplace (Partnership Broker – Worklinks Inc) – contact is brendadesplace@worklinks.com.au

Ms Desplace has produced a comprehensive report on the 2012 pilot, plus a very helpful handbook for interested employers who may wish to become part of such a cluster approach. Further resources that were produced by Rural Skills Australia are also available.

4. Pilot Summary
Members of the Ag Inspirations working group and the eight host employers were invited to an Employer Workshop, where Work Inspiration background and the Three Insights resources were explored and the value of a cluster approach considered. Each employer was invited to conduct their own Big Conversation event, and plan their on-site activities for the students. Support was available from the working group if required.

The pilot program was held over six days (23/11/12 – 30/11/12). Day 1 provided an introduction to the program, which included inspirational industry guest speakers. Days 2 – 5 consisted of a series of visits and interactions (bus tours) with the eight host employers. The employer associations, teachers and the Worklinks Partnership Broker also participated. Day 6 was a review day in which students also presented their feedback and learning to the employers, employer associations, parents, teachers, principals, and three tiers of government.

The visits to the premises of the eight cluster members (host employers) comprised of a mix of tours, talks, career conversations with employees.
and apprentices, hands-on activities, taste testing, and reflective activities. Each host employer was encouraged to design and deliver their own program, generally of 2 – 3 hour duration. A total of 38 different opportunities for students and employers to interact and engage in activities that were relevant to the three Work Inspiration insights were created over this six day period.

5. Key Successes and Success Factors

- By cross referencing the evaluative data from students, employers and teachers involved in the actual pilot, with the findings of the Ag Inspirations Report, one can confidently state that this pilot was particularly successful; not only for the participants, but also in developing a more collaborative and cohesive industry cluster approach to Work Inspiration.

- Students felt that they had been given an opportunity to get out there and get a taste of the agricultural industry. Through their interaction with a range of employers, they found out how it works behind the scenes and the opportunities available. They felt that they had been inspired by the range of career options in the industry. The cluster of eight host businesses and industry associations from agriculture had proven itself to be a most appropriate model for Work Inspiration development with SMEs.

- More than 90% of participating students agreed or strongly agreed that the program had increased their awareness of career options, and had enabled them to learn how careers develop. 80% of students also felt that the experience had increased their motivation to do well at school, and to develop their aspirations regarding career goal setting.

- In this particular pilot, teachers were fully engaged in the planning process (through the Ag Inspirations Working Group) and keenly participated in, and closely observed the actual program. Six teachers responded to the evaluative survey forms and offered a range of comments about the future of WI.
Teachers agreed or strongly agreed (a score of 4.75 or 95%) that the pilot was helpful to their students’ career planning, and that the Work Inspiration initiative should be an integral part of career development programs for young Australians.

Teachers not only valued the beyond the classroom character of the pilot but strongly praised the range of experiences and student – employer interactions offered to the students by the cluster approach. Teachers were impressed with how the student presentations had revealed how much they gained from the pilot. Teachers have also commented upon how students’ confidence has improved post Ag Inspirations, and students are more focused on studies and their career pathways.

The employers agreed or strongly agreed that the students were inspired by the range of career options in the industry, that the Three Insights were helpful to their conversations with students and that the program should be an integral part of career development in Australian schools. 85% of supervising staff from host employers felt that Work Inspiration was a worthwhile experience and 99% thought that engaging with schools adds value to their organisation.

Employers also made mention of how their participation had:
- Boosted work experience in their organisation
- Offered their apprentices an opportunity to speak as role models
- Exposed their ‘non-mainstream’ business activity to young people and to schools
- Exposed young people to a range of employers, and engaged them in meaningful dialogue about and across their industries.

Other post pilot successes have included Apprenticeship and Traineeship outcomes for students. An Ag Inspirations employer is keen to implement another WI model that will interface with a more structured work place model.
6. Key Learnings

For next time: local application

- Consolidate the cluster approach which provides small businesses in one industry an opportunity to offer students a wide range of knowledge, career conversations and dialogue. Employers would be pleased to have further access to ideas and materials that could enhance hands-on activities at their site.

- Enhance the hands-on activities aspect of the program. Students and teachers suggested that interaction (tasks and conversations) had a more positive impact upon the learning of young people than being ‘talked at’.

- Highly value and retain the role of a facilitator/broker, and coordinator, not only to organise the overall program, but maintain the underpinning partnership between cluster members, and specifically between Industry Associations, local businesses and schools.

The long term future of Work Inspiration: national

- The engagement of the Schools and Education Department in the Ag Inspirations working group resulted in teachers becoming much closer to the actual program and more able to point out future possibilities. Teachers are keen to help develop the WI program and explore with employers a range of applications. They are also able to develop follow-up activity back at school that helps to sustain the impact of WI on the students’ career development. Such active engagement is timely, given the development of the new Work Studies Years 9 and 10 national curriculum syllabus.

- 80% of teachers strongly agreed or agreed that they would recommend Work Inspiration over work experience, but a closer look at their responses indicates that they value both.

- Their feedback raises the exciting possibility of Work Inspiration being used as a precursor to work experience (Structured Workplace Learning, School Based Apprenticeships and/or year 10/11 generic placements). Teachers also valued the Work Inspiration experience as a helpful resource for the student Senior Education & Training (SET) planning process, a mandatory personal learning and pathway plan process in Queensland.

- “We can build Ag Inspirations and the learning into our curriculum. I will fit it into Work Education and Ag Studies”. “WI would fit in well as a preliminary program to SET plans”.

- The success of Ag Inspirations pilot for the employers could well be further boosted, if the program incorporates a student research project to explore how the image of Agricultural industry to young people could be made more attractive (a real concern of some of the cluster members). Student ideas could become a feature of the day 6 student presentations. In this cluster approach activities occur across an industry, rather than within one employer’s boundaries. Improving the image and making an industry more teenage friendly are important objectives for certain Australian industries. Industry Associations who wish to communicate these messages can become an integral part of the Work Inspiration campaign and young people can make a valued contribution.

- The facilitation of the underpinning partnership and the brokerage coordination of the cluster Work Inspiration program were demanding (coordinating eight businesses and six schools). In terms of skills levels and time, the RSA officer and the Partnership Broker were essential contributors.

“Students can participate in Ag Inspirations and then follow the employer that they feel most suits their career path and seek work experience”.

[Image: work-inspiration-logo]
The need for coordination and brokerage was highlighted when only 50% of employers who evaluated the Work Inspiration pilot felt that their cluster approach could be led and resourced by employers alone. If the enthusiasm of schools and students further increases the demand for their program, how will it be sustained without such a resource?

7. Special Feature
The Ag Inspirations pilot has offered the national partners an approach and a model of importance. As stated in the Ag Inspirations evaluation report, "Ag Inspirations created a simple and streamlined way of presenting the range of roles that exist within the agricultural industry". The cluster approach may also be the key to engaging small and micro businesses in Work Inspiration activity whether they are, in an existing cluster or not.

8. Recommendations to National Partners
- Explore the relevance/feasibility of the cluster approach to a range of industries (including Agriculture) and promote that information to trade and industry associations, chambers of commerce, local government and potential Industry brokers, e.g. RSA.
- Within such exploration, develop evaluative tools that potentially link the Work Inspiration cluster model to the goals of economic development clusters, such as the value to businesses of more collaborative and effective supply chains. Can a Work Inspiration cluster generate social capital between enterprises that are somewhat interdependent? There is some suggestion that this pilot strengthened collaboration between Industry association cluster members who were working on a shared project and also sharing resources for the first time.
Can this be an additional benefit for enterprises and therefore a promotional message for Work Inspiration?

- The Ag Inspirations model can be used as a platform to connect and partner with the national industry skills councils, especially where Work Inspiration can be explored further as an entry level element of an Industry specific Work Force Development Strategy. This is especially the case in industries that have skill shortages, or where select industry bodies have highlighted that their entry level attraction and recruitment strategies need to be reviewed or revamped nationally. Further to this, the Australian Skills Connect suite of products and services, (including workforce development) is being promoted by most National Industry Skills Councils and provides a unique opportunity for Work Inspiration.

9. Reflecting Upon the Evaluation

This was a wonderful pilot that really tested a special approach to Work Inspiration development. The Ag Inspirations evaluation report and this case study reveal some special opportunities for the national partners to seize or create.