

GROWING IRRIGATION EXPERTISE IN A KEY REGION

Full course name: Certificate IV in Irrigation

Project lead: Sunraysia TAFE

Partner: Select Harvests

Delivery location: Mildura

THE LIFEBLOOD OF LODDON-MALLEE – THE CONTEXT

Good water management is crucial to Victoria's Loddon-Mallee region in the face of drought and climate change risks. The emergence of new technology can help achieve this, but it's vital that irrigation workers have the skills to deploy the latest techniques.

In 2017, Sunraysia TAFE identified several factors that convinced it the time was right to develop a modernised irrigation course. These included:

- Discussions with key sector stakeholders, including the industry peak body, indicated that training was not meeting the needs of irrigators.
- The presence of corporate farms in the region such as Select Harvests. The outlook for producers of almonds, olives, citrus, stone fruit, dried fruit and table grapes is positive, with strong demand from China, south-east Asia and emerging markets.
- A consultation the TAFE held with the team behind the now-completed \$120 million Sunraysia Modernisation Project, which replaced open irrigation channels with pipelines and automated pumping stations. This meeting raised opportunities to include content on the project and related topics such as water rules and allocations in the new course.
- High demand for more irrigation workers. Job websites and local newspapers regularly carry ads for irrigation managers, and the National Farmers Federation predicted in 2014 that irrigation technicians would be in short supply in the "medium to long term".



CHARTING A FRESH COURSE – THE SOLUTION

Backed by a \$72,000 grant from the Regional and Specialist Training Fund, Sunraysia TAFE has rejuvenated the Certificate IV in Irrigation. The grant money covered:

- State-of-the-art equipment for Sunraysia TAFE's training farm.
- The development of resources for the revamped course.
- Tablets and related accessories for students.
- Marketing costs, including an awareness campaign.

In addition, the Fund approved a higher subsidy for five students – this supported Sunraysia TAFE's recruitment of an expert teacher for the course.

"IT OPENS THE DOOR FOR OUR WORKERS TO ADVANCE"

Employer case study: Jason Robinson

Select Harvests, one of Australia's biggest almond producers, farms on thousands of hectares in the region.

It has always found it hard to get the right training to develop its staff, according to operations manager Jason Robinson.

"This is a remote area with limited access to training providers and skilled personnel," he says.

He says this used to leave the company to rely on internal training but that posed problems such as finding time and the right trainers.

"There was a shortfall in training which made it quite difficult to upskill more staff on farms," Mr Robinson says.

The Certificate IV course and similar offerings at Sunraysia TAFE have made a huge difference, he says.

"It helps us to develop irrigation staff more efficiently and consistently, over a shorter time frame. Staff get to be involved with aspects of irrigation they may not be part of in the work place."

"It opens the door (for them) to advance up the leadership ladder and explore other opportunities in the business."

About 97 Select Harvests staff have undertaken training at Sunraysia TAFE, and Mr Robinson says the relationship could snowball.

"The opportunity to use a training provider has given us the ability to move forward with better skilled employees," he says.

"We'll be encouraging staff to further their knowledge and will be using these training courses."

FLOW OF ENROLMENTS – THE OUTCOMES

The course began in April 2018, and 18 participants have enrolled since then. This is above Sunraysia TAFE's expectations – it initially planned to have only five students in the first class.

The participants' training takes place over about 40 weeks, although this can be adjusted to dovetail with harvest and seasonal requirements. The units have been selected and sequenced to teach skills appropriate to the time of year.

Participants attend the Sunraysia TAFE training farm at Cardross, near Mildura, and also have sessions at their place of work. In addition, they undertake some self-directed learning and preparation for these sessions.

BUILDING MOMENTUM - WHAT'S NEXT

Sunraysia TAFE has a long and proud history in teaching irrigation skills at its Cardross farm. It has an ambition to use the impetus from this course to make the farm a centre for world-class irrigation learning.

The resources it has acquired for this course has allowed it to also begin a Certificate III in Irrigation course, and the outlook for the Certificate IV is bright.

"Success with this program has led to sustainable ongoing numbers," says Ross Humphreys, Sunraysia TAFE's commercial business development manager.

"This opportunity is a boost to establish momentum for the irrigation industry, the producers and a community that is so reliant on water supply."

The Regional and Specialist Training Fund is a targeted *Skills First* funding stream that supports training for specific skills in regional and specialist areas that are not being met by the current training market. Training providers who hold a current *Skills First* VET funding contract are eligible to apply for higher subsidies and one-off grant payments for selected courses in specific regions to meet local industry demand or specialised occupations. Funding will be considered where there is a strong connection between industry, training and job outcomes.

To find out more visit:

www.education.vic.gov.au/training/providers/funding/Pages/rst.aspx

or email the RSTF team at:

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