



# ISCRR

Institute for Safety,  
Compensation and  
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## Evaluation of the VEG Education Agriculture 360 Program

Creating a more inclusive and sustainable industry

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ISCRR  
Evaluation  
Report

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## **Acknowledgements**

The Institute for Safety, Compensation and Recovery Research (ISCRR) would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and live, the Wurundjeri (Woi-wurrung) and Bunurong (Boon Wurrung) peoples of the Eastern Kulin and pay our respects to their Elders past, present, and emerging. We want to extend this acknowledgement to the Traditional Owners of the lands where you work and live.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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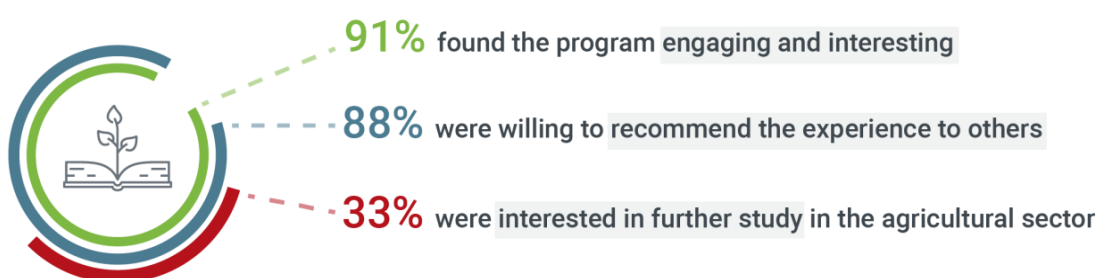
The Australian agriculture industry faces competition from multinational corporations, with the ability to remain viable facing challenges including workforce shortages, and gaps in formal education and safety knowledge. To address these challenges, VEG Education has launched the Agriculture 360 Program (AG360). AG360 included three activities that took a holistic approach to creating a more inclusive and sustainable industry.

ISCRR carried out a mixed method evaluation, combining quantitative data collection with qualitative insights. Each activity within the AG360 Program was evaluated through specific methods tailored to capture both participant experiences and program effectiveness.

### VEG Schools Farm Gate Program

The program aimed to engage school students and enhance their understanding of the agriculture sector through hands-on learning.

To evaluate its effectiveness, a survey was conducted with 527 students from 29 secondary schools in Victoria, and a focus group with the two teachers who delivered the program was held to assess its efficiency and future considerations.



The evaluation findings demonstrate that the VEG Schools Farm Gate program successfully engaged students and enhanced their understanding of the agriculture sector through hands-on learning. We recommend continuing the program and considering expanded funding to target low socioeconomic schools.

### Industry Contextualised Resources

New content was designed to deliver and assess accredited training via the AHC50422 Diploma of Horticulture Management.

The development of the resources is still ongoing, with the final due date set after the submission of this report. A survey was created to learn about industry representatives' satisfaction of contribution and resource relevance.

- Regarding the relevance of these units to the day-to-day challenges and responsibilities in the horticulture industry, five participants found them to be highly relevant, while seven found them very relevant.
- Concerning potential gaps between the units of competency and industry best practices, five participants reported no gaps, and only one noted a few gaps.
- The satisfaction level with the collaboration between VEG Education and industry leaders was notably high, with one participant being extremely satisfied and nine very satisfied.




While initial feedback indicates positive satisfaction with inclusion and the relevance of topics, it is too early to determine the project's overall success. Once the resources are finalised, we recommend convening a focus group to gather industry feedback and secure endorsement.

## Industry Expert Trainer Scholarship Program






The Industry Expert Trainer Scholarship Program was designed to address the shortage of qualified trainers and assessors in horticulture. The program aims to fill this gap by training people who can bring up-to-date industry experience to their roles as trainers.

ISCRR facilitated two focus groups, one with participants and one with mentors, to gather insights on the training and mentoring program.

### Program Operations

	Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusivity	Mentors and participants both acknowledged the importance of creating an inclusive and culturally sensitive environment where participants from diverse backgrounds felt respected and supported.
	Tone of Empathy and Relatability	Participants and mentors noted the importance of empathy and relatability in the program.
	Access to Skilled and Experienced Mentors	Participants valued the accessibility and support provided by their mentors, noting that having mentors available outside of formal training sessions significantly improved their understanding and application of the course content.
	Effective Communication	Communication was identified as a critical component of the mentorship program's success, ensuring that participants felt supported and informed.
	Peer Support Networks	Mentors and participants both highlighted the importance of peer support in the program.
	Managing Work and Study Challenges	Participants faced challenges in balancing work with their return to study. Mentors recognised this challenge and provided additional support to help participants re-acquire study skills and adapt to the academic environment.

### Program Outcomes

	Relevance and Practical Application to Industry	The program's focus on real-world relevance helped bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical skills.
	Capability Uplift for New Trainers	The program ensured that new trainers received practical and relevant guidance.
	Managing Expectations Around the Value of Knowledge	By involving participants in a supportive community and providing them with the tools they need to succeed, the program empowers them and enhances their agency.
	Increased Participant Confidence	Through practice, feedback, and the support of mentors and peers, participants responded that they felt more capable and self-assured in their abilities as new trainers
	Anticipated Higher Completion Rates Due to Supportive Programming	The combination of approachable coaching, support, and a good Training and Assessment Education (TAE) trainer helped more participants stay on track. Participants noted that it was helpful to have the mentors go through the coursework with them.

Findings show that the program successfully supported a diverse cohort and enhanced their training and assessment skills. However, its limited scope to only five participants constrain its potential impact on the broader agriculture industry. We recommend expanding the program to include more participants to amplify its influence.

## INTRODUCTION

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### Background

The Australian agriculture industry has its origins in family-owned farms, where knowledge was traditionally transferred through family members rather than formal educational processes. However, the industry now faces formidable competition from multinational corporations, making Australia's agricultural sector vulnerable to significant challenges. To ensure its sustained viability, the industry must undergo a process of substantial maturation.

Challenges include a lack of formal information resources for those interested in working in the sector, workforce shortages, and a deficiency in safety knowledge among current horticulture employees who require upskilling. Moreover, there is a trend of promoting skilled workers to middle management positions without equipping them with the necessary management skills. To address these challenges, VEG Education has launched the Agriculture 360 Program (AG360). AG360 included three activities that took a holistic approach to creating a more inclusive and sustainable industry.

### VEG Schools Farm Gate Program

This program was developed to serve as a direct link between schools and the horticulture industry and to enhance students' understanding of food origins, supply chains, and career opportunities within the sector. The goal was for both primary and secondary school students to develop a foundational comprehension of these key concepts, fostering a deeper connection to the horticulture industry and its significance in their daily lives.

It offered a wide-ranging experience including a guided tour of the farm and warehouse facilities, illustrating the journey of vegetables from cultivation to consumption and tastings of freshly grown and packed vegetables from Velisha Farms.

Students were expected to gain a basic understanding of the following:

- where and how vegetables are grown
- supply chains
- the diversity of people and skills required in horticulture
- career opportunities in horticulture

Until July 2024, VEG Education Farm Gate Programs were fully funded for Victorian schools by the Victorian Government's Agriculture TAFE and Training Fund.

### Industry Contextualised Resources

New content was designed to deliver and assess accredited training via the AHC50422 Diploma of Horticulture Management. Resources were co-designed with industry leaders to reflect current horticulture practices and to specifically develop the next generation of industry supervisors, managers, and leaders. Building on consultations with farm owners across the fresh produce sector this activity aimed to:

- ensure training materials and assessments are fit for purpose.
- build capacity among students to become future industry leaders.

## Industry Expert Trainer Scholarship Program

Industry association partners identified five current industry workers and provided them with scholarships to participate in CBD College's structured course on how to deliver training and assessment. Scholarship participants received mentoring from industry experts and shadowed current trainers.

## Evaluation Aims

The purpose of this evaluation is two-fold. Firstly, a formative evaluation was undertaken to assess the efficacy of the three components constituting the AG360 Program: the VEG School's Farm Gate Program, the creation of contextualized resources for the AHC50422 Diploma of Horticulture Management, and the Industry Expert Trainer Scholarship Program. This phase aims to discern operational strengths and areas for enhancement for future implementation. Secondly, a summative evaluation was conducted to ascertain initial insights into the outcomes of the three activities.

This evaluation will explore the following questions for each activity within the AG360 Program:

**VEG Schools Farm Gate Program:** To what extent have students in Victoria increased their understanding of where food comes from and the agriculture industry?

**Industry Contextualised Resources:** To what extent is the AHC50422 Diploma of Horticulture Management meeting the needs of industry?

**Industry Expert Trainer Scholarship Program:** To what extent are the scholarship recipients equipped to undertake training and assessment for any Victorian provider?

## Methodology

To address the three evaluation questions, a mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative data collection with qualitative insights. Each activity within the AG360 Program was evaluated through specific methods tailored to capture both participant experiences and program effectiveness. Details on methods are addressed before the findings in each activity section below.

All participants are deidentified in this report. Ethics was approved by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC) (#2024-41278-102726).

## VEG SCHOOLS FARM GATE PROGRAM

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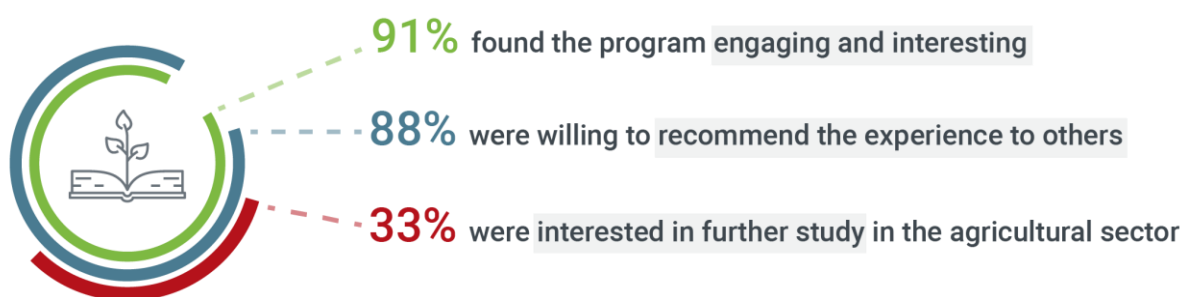
### Background

The Farm Gate Program was designed to engage school students and enhance their understanding of the agriculture sector through a hands-on learning experience. This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of the program in achieving its educational objectives. Key areas of focus included student engagement, understanding of food origins, comprehension of fresh produce production, influence on dietary habits, and perceptions of agricultural careers.

### Methods

To understand the students' experience at Velisha Farm, a survey was conducted at the conclusion of the program. Only secondary school students were surveyed to ensure age-appropriate and relevant feedback. It was administered to students (N=527) from 29 secondary schools in Victoria who participated in the program. The survey comprised ten questions, with nine having yes/no response options and one open-ended question for additional comments. Additionally, to evaluate the program's efficiency and identify considerations for future delivery, a focus group was conducted with the two teachers who delivered the program. Focus group findings were analysed thematically using an inductive approach.

### Findings from students



\* Two versions of the survey were unintentionally distributed: one with 10 questions and another with 9. The question on interest in further study in the agriculture sector was omitted in the shorter version, resulting in only 199 responses compared to 522-526 for the other questions. Please consider this when interpreting the data.

A high percentage of students (91.2%) found the program engaging and interesting, which indicates that the program was effective in capturing students' attention and interest. The program received strong endorsements from participants, with 87.7% willing to recommend the experience to other students. This high level of satisfaction suggests that the program was well-received and valued by the students. While interest in further study in the agriculture sector was lower, with 33.2% of students expressing interest, this still represents a considerable number of students considering further engagement with agricultural education.

### Understanding of Food Origins

A significant majority of students (95.2%) felt that the excursion added to their understanding of where food comes from. This indicates a significant increase in awareness about food origins among the participants.



### Understanding of the Agriculture Sector

The majority of the students (90.8%) reported having a greater understanding of the agriculture sector after participating in the program. This demonstrates that the program was successful in educating students about the broader agriculture industry.



### Understanding of Fresh Produce Production

A substantial majority (96.0%) of students gained a better understanding of how fresh produce is produced. This suggests that the hands-on, experiential learning approach of the program was highly effective in conveying information about food production processes.



### Influence on Dietary Habits

The program had a positive impact on students' attitudes towards vegetable consumption, with 62.8% expressing a desire to eat more vegetables after tasting fresh produce directly from the farm.



### Perceptions of Working in Agriculture

Over half of the students (57.3%) reported that the session changed their perceptions about working in the agriculture sector. This indicates that overall the program was successful in challenging existing perceptions and provided new insights into agricultural careers.



### Understanding of Agricultural Careers

A significant majority of students (90.7%) reported a better understanding of the careers available in the agriculture sector. This reflects the program's effectiveness in highlighting potential career paths within the industry.



### Students' comments further endorsed survey results

*It was great and sad seeing how much waste was being produced, but glad we are making a movement. – Anonymous student*

*Loved it! Could we do a project at school? Design our own menus? – Anonymous student*



## Findings from teachers

The teachers were asked questions about program design, participant engagement and feedback, challenges and the future of the program.

### Program design

The teachers explained that the program is intentionally designed to align with educational curricula and is tailored to suit various student cohorts.

*Intentional design of the program to be more than just a farm visit. We wanted it to be an actual program that aligns with curriculum, but is also engaging ... to make sure that they have an opportunity to use all sensors in the experience of learning. – Farm Gate Teacher 2*

Examples of activities include primary school students singing and dancing to a song about broccoli after tasting it, while secondary and VCE students explored jobs in horticulture.

*This is perfect for [kids going into trades jobs] because they're actually getting a real taste of the careers that are out there and they can see something that's going to relate to them. – Farm Gate Teacher 2*

When asked about the program's delivery and design, the teachers expressed pride in its pedagogical success. They highlighted the diverse activities and hands-on learning, which cater to various student learning needs and effectively illustrate the scale of the fresh produce process.

*They get to actually see the fresh produce, a whole variety of that, and then they get to see it being packed and then they get to see it growing. And so there's a real feel of hands-on and up close with what we are talking about rather than it just being slides in a PowerPoint. – Farm Gate Teacher 1*

*I think that to have that full experience...you go in the cool room, it's like, okay, it's massive, cool, but then, well, that whole room there, that's just broccoli, or that's just cauliflower, it's like, "Oh God, how many is that?" that we distribute –16 elephants' worth of broccoli every month! And to try and see that scale and it's not just a couple of things on a packing line, it's like they're packing crates and crates and crates of produce and how challenging that is. – Farm Gate Teacher 2*

The teachers also described how they connect issues relevant to the horticulture industry with broader societal challenges, such as sustainability and waste. For example, they explain processes like growing sustainable food, creating healthy soil, and recycling water and food waste.

*Well, we do focus a lot on sustainability and waste like a lot...particularly secondary schools, we really focus on because we know that's an area within curriculum that they focus on... [We] explain to the students that everyone wants three things, they want sustainable produce, they want great quality and they want it cheap. And we can give you any two of those, but we can't give you all three at the moment. – Farm Gate Teacher 2*

*We use recycled water, so we're able to talk about that when we're talking about the farm and the irrigation stuff that's recycled water. – Farm Gate Teacher 1*

### Participant engagement and feedback

The teachers noted that feedback from participating schools has been overwhelmingly positive.

*I guess the thing that pleased me is that schools want to come back, so to me that shows that it was a positive experience because they're like, "This is fantastic, we want to bring our next class back." Or, "Can we do this next year." – Farm Gate Teacher 1*

Many schools have written thank you letters, highlighting how they have integrated the excursion into their kitchen garden activities. A common theme in these letters is the cool room

experience, which teaches students about extending the shelf life of vegetables. In the cool room, students experience a temperature of two degrees when learning about perishable items and the supply chain.

*The sensory shock of spending time in the cool room, that's something that stays with kids and we know that it does...particularly primary because primary schools will write us letters and send us little pictures and stuff like that. – Farm Gate Teacher 2*

Similarly, student feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. The teachers noted this has been evident in various ways during the farm visit. For example, one teacher observed that students' interest increases with each activity, as reflected in the complexity of their questions.

*The questions that they're asking by the end of the session as opposed to set questions they ask at the start... by the end [they are] starting to make some inferences about what you're saying. We talk about celery takes a long time to grow, so, it's 20 weeks. And then we might say, "Well, what about the broccoli? How long do you think that takes?" and we get to, "Well, it's somewhere between 12 and 14 weeks." "Okay, so why is that less expensive than celery then?" "Because being quicker in growth, so you can grow more of it more often," those sorts of things. – Farm Gate Teacher 1*

Students also demonstrate their engagement via their excitement to volunteer for activities.

*At the start of the session, we ask for a volunteer and get them to put the PPE on that we have in the packing room, so the apron and the hairnet rah, rah. And sometimes, some of the group's a bit reluctant, nobody wants to really volunteer... And then I ask at the end for a volunteer to come and get the cups to hand out for a zucchini smoothie. Well, when I ask for a second volunteer at the end, there's 40 hands go up! Everybody wants to be a volunteer. – Farm Gate Teacher 1*

The teachers explained that the program introduces students to new vegetables that many students have not tried before. By the midway point, students are enthusiastically eating raw broccoli, celery, and brussels sprouts, and drinking zucchini smoothies.

*"Who wants a brussels sprout?" And the kids go, "Yes," and they're eating raw brussels sprouts or raw spring onions or celery leaves. They'll try it because they're there and so it's maybe saying, "Actually, that's not what I thought it was going to be." And we talk about how to cook things differently and the way that you prepare it. – Farm Gate Teacher 2*

*[It's] essentially a zucchini smoothie, on the surface, when you talk about it is like, "You're kidding me. You're going to make me drink raw zucchini?" And then they do. And mostly the reaction that I always want is, "Oh, that's not bad." And they're like, "Oh," because they're really hesitant and it's like, "Well, you just have to try it. It's not going to kill you, and if you don't like it, that's fine." And then they go, "Oh, actually that's not bad." Or they ask for more. – Farm Gate Teacher 2*

*It's asking for the recipe. Like, "I want the recipe, I need the recipe." "that's really good." And then talking about what they might add to that themselves, like "Oh, I can put bananas in this." – Farm Gate Teacher 1*

Secondary school students showed a shift in their perception of the industry and gained new awareness of career opportunities, which they attributed to their interest in food.

*They're more aware of the different jobs...The perception is, it's on a farm, you're some bloke in a floppy hat on a tractor. And that you have to live in a rural location. But the fact is, in the industry, it's like 50 per cent of the jobs, yes are on farm, but 50 per cent of the jobs are in an office or a corporate headquarters...And so kids are like, "Oh, okay, that's interesting." – Farm Gate Teacher 2*

*I think they're definitely surprised by the range of careers that exist. And we talk about all those different elements, and that not everything comes from a university. So there's jobs for people who are straight out of school. There's jobs for people who've been to TAFE. There's jobs for*

*people who've had an apprenticeship. There's jobs for people who go to university. It's really broad. – Farm Gate Teacher 1*

Some of these students directly demonstrated their interest, while others engaged through incidental conversations.

*We had kids the other week from [location], and this boy asked me no less than four times while we were here, "Do you think I could get a job here?" And not less than four times I said to him, "Yes, you probably can..." – Farm Gate Teacher 2*

*I have kids who will talk to me after we've been between the bit where we go out onto the farm and then come back in the classroom who will make a point of coming and chatting with me as we walk back and might be talking about, "I've liked this," or, "Can you tell me more about what the ergonomists do?" Or, "Can you tell me more about, the people who are picking, what time do they start?" And stuff like that. – Farm Gate Teacher 1*

## Challenges

The challenges that arose with the program were largely outside of the control of VEG Education and the program teaching staff and caused minimal concerns. Themes included students lack of awareness of vegetables, disengaged students, and the complexity of planning and school administration.

### Students limited knowledge about vegetables

At the beginning of the program, many of the students demonstrate limited knowledge about vegetables. The program teachers hoped that students would apply their learnings and integrate more vegetable consumption into their lives. However, they were realistic about the extent to which the program could influence family eating habits.

*There's really a lack of understanding of what a piece of courgettes looks like because either they don't need it or they eat it once it's been chopped up and put in something. They don't know. – Farm Gate Teacher 2*

### Disengaged students

Not all students showed interest and some appeared disengaged. The teachers discussed using their extensive experience to adjust their approach and engage these students more effectively.

*I might get them to do some group discussion stuff with each other... And then sometimes that's enough to break the ice. And once they start talking, they're usually fine. It's the same in classroom, nobody wants to be the first one. Once they go in, they're fine.  
– Farm Gate Teacher 1*

Student disengagement occurred when students were required to wake up earlier than usual or when their teachers did not provide information about what to expect. Conversely, teachers who set expectations and integrated learnings back into the classroom tended to make students more excited.

*Probably the challenges are, it depends on the teacher and their motivation and what they've told the students prior to coming and all of those things are probably what leads you to the challenge or they arrive way too early or they book the bus for way too late. All those sorts of things that's out of our control. And even though we set it up the same, we send the teacher the same information, you get good ones, anything, and you get ones not so good.  
– Farm Gate Teacher 2*

*The teacher booked the bus really early, they had to leave school at 8 o'clock. They were here at 9 o'clock...But then they had to get up much earlier than they'd normally get up in school...they're not quite awake. But conversely, we had a teacher last week who went, "Oh, can I take some brussels sprouts? We are going to go home and we are going to experiment and*

*we're going to cook them a whole lot of different ways to see what works best and taste and try them." And it's like, "That's it, that's what we want." – Farm Gate Teacher 1*

### Planning and school administration

The teachers discussed the challenges associated with the school administration process and how they worked to improve it throughout the pilot.

*It's a challenge on the schooling because they've got to get approval from whoever they have to get approval from and people could coordinate, make sure we've got a space. And because there was a lot of interest, we'll say, "Okay, we've got these dates available." By the time they go through their process, we're like, "Sorry, those dates are now taken." So there's certainly those sorts of challenges in terms of the booking process, but it's the school process I guess.*  
– Farm Gate Teacher 2

They focused on streamlining the process to make it more efficient for schools.

*And we provide them with everything upfront because we've done it enough. They get the insurance documents, the risk documents, working with children's checks, all that stuff, they get upfront. I guess it streamlines their process, but it still is a process. They have to go through, whether they go through school council to get approval. – Farm Gate Teacher 2*

### Future of the program

The teachers fully supported continuing the program. They indicated that there is little they would change fundamentally, as the program's design has proven effective in their experience. Suggestions to enhance the program included integrating more First Nations knowledge, refining information and adding activities, and increasing the funding so the program can be accessed by students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

#### Integrating more First Nation's knowledge

The teachers noted the program's limited inclusion of First Nations information and expressed interest in gathering more feedback to better incorporate information into the program in the future.

*We had one meeting [with a First Nations advisory team] ... there's only so much that we can put in without getting that direct feedback. It's quite a sensitive topic, but it's something that we referenced, but probably once again, would be something that's more into the program, but it's a challenge. – Farm Gate Teacher 2*

#### Refining information and offering more activities

Teachers suggested refining the information in the program to reflect the growth at Velisha Farms and, if logistics permit, adding more hands-on activities and offering students more opportunities to try different produce.

*We have a slide in the primary presentation about how many things we process every day. And I think we'll probably add that to the secondary one because I think the information's good information. People are blowing about how many lettuces go through the process every day, that sort of stuff. – Farm Gate Teacher 1*

*We get them to try the produce that we have here, which is great, because we've got it here, it's in abundance. But if you could bring in other things that we don't necessarily grow, for them to try a range of other veggies as part of the program, I think that would enhance it a bit.*  
– Farm Gate Teacher 2

#### Funding and accessibility

The teachers discussed that limited funding meant only schools with additional resources were able to participate.

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*We've done different versions of this type of program and when there was no funding and schools paid for it, we still had schools come, but generally it was schools that could afford it. So schools in low socioeconomic just can't afford to come and government schools can't charge students for programs. So to make it accessible. – Farm Gate Teacher 2*

*Costs are so prohibiting. I've had lots of teachers like the teacher that said to me about their language class, it'd be great for them to come and see what vegetables are here and stuff like that. So they're thinking all the time about other classes coming and saying that they'd really like to come back. There's lots of that. – Farm Gate Teacher 1*

### Recommendation

The evaluation findings demonstrate that the VEG Schools Farm Gate program successfully engaged students and enhanced their understanding of the agriculture sector through hands-on learning. We recommend continuing the program and considering expanded funding to target low socioeconomic schools.

## INDUSTRY CONTEXTUALISED RESOURCES

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### Background

New content was designed to deliver and assess accredited training via the AHC50422 Diploma of Horticulture Management. Resources were co-designed with industry leaders to reflect current horticulture practices and to specifically develop the next generation of industry supervisors, managers, and leaders. Building on consultations with industry leaders across the fresh produce sector this activity aimed to ensure training materials and assessments are fit for purpose and build capacity among students to become future industry leaders.

### Methods

ISCRR planned to facilitate a focus group with industry leaders to determine if industry needs were met and to confirm industry endorsement after they had reviewed the course materials. However, the development of the resources is still ongoing, with the final due date set after the submission of this report. Since the materials were not ready for review, the focus group was not held.

To address this gap, a survey was created for the industry representatives who contributed to the project at its inception. Due to the incomplete status of the resources, the survey was concise and did not yield extensive information regarding the relevance of the units of competency being developed.

Out of the 13 participants who consented to the survey, 12 completed it, resulting in one incomplete response.

The focus group questions initially prepared for this evaluation have been shared with VEG Education and can be used to gather industry feedback in the future.

### Findings from industry leaders

When asked about their contribution to the units of competency for the development of the Diploma of Horticulture Management, all 12 participants responded that they had been asked to contribute.

Regarding the relevance of these units to the day-to-day challenges and responsibilities in the horticulture industry, five participants found them to be highly relevant, while seven found them very relevant.

Concerning potential gaps between the units of competency and industry best practices, five participants reported no gaps, and only one noted a few gaps.

The satisfaction level with the collaboration between VEG Education and industry leaders was notably high, with one participant being extremely satisfied and nine very satisfied.

Lastly, when invited to discuss any additional topics, 10 participants had no further comments, and two indicated there was nothing more they wished to discuss.

### Recommendation

This project was designed to ensure that training materials and assessments are fit for purpose and to build capacity among students to become future industry leaders. While initial feedback indicates positive satisfaction with inclusion and the relevance of topics, it is too early to determine the project's overall success. Once the resources are finalised, we recommend convening a focus group to gather industry feedback and secure endorsement.

## INDUSTRY EXPERT TRAINER SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

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### Background

The horticulture industry is grappling with a shortage of qualified trainers and assessors who have real-world experience in agriculture and horticulture. Adding to this problem, skilled workers are often promoted to middle management roles without being given the necessary management training. This leaves them unprepared and adds to the skills gap in the industry.

The current path for workers to upskill in teaching and assessment is the TAE Certificate IV qualification. TAE courses, especially in agriculture and horticulture, are very challenging due to their lack of contextualisation and hands-on learning. Additionally, the assessment processes make them difficult for many participants to complete.

The Industry Expert Trainer Scholarship Program was designed to address the shortage of qualified trainers and assessors in horticulture. The program aims to fill this gap by training people who can bring up-to-date industry experience to their roles as trainers. To address low participant TAE completion rates, a mentoring program, guided by current industry experts, was created to provide new trainers with thorough support and relevant skills.

### Program Structure

Mentors met with participants face-to-face for ten sessions. Additionally, there were four Zoom meetings and one farm visit to provide hands-on, practical experience. Follow-ups were conducted via Zoom to ensure continuous support and guidance.

Participants were invited to join a WhatsApp group to share information and foster rapport. Mentors provided support via email, WhatsApp, phone calls or Zoom throughout the life of the program. The mentoring program officially began in October 2023.

### Participants and recruitment

The recruitment process was strategic, using the mentors' strong reputations and industry connections to seek candidates. Five scholarship recipients were chosen directly from the horticulture industry, focusing on diversity in gender, age, location, and current roles to enrich the learning environment by including various perspectives and experiences.

### Methods

ISCR facilitated two focus groups to gather insights on the training and mentoring program. The first focus group, involving five scholarship participants, aimed to understand their experiences in the program and how they plan to apply their learnings in the future. The second focus group, with three mentors, focused on learning about their experiences in the program.

While the evaluation focused on the mentorship specifically and how it equipped recipients to undertake training and assessment, participants spoke at length about the TAE course itself. Findings about the TAE course have also been included in this analysis.

Focus group findings were analysed thematically using an inductive approach.

### Findings from program mentors and participants

The findings revealed key themes about the experiences and insights of participants and mentors. Themes addressed below include program operation, program outcomes, barriers, and suggestions for future improvements. These provide a comprehensive view of the program's strengths and areas for improvement. The following sections will explore each theme in detail.

## Program Operation

The program's support and engagement strategies were designed to enhance student and mentor interactions through cultural sensitivity and inclusivity, fostering a tone of empathy and relatability. Findings reveal key elements shaped the program such as participant access to mentors, effective communication, and robust peer support networks, which all helped participants manage their work and study challenges effectively.



### Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusivity

Mentors and participants both acknowledged the importance of creating an inclusive and culturally sensitive environment where participants from diverse backgrounds felt respected and supported. This approach helped mitigate language barriers and ensured that all participants could fully engage with the material and their peers. As demonstrated by the participant recruitment process, the mentorship program was tailored to ensure that participants from diverse backgrounds were included and supported.

*I think the mentorship made it that. I don't necessarily know if the TAE itself is that [culturally inclusive] but I think the mentorship made it that because A) of the cohort that we selected; B) the support networks we created around that selection; C) our lived experience around working with cohorts from different backgrounds. – Mentor 1*

From the participant's perspective, the program was perceived as culturally inclusive and safe. Participants noted the importance of understanding and respecting different cultural backgrounds, and the importance of being inclusive.

*We are so different. But at the end, we end up here, working and talking like friends of people, because we know how to respect each other. – Participant 4*

*That's a skill we learn from this work – how to communicate with people – some peoples [sic] elder than us and they don't want to hear the command. We tell them in their preferred ways, so they feel comfortable. – Participant 5*



### Tone of Empathy and Relatability

Participants and mentors noted the importance of empathy and relatability in the program. Mentors' ability to understand and connect with participants' experiences was crucial in creating a supportive and motivating learning environment. Participants valued that the mentors had completed the course themselves and could share their challenges and successes, making the learning experience more relatable and encouraging. This shared experience enabled mentors to offer practical advice and emotional support based on firsthand knowledge.

*I was able to relay my story about how hard it was and whatever, but you could do it. I think it gave them confidence to be struggling, because they knew that. – Mentor 1*

*From the start we said, 'this course is confusing. So don't worry. You're all in a boat, and we've been there too'. – Mentor 3*



### Access to Skilled and Experienced Mentors

Participants valued the accessibility and support provided by their mentors, noting that having mentors available outside of formal training sessions significantly improved their understanding and application of the course content. This support helped break down barriers to learning.

*Because they know about the backgrounds of the class. They know what sort of standards. They're teaching us according to our information, our knowledge. It's very helpful... That's why they're building up our confidence. – Participant 5*

Additionally, mentors could identify the key parts of the course most relevant to participants' work as trainers and assessors. This was helpful because it allowed participants to focus on the resources they would use in their daily work after completing the course.

*They know how we're going to hopefully be using this course. So even stuff where we might be going, "what is this? I don't understand what it says!" It's, "Look, this is where you can find the answer, and you can answer it easy." – Participant 1*

*Our mentors in VegEd have done the course previously, and so they're a connecting stone between mentoring us, but in the industry and keeping it applicable to us. – Participant 1*

A key to the mentorship program's success, according to the mentors, is having a skilled and experienced team. Each mentor brings a unique perspective from their own TAE course experience and industry background.

*It's a blend of that unique skillset too that I think has made it work. So if this was to be replicated, who you picked as your mentors would have to be very – that's a very important part – Mentor 1*



### Effective Communication

Communication was identified as a critical component of the mentorship program's success, ensuring that participants felt supported and informed. The use of support systems such as WhatsApp groups, phone calls, and one-on-one meetings helped create a connected and supportive environment. Mentors highlighted the importance of clear and consistent communication to promptly address participants' concerns and questions.

*Being able to give quick, concise advice I think also makes you feel very confident then too. Like, if you ask a question, you get an answer quickly back. – Mentor 1*

Mentors were also flexible in their approach and adaptable to participants' individual needs outside of the group mentoring sessions.

*I've had three people set individual meeting times to just come in and work through some of the materials with me, one-on-one. – Mentor 3*

Some participants noted that the course provided valuable skills in both verbal and non-verbal communication, which are essential to be successful in their role as new trainers and assessors.

*To me it's something like oral communication. This is a skill that I can get from this course. Because as a horticulture trainer, I would think that horticulture is not really speaking much. – Participant 4*



### Peer Support Networks

Mentors and participants both highlighted the importance of peer support in the program. Some participants said that mentorship offered essential support.

*And [mentor] helping us through it. It's so good. If we were on our own doing this, I don't think I'd finish it. – Participant 1*

This peer support network was seen as vital for participants. Peer support and the support network facilitated by the program helped boost participants' confidence, specifically going through the program with peers from the industry

*Imagine doing this with non-hort [horticulture] people and who you really don't have a great connection with – not having that peer support? Because I needed that peer support. –Participant 2*

Participants were motivated knowing that many of their classmates were fellow scholarship recipients who chose to be there. They noted that when people are required to attend there can be differing levels of interest towards the coursework and this has the potential to decrease motivation.

*When it's like-minded individuals that are motivated to do the same thing. You're not – when people are forced, they don't want to be doing it. So it's really good, because I feel like I can get a lot of confidence in things like working with people that are just as motivated as I am.*  
– Participant 2



### Managing Work and Study Challenges

Participants faced challenges in balancing work with their return to study. Mentors recognised this challenge and provided additional support to help participants re-acquire study skills and adapt to the academic environment.

*If they've got a question or they need some support, they know that they can pick up the phone to any one of us. We've all made that really clear from the start.* – Mentor 2

Participants clarified that it was not the course content that made time management difficult, but rather the amount of time wasted due to the complexity and disorganisation of the TAE resources and assessments and their already demanding workloads.

*You're at work all day, and then I put my kids to bed and then I go down and sit down to start looking at my coursework. It's really – it takes a long time just to get into where I need to be, to concentrate on what I need to do.* – Participant 2

As mentors had all completed the training themselves, they were able to share their experiences and provide support based on their own challenges.

*They're obviously working. I think what gave them a bit of confidence too is that I'd done it, and I was able to relay my story about how hard it was and whatever, but you could do it. And so I think it gave them confidence to be struggling, because they knew that.* – Mentor 1

The findings highlighted the critical role of student cohort dynamics in the mentoring program's success. Both mentors and participants emphasised the significance of peer support, the challenges of balancing work and study commitments, and the need for cultural sensitivity and inclusivity. Effective program operation was marked by empathy, effective communication, and approachable coaching, which contributed to a positive team dynamic and overall program effectiveness. These elements were consistently recognised as vital for creating a supportive and effective learning environment.

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## Program Outcomes

Findings on program outcomes revealed increased participant confidence in becoming trainers and anticipated improved completion rates for the TAE course. The program's practical application and real-world relevance were central to these outcomes. Additionally, the discussions highlighted how the program aligns with and addresses key industry needs, such as enhancing the capabilities of new trainers and managing expectations about the value of knowledge. These insights underscore the program's effectiveness in meeting industry demands and supporting participant development.



### Relevance and Practical Application to Industry

The program was designed to meet specific industry needs by providing targeted training and mentorship that equipped participants with the necessary skills. The program's focus on real-world relevance helped bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical skills.

*Already I'm using the skills in my day-to-day. I talk to people and try and teach people about, from a business perspective, a lot, and using that heaps – just how people learn and how to best make sure that they're actually getting what I'm saying. – Participant 1*

Participants noted the program's hands-on approach, which contrasted with the more box-ticking nature of some current horticultural training.

*Make it meaningful for the person getting trained. That's the bit there too. At the moment lots of horticultural training, it's pieces of paper. – Participant 3*



### Capability Uplift for New Trainers

The program also aimed to uplift the capability of new trainers. The program ensured that new trainers received practical and relevant guidance. This approach helped build a strong foundation for new trainers, enabling them to meet industry standards with the goal of being able to effectively transfer their knowledge to future staff or participants.

*Previously it's all been rather preachy kind of training. It's just, "I told you so," and that's it. Not actually training as far as proper training with demonstration and time to practice, and time to evaluate, and time to actually assess performance criteria. That doesn't happen really in a traditional environment. – Participant 3*

Offering mentorship was also perceived by mentors as a step towards breaking the “sink or swim” mentality that can occur in traditional learning environments, by providing personalised support.

*Hopefully that also then creates a learning of – sometimes that old sink or swim mentality – 'well no one helped me so why should I help anyone else?' Hopefully we broke that a little bit too for them when they go back to their teams. – Mentor 1*



### Managing Expectations Around the Value of Knowledge

Mentors discussed the importance of recognising the value of the skills and knowledge gained through the program. By involving participants in a supportive community and providing them with the tools they need to succeed, the program empowers them and enhances their agency.

*It's about an acknowledgment about 'actually we're all very important.' And it's [often] the same people that get flogged because they're a good citizen for the greater good of the industry but someone else takes a clip in the middle. – Mentors 1*

Some participants echoed the sentiment that acknowledgement is important and appreciated the support from the industry.

*It's nice to think that you're getting support through the industry. Not just doing it for your own growth, but feeling like you're part of something bigger. – Participant 3*



### Increased Participant Confidence

The program was perceived as effective in boosting participants' confidence. Through practice, feedback, and the support of mentors and peers, participants responded that they felt more capable and self-assured in their abilities as new trainers. Participants appreciated the training for its practical applications, particularly in non-standard situations. They mentioned how the training helped them make minor adjustments that had significant impacts.

*I think it helped me personally with the non-standard situations – so how to make very minor adjustments that could have a very big impact on somebody, which you might not necessarily consider straightaway. – Participant 3*

*I've always considered how would I best learn, but this definitely taught you how to consider how other people learn. – Participant 2*

Observing and learning from peers and trainers during training sessions helped improve teaching techniques. Participants often mentioned that practising in front of a trusted group boosted their confidence as trainers.

*Just the knowledge on how to actually structure training, for better outcomes. It's less preach than teach kind of training. – Participant 3*

One participant also highlighted the importance of peer support when tackling new challenges for the first time and the impact this has on increasing confidence.

*I guess confidence, like falling back on the class as well, when you're not absolutely sure...then also getting to see how other people do stuff too. So you don't feel like an idiot getting up there for the first time, because everyone feels like they don't know [the answer]...you pick pieces from what other people do, and try and include that to make yourself the best educator" – Participant 1*

Participant's confidence being increased by peer support was echoed by mentors.

*You can see their confidence grow within each other too. They're more confident about asking questions and seeking advice because they're more comfortable in that space. – Mentor 2*



### Anticipated Higher Completion Rates Due to Supportive Programming

The combination of approachable coaching, support, and a good TAE trainer helped more participants stay on track. Participants noted that it was helpful to have the mentors go through the coursework with them. Mentors anticipate all participants will complete the course, yet it is too early to know.

*It was handy to have someone go through it separately that's different from your trainer. It was good to hear it from someone else's point of view ... their considerations. Especially when a lot of the answers to things were very – there were so many different options that you could pick. – Participant 1*

Participants were happy with the trainer instructing the course but noted that mentoring sessions would be even more important to success if the trainer was less effective.

*Mentoring sessions would have been 10 times more useful if you had a bad trainer. I mean, [TAE trainer] were good, and we got lucky. – Participant 3*

Group accountability was also important. The shared experience fostered responsibility and mutual support among participants. This accountability motivated individuals to stay committed.

*They're just doing their final assessments now. So, yeah, so one's completed and got her certificate, which is fantastic, and everyone was really excited. Four to go. – Mentor 3*

In summary, the mentoring program effectively met industry needs by addressing employment gaps, providing a valuable alternative to traditional TAE courses, and enhancing the capabilities of new trainers. Participants reported increased confidence and practical skills, supported by approachable coaching and ongoing mentor assistance. The program's alignment with industry expectations and its positive impact on both participants and stakeholders underscore its overall effectiveness. While mentors are optimistic about the program's completion rates, it is too early to confirm this outcome.



## Barriers and suggestions for improvement

The focus group discussions revealed several barriers that participants faced during the program. These barriers included funding issues, more promotion of the program needed among industry, and challenges with TAE, which is out of VEG Education's control.

### Funding Constraints

Funding was identified as a barrier to the program's sustainability. Mentors emphasised the need for more substantial funding to support the program's operations and ensure its long-term success as reliance on in-kind contributions and limited financial resources would make it difficult to provide consistent and comprehensive support. VEG Education are currently paying participants' employers for their lost time at work. There was a recognised need to expand the program by including more participants to have more impact across the industry should it continue.

*That's five people in Victoria. What about the rest of the country? – Mentor 2*

### Promotion of the program

Participants highlighted the importance of promoting the program more effectively to attract a larger cohort should it expand.

*You can do more social media for everybody can have chance to get the scholarship.  
– Participant 4*

Some participants suggested that better communication and promotion of the program to employers could enhance understanding and support from the workplace.

*It did feel like even though my company's been paid for me to do this course, it's an inconvenience to the company for me to – I'll be like, "no, actually I've got this course on for these two days. I can't attend anything for those two days." And they're a bit like, "yeah, but what even is this?" You know? So maybe just something to hand my team or boss or something. – Participant 1*

### Poor TAE Completion Rates

Poor completion rates were a significant barrier discussed by both mentors and participants for those not receiving scholarship and mentorship. Despite the program's supportive structure, some participants were finding completing the course difficult. Mentors noted that the complexity of the TAE course and the balancing act of work and study contributed to these difficulties.

### TAE Structure and Delivery Issues

The structure and demands of the TAE course presented challenges for participants. The complexity of assessments and the disjointed nature of course resources were frequently mentioned. Participants suggested simplifying the assessment process and making resources more accessible. The lengthy assessment booklet and fragmented course schedule made it difficult for participants to stay engaged and motivated.

*Simplify it. There's too many different things to go back and forth to and refer to.  
– Participant 2*

The presentation of course materials and resources was a common frustration.

*The actual work, when I'm doing it it's not hard, do you know what I mean? It's not completely out of the scope. It's just the way it's presented to me and the way the resources are provided, it's like I have to stop and spend time to get focused to then be able to get to it. – Participant 2*

Participants overwhelmingly preferred the face-to-face aspects of the course over the online sessions.

*The online wasn't actually not doing anything to prepare me. That's just ticking someone's box somewhere! – Participant 3*

*I think the face-to-face training days were probably better than the online days. – Participant 1*

Participants also felt that clearer communication regarding the workload was necessary at the beginning of the course as some were surprised at the intensity.

*It's exhausting! That's what I mean – I really underestimated it. – Participant 2*

The effectiveness of the TAE trainer was frequently highlighted, with participants noting that a good trainer made a significant difference in the learning experience.

*I think because of [trainer], it's the thing that makes us interact with each other as well. Because she knows how to take the lead of the conversation well... very passionate about her job. So it makes us more interested in the course too. – Participant 4*

When asked about specific aspects of the course that stood out in preparing them with the necessary skills to deliver training and assessment, some participants pointed to the beginning of the course where different learning styles and the principles of teaching were covered.

*Very small things that I just never considered. So I think definitely the little things and learner styles and things like that is a big one for me. – Participant 2*

The availability of mentors also played an important role in mediating the challenges of the course.

*[Mentors] were available one-to-one, and you could email if you need any help. So whenever [mentor] was available, he just spoke to us about whatever was confusing us. – Participant 5*

In summary, barriers for participants included the complexity of the TAE course and balancing work and study. They suggested simplifying the assessment process and making resources more accessible to improve engagement and motivation. Funding issues emerged as a major barrier for the mentors and the future of the program.

## Recommendation

The program was designed to address the shortage of qualified trainers and assessors in horticulture. Although it is too early to assess the long-term impact, the findings indicate that the program has been successful in supporting a diverse cohort with current industry experience, enhancing their training and assessment skills. However, the program's scope was limited to only five participants, which constrains its potential impact on the broader agriculture industry. We recommend expanding the program to include more participants, thereby amplifying its influence. Additionally, we advise sharing these findings with the TAFE body as evidence to support the need for improvements in the TAE course materials. Further, consider analysing the program's return on investment and sharing this information with farm owners while promoting the program.

## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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### VEG Schools Farm Gate Program

The results of the evaluation of the Farm Gate Program indicate a high level of success in several areas. An impressive 91.2% of secondary students found the program engaging and interesting, and 95.2% reported an increased understanding of where food comes from. The program effectively educated 90.8% of students about the agriculture sector, and 96.0% gained a better understanding of fresh produce production. Additionally, 62.8% of students expressed a desire to eat more vegetables, and 57.3% reported a change in their perceptions about working in agriculture. The program also highlighted potential career paths, with 90.7% of students reporting a better understanding of agricultural careers. High levels of satisfaction were reflected in 87.7% of students willing to recommend the experience to others. Although interest in further study within the agriculture sector was lower at 33.2%, this still represents a considerable number of students considering further engagement in agricultural education.

Teachers discussed the program's design, participant engagement, feedback, challenges, and future directions. They explained that the program is intentionally designed to align with educational curricula and tailored to various student cohorts. Feedback from participating schools has been overwhelmingly positive. The challenges identified were mostly beyond the control of VEG Education and the program staff, causing minimal concerns. These included students' minimal knowledge about vegetables, disengaged students, and the complexity of planning and school administration. The teachers fully support continuing the program, noting its effectiveness. Suggested enhancements include integrating more First Nations knowledge, refining information and activities, and increasing funding to make the program accessible to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

The evaluation findings demonstrate that the VEG Schools Farm Gate program successfully engaged students and enhanced their understanding of the agriculture sector through hands-on learning. We recommend continuing the program and considering expanded funding to target low socioeconomic schools.

### Industry Contextualised Resources

All participants confirmed their contribution to developing the units of competency. Five found these units highly relevant to the horticulture industry's challenges, and seven found them very relevant. Regarding gaps between the units and industry best practices, five reported none, and one noted a few. Satisfaction with the collaboration between VEG Education and industry leaders was high, with one participant extremely satisfied and nine very satisfied.

This project was designed to ensure that training materials and assessments are fit for purpose and to build capacity among students to become future industry leaders. While initial feedback indicates positive satisfaction with inclusion and the relevance of topics, it is too early to determine the project's overall success. Once the resources are finalised, we recommend convening a focus group to gather industry feedback and secure endorsement.

### Industry Expert Trainer Scholarship Program

The mentoring program's success was significantly influenced by the dynamics of the student cohort, with peer support, work-study balance, and cultural sensitivity playing crucial roles. The program effectively addressed industry needs by offering a practical support to traditional TAE courses, and enhancing new trainers' capabilities. Participants gained increased confidence and practical skills, benefiting from approachable coaching and ongoing mentor support. Despite this success, challenges such as the complexity of the TAE course, balancing commitments, and funding issues were noted.

The program was designed to address the shortage of qualified trainers and assessors in horticulture. Although it is too early to assess the long-term impact, the findings indicate that the program has been successful in supporting a diverse cohort with current industry experience, enhancing their training and assessment skills. However, the program's scope was limited to only five participants, which constrains its potential impact on the broader agriculture industry. We recommend expanding the program to include more participants, thereby amplifying its influence. Additionally, we advise sharing these findings with the TAFE body as evidence to support the need for improvements in the TAE course materials. Further, consider analysing the program's return on investment and sharing this information with farm owners while promoting the program.



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