International Fibre Centre: A study of training innovation

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Introduction

The future of Australia’s fibre industry is closely linked both to the strength of wool and cotton exports and to the domestic textile and clothing industries. All stages of the value chain need to continue to operate and increase competitiveness to capitalise on areas where Australia has a competitive advantage.

The Australian textile, clothing and footwear (TCF) industries have an annual turnover of $9 billion, exports of $1 billion and employ approximately 100,000 people. The TCF industries are facing a number of challenges, including reduction in tariffs, the pressure of imports, barriers to entry in export markets, current cost structures and the requirement for new capital investment. In meeting these challenges the industries will need to maintain sufficient scale of operation and diversity if they are to survive in the long term.

The world fibre market is dominated by synthetics and cotton. While wool comprises only four per cent of the world fibre market, Australia is the major wool producer of apparel wool (724,000 tonnes) and a major exporter of cotton (2.5 million bales). In 1995–96 Australia produced 27 per cent of the world’s greasy wool; 70 per cent of the fine wool; and 46 per cent of world exports of wool valued at $3.5 billion. As the world’s major wool-producing nation, Australia has a unique stake in ensuring that wool continues to be used in the production of clothing and textiles.

Challenges for the Australian fibres, textile and clothing industries include:

- improved communication through the value chain from the fashion consumer to the fibre producer
- adoption of a market-driven approach so the whole industry keeps pace with trends in fibre, textile and fashion design
- adoption of innovative processing and management systems which are based on the latest research and development
● innovative manufacturing systems managed by skilled labour with strong technical skills
● innovation in fibre blends
● improvements in quality
● continued microeconomic reform

The Victorian Government established the Natural Fibres Institute Review Committee (NFIRC) in 1995 to:

● identify the demand for training at all levels of textiles processing
● develop a detailed training program for technical and further education (TAFE) and universities
● determine training delivery options
● identify the need and extent of such investment in plant and equipment as may be necessary to support training through access to modern textile processing facilities
● assess opportunities to support product development

The Victorian Government supported the recommendations of the 1996 NFIRC report, in particular the establishment of the Australian Fibre and Textiles Education Centre, now known as the International Fibre Centre (IFC).

International Fibre Centre

The IFC has been established to assist industry to compete in the future when the drivers of competitive advantage will be increasingly reliant on knowledge and innovation. The IFC will be used to underpin the essential development of management and operational skills and adoption of innovative technology which is critical to a world-competitive textiles industry.

The IFC will support expanded tertiary training and education in textiles through the provision of world-class manufacturing facilities, focussed practical operational training, and product development. The IFC will be a link between the textile industry, education and training providers and research institutions, the aim being the production of better quality textiles in Australia. The IFC will not operate as a training provider.

The Victorian Government is constructing facilities for the IFC. The IFC will operate from two sites in Victoria:

● a pilot wool processing plant at Geelong, on the Waurn Ponds Campus of Deakin University. An added feature of the Waurn Ponds development is the co-location of the IFC with the new wool and horticulture facility of the Gordon Institute of TAFE. The wool facility will comprise a shearing shed, wool-classing rooms, and integrated wool storage and handling area
● a pilot cotton and non-woven processing plant at Melbourne, on the Melbourne Institute of Textiles Campus at Brunswick

Both facilities will include classrooms and quiet areas to support production environment training.

Future training issues in Australia’s industries
The Victorian Government has fully funded the purchase of equipment and the design and construction of facilities. This is a capital investment of approximately $25 million. The two facilities are planned to open in February 1999. In addition the IFC will receive an annual operating grant of $2.5 million.

Advantages of the IFC model for training delivery

The IFC model has been designed to:

- focus on the needs of the Australian textile industry. Given that the IFC is governed by industry leaders the centre will be continually exposed to the realities of the Australian textile industry
- provide a national centre of excellence in textiles training. Industry, training providers and academia from all over Australia can use the facilities. Organisational and geographic barriers have been removed in the IFC model
- maximise the utilisation of the facilities. Facilities are not owned by any one training provider, but are available on a scheduled basis to any public or private training provider, school or university
- provide flexible access and staffing arrangements which will allow for the plant and equipment to operate on demand, seven days a week and/or multiple shifts. Staff are technical experts not teachers or trainers
- provide a legal structure which ensures that any profits earned must be applied solely to the purposes of the company; any profits continue to benefit the textile industry
- ensure the relevance of plant and equipment to the Australian textiles industry. The centre provides the ability to respond to emerging industry developments in relation to technology and training needs
- build on successful international models of training and product development facilities
- complement the role and facilities currently provided by the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO)
- directly involve industry in the ongoing management and development of the IFC to ensure the continued relevance of facilities and services

The Australian textile industry must develop competitive workforce skills, undertake product innovation and value-add to raw materials. The IFC has the opportunity to directly support these developments through facilitating high quality textile training and product development.