# Strategic planning, ongoing development and evaluation of the Nursery Industry Accreditaation Scheme, Australia (NIASA)

Richard Stephens
Nursery and Garden
Industry Australia

Project Number: NY99006

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**Final Report**
**HAL project: NY99006**
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# Media Summary

Over 200 production nurseries and growing media businesses are now accredited under NIASA, and the number continues to rise.

As a result of the new industry strategic plan, NIASA will have more resources, be promoted more widely throughout the nursery trade and offer more benefits to participating businesses.

Widespread adoption of NIASA will be encouraged by demonstrating the on-site benefits of the accreditation process, including; increased productivity, improved industry and consumer recognition and enhanced ability to meet environmental and other regulatory compliance requirements.

NIASA membership has already proved to be a valuable aid in dealing with environmental and worker health and safety compliance issues. The aim for 2002, and beyond, is to expand this benefit and to be seen as a leader in this area.

Preference for NIASA product is likely to grow because of wider industry and market place awareness of NIASA and its selection criteria, especially the independent assessment process.

**Some of the new initiatives for NIASA:**

- A major update and reprint of the NIASA Best Management Practice Guidelines publication. A ring binder format will enable sections or pages to be upgraded more easily as required.
- Re-development of a style guide for the accreditation logo to ensure minimal variation across all the accreditation logos.
- The production of a national NIASA kit. This kit will be produced and forwarded to all existing NIASA businesses and all newly accredited businesses thereafter. Based on the current AGCAS CD ROM introduction kit, it will include:
    - Letter of introduction for NIASA nurseries, mentioning AGCAS and NGIP
    - NIASA logo specifications and style guide
    - Potential customer letter of introduction draft explaining the benefits of NIASA
    - NIASA advertising template
    - Development of a nationally consistent NIASA certificate which would be signed and dated by the state chairs and issued annually.
- Development of an annual directory to the best plants and growing media suppliers in the country. It will list only NIASA businesses.
- Development and testing of a customer feedback sheet and process for inclusion into the guidelines. This will increase our knowledge of what the scheme is achieving in the market place, improve customer focus and help businesses learn from their customers.
- Development of NIASA display posters for promotion at workshops, field days, tradeshows, conferences, etc. One will be produced for each state.

- Upgrade of the NGIA website, highlighting the benefits of NIASA.
- Case studies on NIASA written and promoted to industry, eg: *The Nursery Papers*, general articles. The focus will be on smaller businesses.
- Cross representation on state NIASA and AGCAS committees.
- Jointly organised NIASA and AGCAS state based events.
- A major survey of NIASA businesses to ask them what they want from their accreditation scheme.

NIASA also offers a set of professionally trained eyes and ears, in the form of a helpful nursery industry development officer, to advise on continual improvement ideas relevant to your production nursery or growing media businesses. Such independent advice, coupled with industry proven best management practices, could provide valuable ideas and help your business deal with production efficiency, government regulations and advancing technology.

For more information on NIASA, contact the nursery industry development officer at your state NGI office.

# Introduction

Under the objective 'To raise the level of skill and professionalism of industry members' the nursery and garden industry strategic plan '2002 and beyond' says:

> *Enhance the business benefit of accreditation (NIASA, AGCAS and NGIPP) and improve the accreditation package on offer to the industry*
>
> *Facilitate the adoption of accreditation by members*
>
> *Actively promote the accreditation package to industry*
>
> *Ensure resourcing of accreditation schemes is adequate and sustainable*

Also, under the objective 'Ensure the industry responds to community environmental concerns';

> *Develop environmental best practice guidelines for incorporation into accreditation schemes*

As a result, accreditation (including NIASA) forms a central and key role for the continued professional development of the industry. The nursery & garden industry (NGI) associations of Australia recognise this and are therefore willing to resource accreditation.

It is important to note that the benefits of accreditation are numerous and far more reaching than simply the number of accredited businesses. For example, over 3000 copies of the NIASA best management practice guidelines have been sold. These have been used widely throughout Australia and internationally as a good tip guide for production nurseries. Without NIASA, such a publication would not exist.

Also, many nursery operators have looked at NIASA and learned and implemented good ideas from it, but did not implement all of the NIASA guidelines due to site difficulties or unavailable funds. Such nurseries have also benefited from NIASA. TAFE and other horticultural training institutions use the NIASA guidelines as way of educating their students on how to set a production nursery the right way. Likewise, Nursery Industry Development Officers (NIDOs) use NIASA as a base guide to communicate with industry members on business improvement issues and to ensure industry training workshops are delivered in a holistic, best management practice way.

As with any business improvement scheme, it needs to be updated and reviewed regularly if it is to maintain relevance. The challenge is for this to happen through a process that ensures the current participants remain loyal to the scheme while attracting others. This obviously requires diplomacy and consultation.

As a result, an **'Enhancing Accreditation – Improving the business benefits of NIASA'** project has been written through a process of consultation involving all the

State NGI associations, the State NIASA committees and approval has been given by the Industry Advisory Committee.

This project will enable a new phase of NIASA to begin. With 200 businesses nationally already accredited, we are now in a position to promote the availability of NIASA product throughout the industry, including retail, landscape, commercial horticulture and bush re-generation buyers. In addition, we are able to build into NIASA more environmental and occupational health and safety components that will enable the accredited businesses to demonstrate to the community and government that the nursery industry is responsible and does not require legislation.

## **Project Outline:** Enhancing Accreditation – Improving the business benefits of NIASA (Nursery Industry Accreditation Scheme, Australia)

This project stared on 1 July 2002, and is due for completion on 30 June 2005. the project leader is Richard Stephens, Industry Development Manager, NGIA. The project will result in:

- Increased skill and professional development by industry members, especially growers, wholesalers and allied traders.
- Increased understanding of accreditation and professional best practice by industry members.
- Better nursery and garden industry products, as perceived by customers.
- Synergy between NIASA, AGCAS, NGIPP and other professional development programs.
- A continuation of national coordination and uniform delivery of the industry owned and developed NIASA scheme.
- A sound vehicle for the spread and adoption of new processes by the nursery industry.

It is expected that the current number of NIASA businesses will increase significantly over the life of this project and that the majority of greenlife and growing media product from the allied trade will come from NIASA accredited businesses.

Adoption will be encouraged by demonstrating the on-site benefits of the NIASA process, including; productivity increase, industry and consumer recognition and enhanced ability to meet community/government environmental and other regulatory compliance requirements.

NIASA membership has already proved to be a valuable aid in dealing with environmental and worker health and safety compliance issues. The aim is to expand this benefit and to be seen as leaders in these initiatives.

As a result, preference for NIASA product is likely to grow because of wider industry and market place awareness of NIASA and its selection criteria, especially the independent assessment process.

# Technology transfer strategy and methodology/activities

The Nursery and Garden Industry Strategic Plan 2001 – 2006 "The Nursery and Garden Industry; 2002 and Beyond" lists five main objectives, three of which relate directly to the Nursery Industry Accreditation Scheme, Australia (NIASA).

These three objectives are:

- To raise community perception of the value of gardening
- To raise the level of skill and professionalism of industry members
- To ensure the industry responds to community environmental concerns.

The first of these objectives relates to NIASA by helping industry provide plant products that are perceived as valuable by the community. NIASA and the Australian Garden Centre Accreditation Scheme (AGCAS) have complementary roles to play here and this project will help clarify and strengthen these roles.

The second objective, 'To raise the level of skill and professionalism of industry members', specifically mentions NIASA or accreditation in five of its six strategies. These five strategies that will be covered by the new 'Enhancing Accreditation' project are:

- Enhance business benefit of accreditation and improve the accreditation 'package' on offer to the industry.
- Facilitate the adoption of accreditation by members.
- Actively promote the accreditation package to industry
- Ensure resourcing of accreditation schemes is adequate and sustainable.
- Investigate schemes for accreditation of other members (ie allied traders, transport etc).

The third objective, 'To ensure the industry responds to community concerns', has one of its three strategies that directly relates to NIASA. This strategy will also form a part of this project and carried out in consultation with the various State Accreditation Committees:

- Develop environmental best practice guidelines for incorporation into accreditation schemes.

## Overview

The NIASA scheme has been operating since 1994 and has attracted over 200 businesses. In addition, the year 2000 saw the initiation of the Australian Garden Centre Accreditation Scheme (AGCAS), which currently has 92 members.

A comprehensive strategic planning process for the industry was carried out in 2001 and, as mentioned in the summary above, accreditation is a major vehicle for developing the industry over the next 5 years.

Following the industry strategic planning process, an inaugural meeting was held with the national AGCAS and NIASA committees and the development officers in October/November 2001 in Brisbane. This meeting generated a variety of initiatives to further develop accreditation and ensure beneficial coordination between all the accreditation schemes. Some of these initiatives include:

- NIASA will formally recognise AGCAS, and vice versa.
- NIASA and AGCAS businesses will be promoted to and by each other.
- NIASA and AGCAS businesses will be provided with regularly updated lists of accredited businesses.
- NIASA and AGCAS will endorse the Nursery and Garden Industry Professional Program (NGIPP) and other professional development programs, and thus promote recognition of individuals who maintain and improve their skills.
- The logos for NIASA and AGCAS will have generic similarities.
- Both the NIASA and AGCAS schemes will continue to add benefits for members.
- NIASA certificates will phase into national consistency.
- A NIASA kit will be produced for the benefit of newly accredited businesses and existing members. This kit will provide some generic promotional materials.
- The NIASA guidelines are to be updated and reprinted in a ring binder to enable sections or pages to be upgraded as required.

## Previous NIASA project

The project NY99006, ' Strategic planning, ongoing development and evaluation of the Nursery Industry Accreditation Scheme' was completed on 31 December 2001. This project enabled the NIASA scheme to grow and attract over 200 businesses.

The key elements of this project were:

- NIASA co-ordination and administration
- Development of a NIASA strategic plan
- National promotion of NIASA
- Developing R&D proposals to support best practice and the strengthening of NIASA.

## Why a new project?

The new strategic plan for the industry gives NIASA and all the accreditation schemes a high priority. This project will enable a coordinated approach for the marketing and operations of all the accreditation and professional development programs. It will also enable NIASA to be redeveloped in light of current industry issues and give industry development a focus.

# Evaluation and measurement of outcomes – impact and adoption

While the growth in numbers of NIASA accredited businesses has slowed in recent years, NIASA is used in many different ways to help the professional development of businesses in an industry (described in the introduction section, page 5). As such, benefits from accreditation schemes are far-reaching but necessarily easily evaluated or widely understood. However, comparison of Australian production nurseries against other countries without an accreditation scheme, such as New Zealand, show significant outcomes in favour of accreditation in terms of nursery hygiene and production efficiency.

To evaluate this from another angle, a major independent survey of green-life buyers was carried out in 2000. All of the respondent groups were very positive toward any form of quality improvement, including accreditation such as NIASA. The basic data from the survey (project NY98048) is summarised in the table below.

**Table 1; Greenlife buyer attitudes towards NIASA**

| NIASA Indicator | Chains | Retailers/ Hire companies | Landscapers | Production Horticulture |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Awareness* | *67%* | *58%* | *64%* | *70%* |
| *Acceptance it is Necessary* | *90%* | *55% definitely*<br>*22% unsure* | *65% definitely*<br>*20% unsure* | *78% necessary*<br>*10% unsure* |
| *Prefer Accred. Nurseries* | *Not in short term, will in l/t* | *33% definitely*<br>*26% maybe* | *61% definitely*<br>*15% maybe* | *75% definitely*<br>*20% maybe* |
| *Switch to Acr'd. Nurseries* | *Expected over time* | *5% immediate*<br>*30% in future* | *7% immediate*<br>*32% in future* | *20% immediate*<br>*40% in future* |
| *Value added* | *Unsure; must be proved* | *av. incremental value of 3%* | *av. incremental value of 4%* | *av. incremental value of 11%* |
| *Main benefits expected of NIASA* | *Best practice*<br>*Consistency*<br>*Management, operations*<br>*Lift quality* | *Confidence*<br>*Plant health*<br>*Consistency*<br>*Presentation* | *Plant health*<br>*Consistency*<br>*Confidence*<br>*Easy to sell it*<br>*No errors*<br>*Presentation* | *Confidence*<br>*Easy to sell it*<br>*Plant health*<br>*Consistency*<br>*Information*<br>*No errors* |

Source: HAL project NY98048: Survey of the needs of greenlife producers' customers, Mark Dignam and Associates, January 2000.

The same project also investigated the various perceived quality attributes towards greenlife and the businesses producing greenlife. The summary of this information is contained in the two separate tables below.

**Table 2; Greenlife buyer attitudes on greenlife quality attributes**

| Quality Factors | Percentage Mentioning it | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Chains** | **Retailers Hire Cos** | **Land-scapers** | **Prod'n Hort.** |
| Health/ no disease | Very import. | 93 | 80 | 90 |
| No bugs or insect damage | Import-ant | 23 | 24 | **60** |
| Correct shape or form for variety | Import-ant | 39 | 48 | 43 |
| Presentation, good looking | **Very import.** | **85** | 58 | 40 |
| Pot size suits plant | Minor | 14 | **35** | **35** |
| Strength/durable/ will last a long time | Minor | 8 | 8 | 28 |
| Consistent/good/ uniform size | **Very import.** | 28 | 35 | 18 |
| Good root system/ not bound | Average | 7 | **41** | 15 |
| Good colour | Import. | 11 | 17 | 13 |
| Good quality potting mix | Minor | 8 | 10 | 10 |
| Clear, useful, correct labels | Average | **32** | 8 | 8 |
| Good size for age | Minor | N/A | 5 | 5 |
| Diameter/ thickness of stem | Minor | N/A | N/A | 3 |
| Correct clones | N/A | N/A | N/A | 3 |

Source: HAL project NY98048: Survey of the needs of greenlife producers' customers, Mark Dignam and Associates, January 2000.

**Table 3; Greenlife buyer attitudes on product and service factors**

| Product and Service Factors | Percentage Value Added (%) | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Main Chains** | **Retailers Hire Cos** | **Land-scapers** | **Prod'n Hort** |
| *Product range* | 1 | 2 | 5 | 10 |
| *Supplier stability* | 1.5 | 1 | 4 | 10 |
| *Availability, delivery reliability* | 1 | 3 | 7 | 18 |
| *Product quality* | 10 | 8 | 8 | 27 |
| *Geographic coverage* | 0 | 1 | 4 | 6 |
| *Product information* | 0 | <1 | 3 | 11 |
| *Staff knowledge* | <1 | 2 | 4 | 15 |
| *Product reliability and consistency* | 5-10 | 2 | 6 | 24 |
| *Operational support* | 0 | 1 | 4.5 | 17 |

Source: HAL project NY98048: Survey of the needs of greenlife producers' customers, Mark Dignam and Associates, January 2000.

# Discussion

Charting a future for NIASA is important. The extent to which NIASA should address customer service issues, product quality standards, worker health and safety issues and environmental best practice needs to be clarified in a highly (industry stakeholder) consultative fashion. The aim is not to make the NIASA requirements too difficult but ensure they are progressive, realistic and seen as valuable by all sectors of the nursery and allied industry.

Long term funding of the scheme also requires input from all stakeholders to develop a long term funding model so the NIASA scheme is self-supporting.

Linkages with other industry programs and promotional activities also needs to be explored.

**General administration and management**

The process of annual NIASA meetings involving the state NIASA committee chairs and NIASA Technical Officers (or Nursery Industry Development Officers - NIDOs) has proved essential in ensuring national consistency of the scheme. These need to continue for national consistency in administration and use of the selection criteria and to provide an effective forum to ensure unified understanding and structured implementation of new initiatives. They also provide a mechanism for maintaining cooperation with the AGCAS, NGIPP and other professional development schemes.

It is the Industry Development Manager (IDM) role to organise these meetings preferably in either June or July. Every second year joint, NIASA, AGCAS and NGIPP annual meetings should be held.

The NIDOs also meet at national conference where operational NIASA issues are raised and worked through as required, as well as R&D and Industry Advisory Committee (IAC) initiatives. Again, this needs to be maintained in order for national uniformity, coordination of NIDOs, generation of new ideas and adoption of new initiatives. The IDM is to organise these meetings.

National administration of the scheme is required to enable a reliable and up to date database of NIASA businesses and new NIASA initiatives. Currently this is centralised at the Nursery and Garden Industry Australia office at Epping, NSW. However, the database used for maintaining NIASA records requires upgrading and continual maintenance. Database maintenance will be carried out by the NGIA Administration Manager, with guidance as required from the IDM.

**Implementation of new initiatives**

The industry strategic planning process and the inaugural accreditation and development officers meeting highlighted the importance to industry of accreditation,

particularly NIASA and the need to implement many new initiatives to further develop the scheme.

These initiatives include:

- A major update and reprint in a ring binder format of the NIASA Best Practice Guidelines publication. The ring binder format will enable sections or pages to be upgraded more easily as required.
- Re-development of a style guide for the NIASA logo to ensure minimal variation for all accreditation logos.
- The production of a national NIASA kit. This kit will be produced and forwarded to all existing NIASA businesses and all newly accredited businesses thereafter. Based on the current AGCAS CD Rom introduction kit, it will include:
    - Letter of introduction for NIASA nurseries, mentioning AGCAS and NGIPP
    - NIASA logo specifications and style guide
    - Potential customer letter of introduction draft explaining the benefits of NIASA
    - NIASA advertising template
- Development of a nationally consistent NIASA certificate which would be signed and dated by the state chairs and issued annually.
- Development of a broad based accreditation brochure explaining the various accreditation schemes (illustrated by case studies) and their benefits. The expected audience would be industry personnel, consumers, regulatory and community members interested in knowing more about the professionalism of the industry.
- For each NIASA business to receive annually a list of AGCAS businesses, and vice versa.
- For each NIASA and AGCAS business to receive annually a list of NGIPP and other professional scheme personnel.
- Development and testing of a customer feedback sheet and process for inclusion into the guidelines. This will increase our knowledge of what the scheme is achieving in the market place and improve customer focus and help businesses learn from their customers.
- Development of a NIASA email chat group.
- Confirmation that NIASA is a 'trade focused scheme of best practice' that works in conjunction with AGCAS.

- Develop a protocol on how to handle NIASA complaints based on the draft AGCAS model.

- In 2003, review the demand for and benefits of developing an accreditation or preferred supplier scheme for allied traders, apart from growing media producers, such as transporters, pot manufacturers, fertilizer companies, etc. This review should be considered as a separate project.

All of these above activities are to be coordinated by the Industry Development Manager.

**Continuation of existing initiatives**

The strategic plan for NIASA that was developed in July 2000 identified a number of important issues, some of which are on going and will be supported by this project. They include:

1) Development of NIASA display posters for promotion at workshops, field days, tradeshows, conferences, etc. One will be produced for each state.
2) Upgrade of the NGIA website, highlighting the benefits of NIASA.
3) Case studies on NIASA written and promoted to industry, eg: *The Nursery Papers*, general articles. Focus on the smaller businesses.
4) Cross representation on state NIASA and AGCAS committees
5) Jointly organised NIASA and AGCAS state based events.
6) Include information on NIASA in the Trade Register
7) Ask the buying groups what they would like from NIASA
8) Investigate marketing NIASA overseas
9) Review annual fees set by state committees and consider applying a national fee for national administration and promotion.

The IDM has the responsibility for coordinating the first initiatives 1, 2, 6, & 7. Responsibility for each of the other initiatives lies with all industry development officers and their state NIASA committees.

**Other initiatives**

The 200 NIASA businesses have never been surveyed on a national basis to discover what their levels of satisfaction are with the scheme and how benefits could be maximised. A comprehensive written survey will be developed, sent out and results processed to provide information on the best ways to further develop the scheme and initiate national communications among all NIASA businesses.

In the survey, preferred approaches to many of the initiatives listed above will be asked for and promotional ideas, such as providing NIASA stickers for NIASA product, will be assessed. The advantages and disadvantages of various options for the development of NIASA, such as including worker health and safety and/or environmental impact issues will also be assessed

The survey is to be coordinated by the IDM.

# Recommendations

The project described above, 'Enhancing Accreditation – Improving the business benefits of NIASA', provides a valuable platform for the professional development of the nursery and garden industry. It, along with the other strategies as detailed in the industry strategic plan '2002 and beyond', have been through an extensive consultation process. This means that individuals within the industry are empowered to carry out the strategies and actions and therefore bring the benefits for the national industry into fruition.

This report recommends the implementation of the 'Enhancing Accreditation – Improving the business benefits of NIASA' project without delay, and in a continual consultative manner.

# Acknowledgments

The author would like to acknowledge the help and support shown by all of the nursery industry development officers, both current and previous, as well as the previous Nursery Industry Development Manager, Ian Atkinson.

In addition, input from the volunteers on the national and state NIASA committees needs to be acknowledged. Without their input, we would not have an accreditation scheme for nursery producers. Particular thanks go to the current national NIASA chair, Keith Bodman, and the previous chair, Wayne Parr.

Last, but not least, thanks to every NIASA business operator, who provide an example of 'Best Management Practice Professionalism' in the nursery and garden industry.