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WITH MANY YOUNG PEOPLE TURNING THEIR BACKS ON FARMING, AN OVERHAUL OF AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION HAS BEEN SUGGESTED TO SECURE THE FUTURE OF OUR RURAL INDUSTRIES. STORY: NIC BARNARD

**F**arming used to define Australia: the image of a wide, brown land, cattle and cane and honest toil under the sun were a way people saw their country.

Today, it's still an idea romantic enough to entice a few sea-changers to up sticks from the city and buy a hobby farm in the country. But for many, farming conjures up images of drought and poverty, ageing battlers struggling to keep their properties going in the face of falling prices and wondering who'll take over when they're gone.

The message being delivered to federal lawmakers by those involved in bringing on the next generation of land workers is that farming is in crisis, and it will take concerted action to turn it around. A national plan is needed for a root-and-branch reform of agriculture training and education that would otherwise see many providers go to the wall.

The evidence, from providers such as the University of Queensland and from agriculture professionals, was submitted to the House of Representatives Agriculture Committee as part of its ongoing inquiry into rural skills training and research.

The committee was asked last year by federal Agriculture Minister Warren Truss to survey the current state of training and education in the agricultural sector amid concerns that they fail to meet the needs of the industry and that the sector is ill-equipped to meet the demands of a changing global market.

Those concerns have certainly been echoed in written evidence and in hearings held in Canberra and around the country. As Professor Roger Swift, executive dean of UQ's faculty of natural resources, agriculture and veterinary science, told MPs: "We have one of the worst educated farming groups in the developed world, apart from Argentina."

His warning was stark: the industry is on the verge of a severe skills shortage and reform is essential. "If we do not change now, we become an also-ran in the world market."

Critics argue there are too many colleges and universities offering too many courses. Although employment in agriculture is strong, individual providers are too small and under-funded to offer either the breadth of knowledge or the specialisms that are required in a fast-changing, increasingly complex industry.

Continued page 38 ▶

# FUTURE CROP

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Individual TAFE courses are also too small, with institutions trying to maintain a number of campuses, often over large distances. Unable to employ a critical mass of staff to innovate or maintain standards, they face inevitable decline.

Worse, any attempt to co-ordinate the system has all but disappeared. UQ’s submission to the committee is scathing: “There has been a serious lack of planning of agricultural education, with no national plan for a cohesive system ... Too often, decisions have been driven by political rather than educational needs ... Funding has been inadequate and poorly targeted.”

Courses have become, in the robust phrase of another witness, about “bums on seats”. Often they are designed around the specialisms of the staff that have survived cutbacks instead of being tailored to meet the needs of industry. They no longer attract the brightest and best students because entry grades are so low, making agriculture appear a soft option; yet the grades have to be low to attract enough students.

None of this is helped by the poor image of farming in general. “The typical news item about agriculture is somebody kicking dusty

dirt in a paddock and crying because they have to leave their property,” Prof Swift told the committee.

“We do not see the go-ahead images of an industry that is thriving.”

Yet agriculture is still a major part of the economy. It accounts for almost one dollar in eight of the nation’s income; and fully one adult in six works in farming or a job that depends on it. But the average age of farmers today is 54; in South Australia, a quarter of them plan to retire within five years. And student numbers are falling. “There are now too few students for the number of vacancies in the industries that we supply,” Prof Swift told the inquiry.

The solution put forward by Prof Swift and by other witnesses is a “national plan”, led by the federal government, that would break through institutional, geographical and political barriers, and take the long view. It would be backed by a national body, possibly the Council of Australian Governments, which could make recommendations to Canberra.

There would be fewer providers, with those surviving grouped into large “centres of excellence”, specialising in different fields. Teaching would tie closely into research, seen as essential in an increasingly science-based profession. They would also take in CSIRO researchers and staff from local departments of primary industry.

In its submission to the inquiry, UQ suggests the establishment of “at

least two major institutes in agriculture”, one to specialise in temperate climates and bringing together institutions and research programs across New South Wales, Victoria, SA and southern Western Australia; a second, in Queensland, would bring together tropical and sub-tropical research across northern Australia.

Prof Swift told the inquiry the best way to spend a limited pool of public money was on “really good, well-resourced faculties, with a breadth of disciplines and several people in those disciplines”.

“It does a disservice to those students to teach 10 or 20 with two people who know a little bit about something and not much about all the rest.”

Recent years have seen the science and technology of agriculture take huge leaps forward, while the professional, 21st century farmer also needs a keen grasp of finance, economics and marketing.

It’s for that reason that witnesses before the inquiry argued that small agriculture departments could no longer meet the needs of the profession. Only by creating a national network of centres of excellence would Australia have the breadth and depth of expertise to train students who might want to specialise in anything from soil science to animal nutrition.

In a much more centralised system, university places would need to be managed by Canberra. It would involve tough decisions and strong, even “brutal”, action by the federal government, ending funding for some institutions entirely. “I am sure there would be uproar from local MPs,” Prof Swift admitted.

He added: “That will cause a lot of upset, but if we are not prepared to take it on, we will not go forward.” Continuing to prop up failing or ineffective courses simply meant reform would take longer.

Despite the cost to universities who lost out, he predicted that academics would welcome such changes. At the moment, he said, they were seeing “death by a thousand cuts. They would rather have the scimitar across the neck.” His colleague, Richard Williams, professor in horticulture, agreed: “Academic staff



Photo: Tom Klein, Newspix

in general are almost desperate for change.”

So how would it work? With one university acting as a hub, other institutions or centres could provide “spokes”, following the same curriculum but perhaps offering only diplomas or two-year degrees, with students moving to the centre to take their studies further.

Technology would be the key to the success of such a system. Some courses could be taken remotely by rural students at satellite institutions, with scholarships then used to help them move to the centre to specialise or to take their studies further. In such a large country, it was important for rural students to spend some time in their own communities and some at the centre, Prof Swift said.

It would eliminate one of the major problems of the present system: the expensive duplication of some courses by rival institutions. Different institutions would be able to bid to become centres of excellence in different fields. And with different centres co-operating and sharing programs, students in, say, SA could carry out their basic studies in Adelaide, but then move to Townsville to specialise in beef.

Technology had the capacity to revolutionise education, Prof Swift told the committee, but “instead of preparing for it, we are actually going backwards”.

A similar analysis and call for national action has also come from the Australian Institute of Agricultural Science and Technology (AIAST)—the peak body for agriculture professionals. A submission from its South Australian division said the country needed fewer, but larger, providers of agricultural education. Some courses would have to close, and some universities “would get out of ag education altogether”.

Geoffrey Thomas, president of the South Australian division, warned a shake-out was inevitable. Courses would close anyway through falling demand, but without a national

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strategy the results would be random and incoherent.

“Many of the faculties will disappear. They will disappear for the wrong reasons and we will slowly end up with major gaps in the service provision,” Mr Thomas told the committee. Indeed, gaps were already appearing: Adelaide University no longer offered horticulture.

The need for a national perspective was echoed in the vocational education and training sector. Arthur Blewitt, chief executive officer of the Agri-Food Industry Skills Council, told MPs:

“What industry wants is people who are job-ready and trained properly and, importantly, that there are consistent standards across Australia.”

The council is working to streamline training programs across the industry, to cut duplication and get people into work more quickly. It’s also developing a model of what makes a good TAFE to spread across the 800-900 centres Australia-wide that run agricultural programs.

“There is a massive job there to get good quality standardisation across states and, importantly, to get products that relate to industry-driven needs,” Mr Blewitt said. But the council admits it struggles with a bureaucracy that means it can take 18 months to validate some courses. Programs need to be agreed by each state government as well as by Canberra.

Agriculture used to attract itinerant or mobile workers—Agriculture Committee Chair and former meatworker Alby Schultz (Member for Hume, NSW) was one, working in the mutton industry in Victoria for half the year then hitchhiking to Queensland to work in beef. That is harder now, and employers say they need qualified people because of the legal responsibilities that come with working with chemicals and other hazardous products.

Rationalising qualifications would make that easier, but the skills council also raised concerns that many courses

Continued page 40 ▶



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now emphasised “soft” skills such as teamwork and communication, at the expense of the solid, technical knowledge actually needed to do the job. Jane Brownbill, the council’s senior manager, talked anecdotally of a trained arboriculturist who had never been up a tree.

Private training providers, such as Rural Industries Skill Training, meanwhile talk of the need for a national approach for buying training hours. At the moment, every state runs a different system.

Those calling for a national plan for agricultural education know they are going against the prevailing tide. Several witnesses recognised Australia’s long standing discomfort with centralised services.

Similarly, in areas where governments are already involved in supporting farmers and linking with education and research, services have been downsized and privatised. UQ says the focus of government extension or support services today is on crisis management, not the big picture.

And this is not the first time government has looked at the challenges facing farming. Mr Thomas, at AIAST, told MPs the first step in developing any national strategy must be a fundamental review of the current landscape, spelling out exactly what the farming industry needs and proposing a way forward.

The trouble is, that was exactly what happened in 1991, when the then federal ministers of education and primary industries commissioned a team led by Jim McColl to carry out a review of agricultural education.

Mr McColl, now a board member on AIAST who gave evidence alongside Mr Thomas, came up with a very similar set of proposals, including merging institutions and cutting courses. It didn’t happen then. Will it happen now? ■

*For more information on the rural skills training and research inquiry by the House of Representatives Agriculture Committee, including access to the submissions and transcripts from the hearings, visit [www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/primind](http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/primind) or email [aff.reps@aph.gov.au](mailto:aff.reps@aph.gov.au) or phone (02) 6277 4500.*

## Home grown farmers needed

IF farming is failing to appeal to a young generation of workers, the answers may lie in the bush itself. That was the message given to members of the House of Representatives inquiry into agricultural education.

Parents in country New South Wales are campaigning for the re-opening of a residential agricultural college in Murrumbidgee which until 2003 ran full-time training courses but now offers only short courses aimed at farmers and other producers.

Their campaign comes as witnesses told MPs of the desperate need to improve the image of farming as a profession and end the drift to the cities and coasts of young country people.

Jim McColl, author of a 1991 report into agricultural education, told MPs educators still did too little to attract rural students into university agricultural courses. “(The) sons and daughters of farming families are the ones we should be really trying to encourage,” he said.

The Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association of NSW, part of a national group that lobbies for equal access to education for rural students, says the problem lies in the lack of local training facilities for young people.

Murrumbidgee Agricultural College was one of only two public institutions in country NSW offering residential courses. When it closed, parents say, only one of its 39 students transferred to the other college, at Tocal, near Maitland. For the rest, it was too far. They want the college to offer residential courses for Year 11 and 12 students, using the “100 rooms sitting there with no-one using them”.

Susan Gordon, president of the NSW association, told the inquiry local high school courses were geared towards university entrance; many students who needed something more practical dropped out early. TAFE colleges were too far away for young people with no driving licence.

Some parents relocated the entire family to bigger towns and cities in order to give their children better educational opportunities. Rural communities were losing not only the next generation of skilled workers, but the current one. “ICPA wants to keep rural communities viable. Access to education is the key element of maintaining this viability,” she told the committee.

The college would offer a wide range of agricultural courses from sheep shearing to beef, mixing practice and theory alongside compulsory maths and English, to prepare students for working life. It would also cover useful skills such as chemical use, tractor and 4X4 driving, chainsaws and senior first aid.

Short courses would also be offered to more remote students living out in the field. But the NSW government says it does not have the \$2 million needed annually, Mrs Gordon told the inquiry.

According to AFISC, numbers on agrifood VET courses fell by 3 per cent between 1998 and 2003, at a time when overall student numbers went up by 13 per cent. With severe skills shortages in some areas, finding people prepared to work in the country had become more important than finding people with the right qualifications. “Industry image is lousy,” said AFISC’s Arthur Blewitt.

Bill Hamill, chief executive for private training provider Rural Industries Skill Training, said agriculture was still seen as a “blue-collar, non-skilled industry”. Most schools had dropped it from the curriculum, and pupils doing badly at school were told by teachers to go back to the farm.

“Agriculture is a dynamic industry, and there are a lot of career paths you can take from agriculture. So we have to address that—and not at year 12 or at university. We have to address it at year 5,” he said.