

Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Higher education and skills training to support future demand in agriculture and agribusiness in Australia

1 Introduction

The purpose of this submission is to emphasise the need for increasing the capacity of Australians in the area of Agribusiness (food from paddock to plate). It is vitally important for Australians to become more aware of the food that sustains us as humans, and to value our capacity to sustain ourselves as a nation.

Agribusiness education and training plays a major role in our future as individual humans, families, communities, States and as a Nation.

I come to this Inquiry as a person whose Dad grew some of our veges 'down the back' of our modest ¼ acre block in suburban Perth. I studied at Muresk in the 1970's and came out with a humble Associate Diploma in Agriculture (WAIT). During my two years at Muresk I studied English, animal and plant sciences, soil science, farm mechanisation, economics, surveying, business budgeting, accounting and management and designed and undertook a scientific research project, among other things.

As a result of these studies I have never taken the food on my plate for granted. My initial tertiary studies have always been a platform for my curiosity about who I am, how the world works, and where I fit into it.

My husband works in his own Agribusiness company and two of our three children, who are both Muresk/Curtin Uni graduates, work in Agribusiness companies.

I am also a member of the Board of Muresk Old Collegians Association Inc.

2 Some history and context

After World War II Europe was brought to its knees by the results of warring for five years between themselves, during which food supply was threatened severely throughout the warring world.

- Peace had no sooner been declared than the Cold War between East and West came into being.
- The organisation that we know today as the European Union grew out of that Cold War, in an effort to ensure that all the countries of Europe would work together, instead of against each other in the future.
- A Common market was established, first in iron and steel in 1951, to ensure that no country would have its own armaments industry, and
- extending quickly to food, so that none of the initial group of five countries would be insecure in food supply.

Farmers, and therefore food production in Europe is now heavily subsidised (farm subsidies being the largest item on the EU's budget) because it is still seen to be critical for national and European security. This document shows just how seriously Europe takes food security and the rural parts of their countries,

http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eval/reports/income/fulltext_en.pdf . I also realise that the EU is far from perfect, but history speaks for itself, and the EU is only one political entity concerned about food security.

3 Contemporary Australian life and food

Fast forward to contemporary Australia. We could be no more different from Europe. We have very little in the way of farming subsidies, yet most of us have three square meals a day, and take every mouthful for granted.

Much of this food and our groceries are imported. We have been net importers of food and groceries since 1988. (Source: Australian Food and Grocery Council's *2020: Industry at the Crossroads*, released 2 November 2011).

For most Australians our source of food is exclusively Coles and Woollies. We enter the Shopping Centre in our cars, park free, and shop in air-conditioned comfort in these windowless theme parks, where we lose all contact with the outside world, and with night and day. These palaces of consumption are more akin to casinos in their seductive marketing style than traditional food markets or strip shopping precincts.

Most of the things we buy, other than food, are to make our bodies, our pets, our homes and our cars more 'beautiful'. We are the ultimate consumers, producing little but service industries, and seeing no need in our everyday lives for anything, other than someone else to do the things for us that we do not have time to do in our busy working lives.

We don't have time or inclination to think about how the Weetbix in our brekkie bowl came to be there, or how a grain of wheat became the Weetbix.



Europe did.

Australians have the money to import anything we could want, while the wages component of cost of production in supplier countries is low, subsidising our cheap retail goods and our already high standard of living.

The vast majority of our exports go out as shiploads of ore and unprocessed grain (much of it returning later as manufactured goods and food). In the absence of a large manufacturing sector our economy is at the mercy of our suppliers (for finished products and inputs) and our export markets (for income), if we are to have an economy at all.

All the hairdressers and fashion retailers in the world will not put food on our tables when the going gets tough.

We are a nation of consumers, not producers.

I believe that this is not healthy economics.

4 Future Australian life and food

If we continue to import a large proportion of our food needs in future, many more of our own producers and secondary food businesses will go out of business, as evidenced by the Food and Grocery Council forecasts in their *2020: Industry at the Crossroads* .

This will bankrupt our supply of skilled food producers who will be lost to other industries or jobs overseas. In future we will not be able to produce more food because we will have lost our human workforce capacity to grow, process, market and distribute food.

Growing food, in particular, is a specialised business, with skills and knowledge often passed down through the generations, as well as more formal education. So social capital is lost as well when an industry dies.

To have the capacity to produce our own food we need Australian citizens who have the knowledge, education, training and experience to produce food from paddock to plate.

I believe that we should not fill that gap, except in the short term, with people on working visas. That is just papering over our lack of capacity and preventing us from seeing the truth about our own loss of capacity. Skilled immigrants should only ever be a temporary measure, to fill a gap while there are Australian lacking qualifications becoming trained and educated to do the same jobs.

5 Future Agribusiness education and training.

The current Federal and relevant State legislative frameworks still fragment child care, primary, secondary, VET and TAFE and University level education systems from each other. They are all one continuum. Federal and State Governments need to be prevented from separating them from each other, and thereby breaking pathways that allow students to continue their chosen path right through, without red tape impediments.

Universities need to be able to set their own entry requirements, but I believe they have a responsibility (which is currently not enshrined in legislation) as part of Australia's Food Security policies, to ensure that they respect pathways (in both spirit and law) that have been established by Government, to enable secondary students without their Uni entry requirements to proceed through Uni courses via Bridging courses. They do, after all, receive Government funding and many have concessional use of government land!

With the current desperate shortage of Agribusiness graduates I think this means that students studying Agribusiness courses should become an Equity group, and that Universities and other education providers be bound by legislation to nurture these students specifically, because they will be critically important to Australia's food security in future.

It is hard enough for many of these students, who are already in other Equity groups, eg women in traditionally non-female areas, rural-based, and low income families because they

come from rural areas (or all of these Equity categories!). They have to move away from their family and rural community for study and training purposes in the city, and carry those extra living expenses as well. Another way to do it would be to ask this question. We have seen special Rural Medicine and Rural Teaching schemes set up. Why not a special Agribusiness scheme?

Regional campuses have historically had a special role to play in meeting the social and academic needs of many of these students because they establish lifelong business networks while they are studying in small, less impersonal campuses.

Small campuses pose great economic challenges for education providers, who usually take the easy way out and treat them as an 'inconvenience' rather than an 'asset', running them down actively, by neglect, or by manipulation of information or manipulation of expenditure. We have seen the demise of every University-run Agribusiness campus in Australia over the last couple of decades.

There is something wrong with a system that has allowed this to happen time after time after time. The legislative frameworks of universities need fixing, when the status quo fails so badly and so repeatedly. Agribusiness campuses are not the only regional campuses to experience financial pressure.

The Agribusiness industries need to be asked what courses they require for their potential and existing Staff, and not just accept whatever (low cost) Courses the Unis are offering, which wastes the time and resources of

- students,
- Academic Staff of Unis,
- federal University funds and
- the potential employers who would rather have industry-ready graduates than generic graduates whom they have to further train in their first 12 months to bring to the point where they can generate income for the company..

6 Conclusions

State and Federal Governments need to promote and support the Agribusiness industries as being as critical as Health and Education for the wellbeing of all Australians.

Agribusiness Education from Childcare through to University is the key to this.

With Food Security such an important issue for the world and for Australia, Legislative changes need to be made at Federal level to enable Universities to

- provide robust, appropriate pathways for non-TEE level undergraduate entry,
- provide the best possible study environments (physically, academically and socially) for Agribusiness courses.
- teach industry-relevant courses, instead of generic Degrees.
- pull up Australia's Agribusiness readiness by the bootstraps, utilising Government Food Security incentives to do so.

We need our school children, our Australian decisionmakers-in-the-making, to understand

- where their Weetbix came from,
- how many jobs went into getting it from a wheat seed in the silo to their breakfast bowl,
- and that they can have valuable and stimulating future careers in Australia's Agribusiness industries.

Australians need to know how important it is for Australia to be able to be autonomous in its own food industries. Otherwise we are doomed to become a nation of theme park-dwelling truck drivers who are only interested in saving native forests, renovating their homes, watching the footy on their wide screen tellies and pondering the colour of next year's lipstick.

That is why it is important to have a robust Agribusiness education and training sector for Australia.

That is why we have to ensure that young Australians are aware of the Essential Industry status of our food producing industries.

That is why these young and not so young people need be motivated to be a part of it.

That is why the Federal Government has to be a part of the solution to our Agribusiness skills shortage on several fronts.