



November 8, 2011

Mr. Tim Watling
Secretary
Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Tim,

The Western Australian Farmers Federation (Inc.) (WAFarmers) thanks you for your letter of September 29, 2011 inviting our comments to the Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations' *'Inquiry into higher education and skills training to support future demand in agriculture and agribusiness in Australia.'*

As background, WAFarmers is the State's largest and most influential rural lobby and service organisation. WAFarmers represents approximately 4,000 Western Australian farmers from a range of primary industries including grain growers, meat and wool producers, dairy farmers, pastoralists, horticulturalists, commercial egg producers and beekeepers.

Collectively our members are major contributors to the \$7.1 billion gross value of production that agriculture in its various forms contributes annually to Western Australia's economy. Additionally, through differing forms of land tenure, our members own, control and capably manage many millions of hectares of the State's land mass and as such are responsible for maintaining the productive capacity and environmental well being of that land.

WAFarmers is not able to comment on all of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference however provides comments on:

- (1) improving opportunities for rurally-based students,
- (2) the opportunities to promote agriculture as a career to students, and
- (3) the impact of the two-speed economy on agriculture.

Improving opportunities for rurally-based students

The 2008 Federal Government Review of Higher Education (the Bradley Report) outlined the ongoing difficulty that exists for rurally-based students in accessing higher educational opportunities, commenting that:

"People from regional and remote parts of Australia remain seriously under-represented in higher education and the participation rates for both have worsened in the last five years. Retention of the regional group has also been decreasing relative to urban students and

retention rates are now 3 per cent below the rates of the remainder of the student population. The success and retention patterns for remote students are of much greater concern. The indicator levels are very low compared with their non-remote peers. For example, success rates are currently 9 per cent below and retention is 13 per cent below the rates of other students.”

The Bradley Report clearly identified that rural and remote students have limited options to remain in their community to continue their education. Advancing their education involves challenges not faced by metropolitan based students, and includes financial costs, in relocation and the ongoing cost of living expenses and social costs, and their disconnection with the support network of their family and home.

In Western Australia we have recent firsthand experience with these impacts. Curtin University, one of two Western Australian universities to offer agriculture-based courses, has over the last two years transitioned the delivery of these courses from its Northam campus (Muresk) to Perth. The loss of the Muresk campus as an undergraduate location has meant that agricultural related courses are only available to students who are prepared to, and can afford to, move to Perth (to do so), adding to the problems identified in the Bradley Report.

Recommendation:

WAFarmers believes that the Inquiry should evaluate the policy development and financial investment that has occurred in support of the Bradley Report.

Promoting agriculture as a career

It is widely recognised that a high percentage of students who study agriculture-related professions have a farm or farm-related background. As the average size of Western Australian farms increase and become more mechanised, this potential pool of students decreases. Whilst not overlooking this important pool of people, it is clear that the ‘net’ needs to be cast wider.

The ‘connection with the land’ which existed many years ago is dwindling. WAFarmers experience is that many city-based children have never experienced even a farm visit. If skilled and qualified people are to be attracted into employment in rural areas, then a greater emphasis in the school curriculum in the formative years is critical.

Currently, the lack of exposure that Australian school students (K-Year 12) have to agriculture through the current curriculum is not generating interest in careers as diverse as farming itself and in the consulting, agronomy and the financial sectors which provide significant input into farm business management.

Industry, through its levy funded investment, has been proactive in this area, in the absence of a curriculum requirement and through primary education programs aims to deliver tangible education benefits to metropolitan students about the importance and function of modern agricultural businesses.

Recommendation:

WAFarmers believes that the Inquiry should investigate options for introducing and funding agriculture-related curriculum development in the year K-Year 12.

The impact of the two-speed economy on agriculture

To attract entrants from both farming and non-farming backgrounds to the many varied employment opportunities that exist in the sector, there needs to be sufficient financial and

professional reward, career pathways and incentive. Agriculture, like many parts of the Western Australian economy suffers from the strong labour demand of the mining industry.

On this, WAFarmers notes the recent announcement by the Australian Bureau of Statistics that the average earnings for a full time, adult, ordinary, Western Australian male worker is \$78,192 (or 1503.70/week). This compares to the minimum wage of \$30,534.40 (\$587.20/week) for a person employed through the Farm Employees' Award or \$31,990.40 (\$615.20/week) for an employee under the Fruit Growing and Fruit Packing Industry Award.

WAFarmers understanding is that the current on-farm rates of pay exceed these levels, and significantly in some cases, but the base rates of pay are an indication that the attraction and retention of staff by agricultural businesses in Western Australia is on ongoing challenge.

Recommendation:

WAFarmers believes that the Inquiry should review taxation-based and other financial measures which will assist in attracting and retaining staff in rural and regional areas.

In summary, WAFarmers believes that the current Inquiry is investigating a complex and challenging problem which requires innovative thinking to develop options for attracting and retaining young people from traditional and non-traditional backgrounds into a career in agriculture. In this submission, WAFarmers has highlighted a small number of underlying issues which we anticipate will be addressed through your Inquiry.

WAFarmers again thanks you for the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry, and we request an opportunity to address the Inquiry, should you hold public hearings. To arrange that or to further discuss the issues raised in this submission, please do not hesitate to contact WAFarmers Director of Policy, Alan Hill on

Yours sincerely

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Mike Norton
President