

Senate Inquiry - Higher education and skills training to support future demand in agriculture and agribusiness in Australia

Landmark Operations Limited (Landmark) is the leading agribusiness company in Australia employing approximately 1700 permanent employees across the country. We are in many instances the only employer in regional towns.

Landmark sells agricultural inputs, for example chemicals, fertiliser, general farming merchandise, fencing and animal health related products. We run business around insurance and real estate as well as most aspects of livestock and wool. We also sell agricultural services predominantly in the agronomy stream.

As it relates to the Inquiry, to support our business operations we employ specialists in agronomy, animal health, livestock and wool. To this end we run the following annual programs:

Graduate - two streams – agribusiness and agronomy

Trainees – Livestock

Trainees – Wool

Internships

Issues we face in running these programs:

Graduates - we recruit across Australia and compete with the mining and banking sectors. While the number of applicants is high we routinely find, during the selection process where we look for highly motivated candidates, that those truly interested in pursuing a career in agribusiness is disappointingly low. We have in the past also experienced a resistance to rotate through the placements where the rotation takes the graduate away from their home district.

Trainees - Livestock and Wool – these generally are school leavers and occasionally will include graduates. They have agricultural experience and have usually grown up working with Livestock or Wool and have a desire to work only in this area of the business. Some of the successful employees we have had in these programs have been less academic and prefer learning from more practical experience.

Internships – a recent innovation whereby we have partnered with one of *the* largest agricultural universities in Australia and offered ‘scholarships’ to carefully selected third year students who then work undertake a block assignment with Landmark as well as casual work over the year as a part of their degree. They are then taken into the graduate program the following year. We have recently approached *another university* on the same basis.

We are looking at commencing a trainee program in another of our activities because currently there are too few graduates interested in the particular activity coming through the agribusiness stream.

We acknowledge that this is not an easy industry and to be successful in agriculture takes not only a love of the land but also very strong business acumen, patience and tenacity. Working along side the farming community also takes empathy.

Terms of Reference

1. Adequacy of funding and priority given at the federal, state and territory level to agriculture and agribusiness higher education and vocational education and training

Comment

a. It would appear that the current funding levels do not provide for smaller intakes of students – i.e. the critical mass number is too low. The government should consider funding to a lower number so that institutions can continue to provide the programs rather than close them down.

b. Restructure the ways in which students can access supported funding. Generally speaking, it takes longer for an agribusiness student to repay a HECS loan than in other industries due to lower incomes particularly where the student is a principal in a farm enterprise.

2. the reasons and impacts of decline in agricultural and related educational institutions

Comment

a. Decline in students has led to the decline in institutions offering agricultural related courses. The predominant issue we face in recruiting young people into agribusiness is not the level of education as we find the number of qualified graduates to be satisfactory, but the ability of the student to see that agriculture / agribusiness is a place to make a career. Feedback we receive indicates that graduates are wary of pursuing a career in a field that is reported frequently as one of doom and gloom, natural disasters abounding or a career in a field for which the majority of Australians have no appreciation. We have experienced career teachers who are unaware themselves of the roles that exist at agribusiness at the other end of a university degree. There are also farmer parents who actively discourage their children from pursuing a life on the farm and likewise children see the hardship their parents have endured.

b. The lack of Universities offering agricultural studies particularly effects Queensland and Western Australia where finding students to take our graduate positions is quite difficult. In some instances we are relying on candidates who are willing to relocate to these states to fill the available positions.

3. solutions to address the widening gap between skilled agricultural labour supply and demand

Comment

The answer is not just about money. The Government needs to 'market' agriculture and agribusiness specifically in Australian cities. Those of us working in agriculture or agribusiness understand that as an industry we are poised to be the next "mining boom." Food supply to the Asia region and the world generally is fast becoming a critical issue and Australia's geographic location, size and population provide an opportunity. We have seen this in the number of foreign interests purchasing Australian land and the number of foreign interest in Australian companies. Landmark is an example of this, having been acquired by Agrium (Canadian owned) nearly a year ago. Cargill's purchase of AWB Commodities and Viterro's acquisition of ABB are a further two, more recent, examples.

From building an understanding of the contribution agriculture/agribusiness makes to the Australian economy the industry profile will lift, a greater interest will develop in building careers – hence more students, universities and schools will have to meet that need. This will mean an increase in the Governments (not just the government of the day) financial commitment.

4. the impacts of any shortage on agricultural research

Comment

Agriculture is a competitive industry at the global level and to be at the forefront is critical to the viability of our farmers. This is particularly the case when you consider many of our global competitors operate in subsidised environments. The shift from government to industry funded research has narrowed significantly the pool of available talent. Commercially funded research has been more directed at significant commercial outcomes as opposed to broader general industry advancement programs.

5. the economic impacts of labour shortages in Australia's export oriented agricultural industries

Comment

Access to labour within the agricultural sector has been impacted significantly by the resources boom. While access labour has been an issue it has also driven pay rates increasing the cost to the industry.

6. the incorporation of animal welfare principles in agricultural education

Comment

Well balanced and practical material would be useful to the graduates overall understanding of the issues faced by farmers and those in the related industries. If this was to become a forum for extremists more damage would be done than good.

7. other related matters

Comment

A constant issue our business faces in recruiting not just graduates and trainees but also to other roles is a reluctance to work in geographically challenging areas where accommodation is hard to find and medical and education services and social support is less than desirable. The government should consider providing some form of incentive and or financial support to living in geographically challenged areas – as the current taxation provisions in respect to remote areas in the writer’s view are far too limited.