



OUT11/20704

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

Dear Mr Watling

Thank you for your letter of 29 September 2011 regarding the Inquiry into meeting the education and skills requirements for the agriculture sector in Australia.

The matters to be considered by this inquiry will be addressed in the order they are listed:

The adequacy of funding and priority given by governments at the federal, state and territory level to agriculture and agribusiness higher education and vocational education and training

Training in agriculture is expensive compared to many other areas of post secondary training. The practical aspects require low staff/student ratios and sophisticated and up-to-date equipment. To gain experience students often have to travel vast distances. The funding models and support for post secondary agricultural education do not reflect these costs. Therefore, comprehensive education institutions, be they universities or TAFE colleges, find it difficult to support and grow training in agriculture. Often this results in facilities for agricultural education not being updated, leading to a decline in the perception of the quality and relevance of the training which leads to lower enrolments. Therefore, the inadequacy of funding and lack of recognition of the high costs associated with agricultural education is a major factor for its decline in Australia over recent years.

The reasons and impact of the decline in agricultural and related educational facilities

This is a complex area and it is difficult to be sure about all the reasons. Australia is not alone in finding that there is a decreasing number of people taking up training in agriculture. Some of the reasons are as follows:

- Agricultural and related careers being perceived as lower paid with limited job advancement or opportunities.

- A general apathy on the part of many in the rural industry regarding training despite the hard work by some advocates within the industry. In other words the industry is partly to blame for this because they have not pushed the need for education and training nor at times have educational institutions been receptive to support from industry organisations.
- A divided industry reflected in 'silos' created by the framework for research and development. Industries operated independently and do not collaborate to promote diversity in agricultural education and training. As a result they are divided and do not speak with one voice to government or educational institutions. This structural aspect is a significant impediment to supporting agricultural education in the tertiary sector.
- There has been a decline in the number of specialised institutions which promote and provide training. Many former agricultural colleges are now campuses of universities with much less recognition of agriculture and the needs of the agricultural sector.

Solutions to address the widening gap between skilled agricultural labour supply and the demand

There are short term and long term solutions to address the gap between labour supply and demand in the agricultural sector.

- In the short term, funding should be increased toward the high cost educational programs with a focus on institutions that will deliver in the long term. In other words, creating high returns through a demand-based training system will attract short term commercial Registered Training Organisations keen to capture funds on offer. This has been the experience in some states and, as a result, the long term benefits are negated.
- Reinvestment in agricultural education facilities at institutions so that practical-based courses can be well supported.
- Encouraging learning about agricultural education and primary industries throughout the school system. This requires the strong support of the Primary Industries Education Foundation.
- Creation of greater collaboration between research and development to support agricultural education and training in all sectors of education.

The impacts of any shortage on agricultural research

Due to the decline of agricultural education in the higher education sector there is a shortage of scientists to undertake agricultural research. Specialist agriculture courses need to be supported in universities to ensure there is a supply of scientists.

The economic impact of labour shortages on Australia's export oriented industries

The lack of skilled labour in regional areas is already an impediment to productivity. It is difficult to quantify this but experience at the Department of Primary Industries' College indicates there is a threefold demand for trained personnel from the College. The demand continues and is particularly impacting on the export sector of agricultural industries, where specialist skills are required.

The incorporation of animal welfare principles in agricultural education

It is important that agricultural education programs incorporate animal welfare principles and they have foundation in science. Animal welfare includes the consideration of the ethics and value system of community. Agricultural education, therefore, needs to be adaptive to the analysis of social ethics and values and develop programs to suit.

Other related matters

Further information is available from Tocal College regarding its operation and the services it provides for education and training in agriculture. Dr Cameron Archer, Principal Tocal College may be contacted on

Yours sincerely

REGINA FOGARTY
A/DEPUTY DIRECTOR GENERAL AGRICULTURE NSW

8 NOV 2011