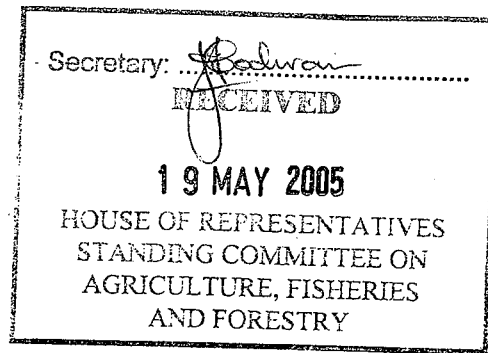


17 May 2005



Committee Secretary  
 House of Representatives  
 Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry  
 Parliament House  
 Canberra  
 ACT 2600

Dear Sir or Madam

**Re: Inquiry into Rural Skills Training and Research**

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry.

It is acknowledged this submission relates to the current Victorian State context only. However, the experience gained, and lessons learned in Victoria may well be of relevance to other States.

It is argued here that the availability and adequacy of agricultural technical support systems, including vocational education and training, is not satisfactory at this time. It certainly will not be in the future unless there is further aggregation of providers, and improved coordination of planning and delivery of their services.

Background

The author of this submission is an employee of the University of Melbourne. However, the views expressed here are not necessarily endorsed by the University. This submission is a personal view, and is based upon the author's experience in agricultural education and training over a period of 30 years, including:

- employment with the dairying and agricultural education divisions of the (former) Victorian Department of Agriculture, as an extension officer and then lecturer;
- Eighteen years as Principal of Glenormiston Agricultural College within the Victorian Department of Agriculture, followed by the Victorian College of Agriculture and Horticulture, and finally the University of Melbourne;
- Fifteen years as an international rural development specialist undertaking design, implementation and review of international development projects funded by AusAID and other international development agencies;
- Appointed, in 1998, Deputy Dean and Director of TAFE, Institute of Land and Food Resources;

- Currently, Head of the School of Vocational Education and Training, Faculty of Land and Food Resources, with academic responsibility for the VET (TAFE) programs delivered from seven campuses, including those in rural locations at McMillan (Gippsland), Glenormiston, Longerenong and Dookie.

The Author was promoted and transferred from Glenormiston to his present position at Parkville following the University's first failed attempt at restructuring the rural colleges in 1998. His brief, as Deputy Dean and Director of TAFE was to develop a revised Plan for the colleges that would ensure viability and their consolidation within the University structure.

This Plan was subsequently developed and endorsed, and a School of Vocational Education and Training was created to carry the Plan forward. The author was appointed Head of that School in 2001. This submission provides the author's reflections on the roll-out of the Plan, the difficulties it has encountered within the university environment, and whether it remains relevant to the requirements for agricultural technical support service delivery in future years.

### Reflections upon the rural colleges restructuring plan

Essentially the Plan involves the creation of specialist vocational courses at each of the four rural colleges. Each college would continue with a general agriculture program for their region – but one area would be developed for specialisation.

The specialisations were selected not only to reflect the dominant form of agriculture in the region, but also because of the proximity of other related technical support services.

For example, dairying was selected as the specialisation for McMillan college in Gippsland, this decision being influenced by the location of that college near to the Department of Primary Industries' (DPI) facility at Ellinbank

Similarly, crop agronomy was identified as the specialisation at Longerenong in recognition of DPI's strong research base at Horsham, and the grower-controlled research facility at Birchip.

Beef and sheep was identified as Glenormiston's area of specialisation to contribute to the strong knowledge base being developed in the south-west region by Marcus Oldham College, the Rural Industries Skills Training Centre, the farmer-controlled Southern Farming Systems research group, and the DPI's research and extension base at Hamilton.

Irrigated agriculture was the area of specialisation identified for Dookie's vocational program, again in recognition of DPI's strong research and extension base in the north-east region.

It was intended that the specialisation developed at each college would involve course development at diploma and advanced diploma level, and, with the State Government recently enacting legislation to enable vocational (TAFE) degrees, these also are a possibility in the area of specialisation.

In addition, it is expected the colleges would act as a base for specialist studies being undertaken by undergraduate and post-graduate students from Parkville.

It is also expected there would be improved coordination of short courses provided by the colleges, and DPI's extension activities.

Furthermore, the knowledge base created by cooperation between DPI, the central University, the colleges and other agencies was expected to attract further demand for applied research, education and training from industry.

The original intent, then, was for each college to do what it does best – prepare people for careers in agriculture. However it was realised this was only part of the development of an industry technical support system. Cooperation and alliances with farmer and grower organisations and the providers of other professional services was needed. In this way, the colleges could complement and contribute to this developing system, whilst also drawing from it to enhance the quality of college courses.

To date, the college areas of specialisation have been developed and diploma and advanced diploma courses have been put in place.

Cooperation between the colleges and DPI extension programs has occurred, with the Target 10 dairy extension program being a good example.

However, implementation of the Plan is still embryonic, and it has a long way to go before the original aims are realised.

Clearly there is a good deal of industry support for the concept, because industry expects its service providers to work together and avoid duplication, to optimise use of scarce funding for research, education, extension and training.

Unfortunately, attempts by the University last year to centralise all advanced diploma courses at Dookie derailed the Plan, and on-going speculation as to the future of the colleges is posing a serious threat to any further development of the Plan.

Currently, replacement appointments for vacancies in beef/sheep at Glenormiston, and a replacement appointment in irrigated agriculture at Dookie have been put on hold until the situation is clarified.

The colleges and their potential partners hope this situation will be resolved soon, because there is still much to be done in building cooperative links to better serve agriculture in the future.

### Summary

Continued speculation as to the future of the rural colleges is undermining the roll-out of a Plan for the colleges that has been unfolding for around five years now.

Three premises under-pin the Plan:

1. That the colleges will continue as the largest provider of vocational agricultural education and training, and will continue to operate as an integrated and coordinated State-wide system. Fragmentation of the system would lead to loss of focus and dissipation of effort and would not be in the best interests of agriculture.
2. The agricultural college system, in turn, needs to be better aligned with other technical support services. These services operate in a "thin market". They are expensive to provide, and expert staff are difficult to recruit and retain. The technical support role is a demanding one – it requires adding value to activities undertaken by farmers and others who operate in an increasingly complex technological, financial and social environment. These staff, engaged in education and training, extension, research and other technical support roles need to operate in a collegiate environment where they can provide mutual support and learn from each other in cooperative planning and delivery of service.
3. That the colleges will continue to be governed by the University of Melbourne. This premise is based on assurances given by the University at the time the Plan was formulated. Also, the rural colleges represent a valuable link between the State's most prestigious university, and the largest sector within the State economy. It seems likely that future generations would have difficulty in understanding any decision-making processes that could lead to this link being severed.

In the view of the author, the premises underpinning this Plan remain valid.

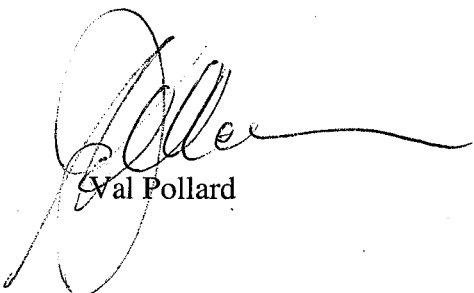
As agriculture becomes more complex, there is a need for the aggregation of technical support services delivered by quality service providers.

Some engaged in the current debate surrounding the future of the Victorian rural colleges would argue that for clarity and ease of management, the system should be fragmented.

The author of this submission wishes to present a quite contrary view. Modern technical support systems are complex. If management needs to be enhanced to cope with the complexity, then that becomes the challenge.

Providers of technical support services need to rise to this challenge, because fragmentation of the system would lead to loss of focus and dissipation of effort and expertise, and this would not be in the best interests of agriculture.

Yours sincerely



Val Pollard