

Agricultural Training in Regional Areas

The wide range of industries, environments and distance combined with Federal, State, and Regional responsibilities mean that servicing agriculture in Australia is diverse and fragmented. Furthermore, the role of agriculture in the Australian economy has decreased and politically is of a lesser priority than social welfare, health, education, transport, law enforcement, and the environment.

In New South Wales and probably other states, the proportion of the budget to agriculture has decreased; a trend that almost certainly will continue. Therefore, it is timely that the future direction of agricultural education is being examined.

Down-sizing of government agencies associated with agriculture is resulting in experienced staff not being replaced when they leave. Mentoring arrangements where new staff have the opportunity to work with experienced staff are now limited. This must impact on the collaborative supervisory capacity for future agricultural education, particularly for higher degrees. Maybe more consideration should be given to harnessing the expertise and experience of retired agriculturalists. This appears to be an under-utilised resource.

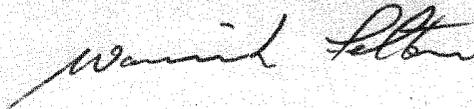
After 40 years in crop agronomy research one thing that is clear to me is poor agronomic practices result in bad science. Too often invalid conclusions are made from poorly designed and conducted experiments. Student projects, early career experimentation, and scientists with poor agronomic skills, commonly have this problem.

Another problem is short-term funding. Industry grants and even Cooperative Research Centres mean that studies are often superficial and done by early career personnel with limited input from experienced supervisors. The latter spend a disproportionate amount of their time actually seeking funding support rather than the actual research.

In general the number of quality students pursuing a career in agriculture is limited and it appears that at the under-graduate level those interested in a research career, particularly in agronomy, is very small.

Universities play a very important role in the quality of future agriculturalists. Academic staff exposure to applied research and development is often limited so their collaboration with other government and commercial expertise is critical in achieving competitive, profitable and environmentally sound enterprises in the future.

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