

29 June 2005

Mr Ian Dundas  
Committee Secretary  
Standing Committee, Inquiry into Rural Skills Training & Research  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Mr Dundas

**Re; Standing Committee Inquiry into Rural Skills Training & Research**

The South Australian Farmers' Federation is pleased to respond to this inquiry. In particular the Federation would like to address the issues of barriers such as distance, recognition of prior learning and the lack of adequate agricultural educational campuses in SA.

The industry is facing a critical shortage of skilled workers. This has been a result of decentralisation, low wages, poor image of the industry and lack of adequate training. The promotion of VET programs and traineeships has enabled young people to access training. However the barriers remain and limit the success of these programs.

Our organisation is keen to support this inquiry in the hope that there will be outcomes to address the issues facing both training providers and farmers. We would be pleased to offer further assistance to the committee if required.

Yours sincerely



Carol Vincent  
GENERAL MANAGER



**SOUTH AUSTRALIAN  
FARMERS FEDERATION**

# **Standing Committee Inquiry into Rural Skills Training and Research**

## **PREFACE**

The **South Australian Farmers' Federation** is the State's peak primary producer organisation with a proud history of representation and support for farmers dating back more than 100 years.

We represent industries which have helped to build South Australia, and will continue to play a key role in its future.

Agriculture and Horticulture contribute more than \$4.0 billion annually to Gross State Production and account for around 55% of the State's export revenue. The Centre for International Economics has forecast that over the next decade these industries have the potential to contribute an additional \$1.0 billion to the State economy.

To ensure the sustainability of these industries the Federation sees the need to support the education and training of young people in agriculture. The fact that the average age of SA farmers is close to 60 years indicates the need to provide encouragement and support to young people keen to enter these areas.

**1. The availability and adequacy of education and research services in the agriculture sector, including access to vocational training and pathways from vocational education and training to tertiary education and work.**

Distance from training and transport are major barriers to education in the agriculture sector as access to training is often limited or cost prohibitive when considering travel and accommodation.

In SA there is a single agricultural secondary school (Urrbrae) although a number of schools offer agricultural components in their curriculum. Urrbrae has considerable demand for places and turns away over 200 applicants each year. The number of agriculture teachers is declining and many are moving to other subject teaching roles due to the demands on agriculture teachers to maintain school farms in addition to their teaching demands. Therefore many agriculture programs in schools have been downgraded or removed.

Schools driven by the need for high TER scores have discouraged many high achieving students from engaging in Agriculture and have considered the subject only appropriate for students of lower literacy and numeracy. With increasing technological change the industry needs capable students to consider the opportunities in agriculture. Careers Counsellors in schools are yet to understand the opportunities for students who study agriculture at tertiary level. It may be appropriate to consider a more flexible unit of competency funding strategy. It is our belief that lack of flexibility limits the uptake of training in particular in rural industries.

Articulation from vocational training to further education is an issue which needs to be considered. Pathways from vocational training to further education can assist in building opportunities for young people to extend their qualifications and produce graduates with extensive industry experience. In South Australia the lack of specific post-secondary Agricultural Colleges limits the opportunities for rural training. Many students move interstate for this training.

At a recent young farmers' forum held by the South Australian Farmers' Federation, one of the main issues identified by over 150 delegates was the lack of educational opportunities and initiatives for young people in agriculture, especially that promote agriculture as a rewarding and profitable career.

In an attempt to rectify this, the SAFF Future Leaders Committee aims to host a series of regional workshops to increase the knowledge of young people in rural SA and potentially provide participants with recognised learning towards formal qualifications.

The Federation would like to see similar opportunities provided by government and other industry and training bodies.

**2. The skills needs of agricultural industries in Australia, including the expertise and capacity of industries to specify the skills-sets required for training, and the extent to which vocational training meets the needs of rural industries.**

Engaging farmers' participation in vocational education delivery is difficult particularly when delivered by traditional means. Flexibility is required to overcome the seasonal cycles, demanding work schedules and distance to access training. This also applies to school-based training which often needs to be flexible to allow block training at peak times.

The future of rural industries and rural communities lies in the recruitment and retention of young people into rural areas. Young people need the opportunity to obtain skills and qualifications locally and there is still a need to provide training which is based on localised skill needs. Local industry must have input into courses provided to ensure their relevance.

Recognition of prior learning is another area which needs to be better recognised and supported. This process needs to be more accessible and better understood. Many people engaged in employment within the rural industries are highly skilled and would match the required competence for qualifications in the National Training Packages. This recognition would give workers credit for their skills and may provide incentive to further their qualification.

**3. The provision of extension and advisory services to agricultural industries, including links and coordination between education, research and extension.**

The State government primary industry department no longer provides the bulk of extension services. Therefore this area is increasingly being covered by private providers. There is a growing shortage of these services due to the shortage of adequately trained personnel.

**4. The role of the Australian government in supporting education, research and advisory programs to support the viability and sustainability of Australian agriculture.**

The greatest benefit to encourage participation in education in agriculture would be to create an improved image of the industry. In times of consistent poor press around drought, the downturn in rural living and the plights of farmers, it is not surprising the public opinion of opportunities in agriculture is poor.

Training programs offer excellent opportunities for students to gain skills in areas where skill shortages are experienced. School-based traineeships must be encouraged to give young people a head start and the chance to taste the opportunities within the industry. VET in schools along with SBNAs are vital to build a young skilled workforce. Articulation of these courses through to tertiary education should be encouraged and the development of these pathways must be supported.

Communities, particularly rural, need to have access to high quality, affordable education. It is vital that the government continues to invest and promote the improvement of educational infrastructure in rural regions of South Australia.

Incentives for agriculture students to train as teachers and support to schools to maintain and build on their agriculture farms will be necessary to build the potential for valuable agricultural education in secondary schools. Industry needs to be encouraged to build partnerships with their local schools to assist in supporting education in agriculture.

Information is available for careers advisors. However it is difficult to overcome the negative image of the industry. Continual support is needed to promote the industry and opportunities for young people through these influential advisors.