

The Western Australian Farmers
Federation (Inc)



Submission

to

Inquiry into Rural Skills Training and Research

Standing Committee on Agriculture,
Fisheries and Forestry

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The Western Australian Farmers Federation (Inc) (WAFarmers) is WA's largest and most influential rural lobby and service organisation.

WAFarmers represents Western Australian farmers in a wide range of primary industries including meat and wool producers, grains, horticulturalists, dairy farmers and beekeepers.

WAFarmers recently expanded its membership base to incorporate rural small business owners, most, if not all of whom are dependent upon a vibrant, profitable and sustainable state-wide agricultural sector.

Members of WAFarmers are therefore major contributors to the \$5.538 billion gross value of production that agriculture in its various forms contributes to Western Australia's economy (ABS report 2001/02 season).

Additionally, through differing forms of land tenure, our members own, control and capably manage many millions of hectares of the State's land mass and as such are responsible for maintaining the productive capacity and environmental well being of that land.

WAFarmers endorses the submission of the WA Department of Agriculture, but notwithstanding that has made the following points based on the stated terms of reference.

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.

In WA agriculture is well served by the agricultural college system. The Western Australian College of Agriculture provides excellent educational opportunities at six residential campuses in Cunderdin, Denmark, Esperance, Harvey, Morawa and Narrogin. Each Campus has modern facilities located on farms and offer Year 11 and 12 programs for male and female students. The students study a range of Curriculum Council subjects leading to Secondary Graduation and Units of Competence from Industry Training Packages.

The College delivers vocational qualifications that focus on agriculture but include horticulture, viticulture, equine, aquaculture, forestry, building construction, metals and engineering and automotive. Each Campus offers some specialist programs that can lead to apprenticeships and careers in a range of agriculture related vocations

The WA College of Agriculture is unique in providing a blend of secondary education and vocational training. All graduates directly enter employment or courses of study at TAFE or University. The success rate of students is outstanding with nearly all students gaining employment or entry to further courses of study on graduation from the College.

High schools, TAFES, and universities in WA also provide a range of courses aimed at careers in agriculture.

However Western Australia is about to undergo considerable change with the role of the agricultural colleges being modified extensively as the changes in the curriculum demanded by the Post Compulsory Review of Education come into effect. Of principal concern to teachers and the Colleges of Agriculture is reduction of four wholly school assessed subjects related to agriculture into a single subject. Moreover, to achieve at the highest levels students will have to spend most of their time 'in the classroom' and not 'in the field' as is presently the case. In the last couple of months serious reservations about the outcomes based style of education and assessment have been raised by teachers, some academics and the press.

The State School Teachers Union has directed its members to delay implementation of the controversial new system by at least a year. There are ongoing concerns about methods used to assess student performance, lack of resources and inadequate trials and professional development. OBE (outcomes based education) assesses students on their achievement of outcomes, rather than comparing them with other students. The system is strongly opposed by many education experts, who say it would dramatically increase teachers' workloads and cause students' standards to fall.

Of increasing concern to WAFarmers is the inflexibility of training packages in VET for schools. The bureaucracy of the formal education sector emphasises conformance to bureaucratic process rather than the required industry outcomes of trained, work-ready people. This has been to the detriment of pastoral care and upskilling that used to be provided. There has been much comment from educators in WA (and echoed around Australia that quality teaching and learning programs are getting harder to deliver due to the flood of paperwork that has more to do with policy and procedure than achieving quality outcomes.

This has been of particular concern to WAFarmers who have set up a RTO, in the interest of filling training gaps we can see as a result of increasingly inflexible training packages, that lack mobility, a particular need in rural and remote communities. The struggle in complying with public sector processes, has been a major barrier to the success of that enterprise.

VET and competency based training models are very important to rural communities, particularly given the current shortages of skills, but unless they can deliver real life skills that can only be learned 'in the field' then they are not working for students or communities. The very nature of rural and remote communities means people must have a broad range of skills, a local auto mechanic must be able to fix more than just Holdens, but all makes and models plus farm equipment, farmers require knowledge not just of how plants and animals grow, but mechanics, fencing, accounting, marketing etc. While we believe that it is important to have specialist skills available to communities through agricultural extension programs, unless training can better deliver broad and effective competencies then rural communities will struggle.

The importance of delivering broad skills to potential farmers and agricultural workers is important from the perspective of the school and the needs of the state and government in promoting life long learning. Schools have a central place in building the social capital of communities, and in demonstrating and developing leadership within rural communities. Much learning in rural communities is conducted through farmer networks, and schools need to be a part of that network using the information to develop their training requirements. By developing their courses this way, and using new outside information schools develop learning in their communities by their graduates sharing that information. WAFarmers is concerned that increased inflexibility in delivering programs, which are developed with little community consultation is damaging the ability of schools to develop their students and thus losing relevance to their communities.

WAFarmers wants to ensure that all students in rural and remote areas have equity in accessing educational opportunities with those people who live in the cities. We want to ensure that students who wish to, can attend secondary and tertiary studies that are centred outside of their communities. We believe that extra assistance should be made available for rural and remote students due to the extra costs incurred by families for accommodating students away from home, and for the distances that students often have to travel to get to and from their place of schooling. This is of particular importance in WA. Studies at UWA have shown that while rural and remote students typically have lower university entrance scores, they form a higher percentage of the students who finish their courses in the standard allotted time, and that they perform as well if not better than students from cities.

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.

This has already been partly answered in the previous section. In line with other submissions WAFarmers believe that since the development of training packages, vocational education has become prescriptive and restrictive, and there is little room for institutions to differentiate their courses from other providers. In rural businesses employers expect workers to be able to complete manual tasks such as welding, fencing, and other more complex tasks such as operating irrigation systems and combine harvesters. It is expected that graduates of agricultural diplomas or degrees will have these competencies. However it is often the case that new graduates do not have the abilities that are needed.

Support must come from government and the rural sector to pay for this training. Moreover the public sector must work to put flexibility back into training.

Mention has been made of WAFarmers setting up of an RTO. This was done to fill the gaps apparent in the education system, and to try and bring the education platform to the student. RTO's have been set up around Australia for similar reasons, they raise the capacity of industry to specify the skill-sets required for training, and to further the extent to which vocational training meets the needs of rural industries. However administering and managing an RTO is complex due to stringent compliance requirements set by State governments. The core business of RTO's is education, but

it gets diffused by the continual requirements of paperwork and strategic management. WAFarmers feels that industry needs to have a greater influence in determining educational objectives, and RTO' have been an attempt at achieving that, however the 'silo mentality' of the public sector vocational educators has not helped in achieving those aims, and needs to be addressed by this enquiry.

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

The perception of agricultural information as a public good, and subject to market failure, has provided the prime argument in policy debates since the 1960s for the continued provision of government extension services. The increasing industrialisation of agriculture, with a consequent increased emphasis on the potential for commercial provision of these services, has resulted in a questioning of the public-good nature of much agricultural information.

It is argued that much agricultural information still has public good characteristics and that market failure can occur even with services clearly deemed to be private goods.

This is supported by overseas experience, which indicates that areas of market failure are a reality as extension services are privatised. It raises the concern that some state governments may go too far down the road of privatisation of extension, neglecting important issues which would not be picked up by the private sector.

There is also concern about the weakening of research/extension links. Loss of feedback from farmers to researchers could become a problem as state public-sector agencies cut back on production-oriented extension.

Availability of information is being restricted primarily by the push for intellectual property rights and the increasingly competitive nature of research funding. Dissemination of information is affected by the number of competing research and information providers, which contributes to a perception of information overload among clients. Information availability to private-sector information providers could become a problem as funds from taxpayers or farmer levies are increasingly used to resource private-sector researchers who are likely to be less willing to share the information.

This issue is of particular concern to tertiary institutions who are being pressured into commercial relations with industry. Research is being skewed to the demand of industry, and there is less room for pure research in agriculture that may result in public goods.

The problem is worsened by the lack of processes to obtain private-sector feedback to public-sector researchers. As the private sector takes more responsibility for production-oriented extension delivery, it will be more important to obtain their input into research priorities.

Barriers to obtaining this input, such as the costs to the private sector of engaging with the public sector, need to be addressed. As even the best extension cannot compensate for irrelevant or ineffective research.

If agricultural extension is to become dependent on commercial priorities then the directions pursued may not be economically efficient from the point of view of society as a whole, or may be contrary to other goals related to social welfare or the environment.

Other concerns are that extension may be biased towards individuals and industries better able to pay, the corporatisation of Landcare, and industry-funded research products being marketed by particular companies.

If researchers are now more reliant on the private sector for practical feedback about their research, this clearly involves greater costs than were previously the case. Indeed the costs borne by the private sector in providing this feedback may mean that they are unwilling to do so without a clear perception that they (or at least their clients) will benefit.

Some of the increase in transaction costs is attributable to increased monitoring and evaluation to meet increased requirements for accountability. Some is due to the need for more complex systems of participation in order to achieve wide support from stakeholders. Some is due to administrative systems being poorly designed and/or implemented.

We contend that there is an over-reliance on group-based extension. The disadvantages of group-based extension, particularly issues of non-participation, make it inappropriate for areas where widespread involvement is required for extension objectives to be achieved, notably Landcare and industry protection initiatives. For farmers, the current and developing extension environment means a plethora of groups, often with high participation costs and possibly a low pay-off, or at least one which can be difficult to determine. This is also a potential problem facing agencies who are required to provide services to many groups with overlapping goals. The effectiveness of group-based extension could be threatened by the existence of many groups, with too few that are genuinely worthwhile and productive.

There has been a shift in control of and responsibility for extension activities, this is becoming evident with the developing role of the RDCs and other nationally-funded programs as co-ordinators and "wholesalers" of information marketing activities. National coordination is being flagged by the RDCs as a way of maintaining control over "extension products" from funded research, reducing duplication of services and overcoming perceived difficulties caused by changes in the role of state agencies that reflect differing political realities in each state. We see a danger in national coordination reflecting top-down priorities and concerns, and feel that it is contrary to an objective of industry ownership. It is also resource-hungry, and benefits may be difficult to achieve in practice.

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

"The life of rural and remote communities, and the lives of young men and women, have been subject to fundamental strains over recent decades. Some have prospered in the changing environment of economic restructuring, globalism, and the social and economic transformations that the communications and information revolution has brought about. Others have worn it hard, and have struggled to survive.

Rural Australia has had to adjust to deregulation both of their own industries and of other sectors on which they are highly dependent - particularly the banks. Buffers and protections have been removed. Government and business policy has homed in more narrowly on economic efficiency as the dominant criterion for decision-making, including decisions about what to put where. Rural Australia has become more centralised and regionalised. As a result, many small rural communities face a downward spiral as local offices close, local business moves to the next big town or to the city, more local businesses shut their doors and young people, facing a jobless town, move away. As the economic core of the town falters, its social and educational resources also tend to deteriorate. Much of this drift has been to capital cities. Most of the rest has been to "sponge cities" - large regional towns where better economies of scale apply - and to the more amenable environments of the coastal fringe.

Young people across Australia have been vulnerable to the impact of economic restructuring, but not more so than in the bush. The collapse of the youth labour market, where many of the jobs that used to be done by young people no longer exist, has hit rural Australia as hard as anywhere else. The youth jobs that have not disappeared have been casualised or made temporary or part time, in the quest for a more flexible, cheaper, ready-made, "just in time" labour force. The growth even in these positions has mostly been in bigger population centres, and young people have followed. Even with the out-migration of young people seeking work, unemployment has been higher among young people in rural Australia than in the city. Young people's involvement in small business has declined, with a more complex business environment and higher start-up costs in many lines of work.

In country areas, these problems have been made worse because access to career information and transition-to-work programs that are available to other young Australians, including job search support. Training programs like apprenticeships and traineeships are difficult to get in places where most businesses employ less than five people and where access to TAFE programs is limited.

Rural young people's vulnerability is accentuated by a global economic environment that is education-hungry. Educational resources are shallower and more thinly spread outside major metropolitan centres, especially in post-compulsory education. It is harder to recruit and to keep experienced and skilled teachers. So young people either content themselves with lower than average levels of education, or leave home to head for the city where secondary, technical and tertiary opportunities are much richer. Access to education is not the only problem. Housing, transport, communications, leisure and cultural resources follow the same pattern."

The ideas expressed above come from a report published in 2001 entitled "*Creating better educational and employment opportunities for rural young people: A report to the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme*" by Peter Kenyon, Howard Sercombe, Alan Black and Dominica Lhuede. WAFarmers agrees with the sentiments expressed.

That is why we believe that the government primarily needs to support rural institutions in efforts to attract people, and importantly attract people back, into working in the sector.

One submission raises the point that the government promoted the idea of the 'clever country' which lead to the belief that agriculture was a 'sunset industry' and there was no future for young people in the industry. WAFarmers believes implicitly that this notion has to change, we want to attract the best and brightest to farming.

Experience has shown us that career development officers at all schools have steered students away from a career in agriculture, and have looked at it as a dead end. We have also seen that the students turned towards agriculture have had challenges in dealing with the education system, as it were. Farming requires a good deal of intelligence, and working in agriculture is more than just farming, while the number of farms is declining the agribusiness sector servicing those farms is growing and needing more skilled people. In WA work has been done by Rural Skills Australia's Emma Kiffen-Petersen, travelling to rural and remote communities all over the state, showing students, and importantly career advisors, that agriculture is a good career. This work has been very successful, but is now endangered by a lack of funding.

While agriculture is currently facing a losing battle with other sectors of the economy, particularly mining in WA, for availability of labour, the government must realise the importance of a successful agriculture sector to the economy. Using sustainable practices Australia will still have, and need, an agricultural sector when our mineral wealth is exhausted. Exports of agricultural goods still remains important to our trade portfolio, and agriculture is an integral part of our social fabric. It is impossible to stress enough how important it is to remind all Australians of agricultures importance, and the importance of people to staff and provide leadership into the future.

