



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

**HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND
FORESTRY

(SUBCOMMITTEE)

Reference: Rural skills training and research

TUESDAY, 15 NOVEMBER 2005

GEELONG

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

INTERNET

The Proof and Official Hansard transcripts of Senate committee hearings, some House of Representatives committee hearings and some joint committee hearings are available on the Internet. Some House of Representatives committees and some joint committees make available only Official Hansard transcripts.

The Internet address is: **<http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard>**

To search the parliamentary database, go to:
<http://parlinfoweb.aph.gov.au>

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FORESTRY
(Subcommittee)

Tuesday, 15 November 2005

Members: Mr Schultz (*Chair*), Mr Adams (*Deputy Chair*), Mr Martin Ferguson, Mr Michael Ferguson, Mr Forrest, Mr Lindsay, Mr Gavan O'Connor, Mr Secker, Mr Tuckey and Mr Windsor

Members in attendance: Mr Forrest, Mr Gavan O'Connor and Mr Schultz

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

- 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.
- 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.
- The provision of extension and advisory services to agricultural industries, including links and coordination between education, research and extension.
- The role of the Australian government in supporting education, research and advisory programs to support the viability and sustainability of Australian agriculture.

WITNESSES

BERRISFORD, Mr Peter Edward, Private capacity.....	23
BERRISFORD, Ms Lynette (Nickie) Mary, Executive Officer, Grains Industry Training Network.....	14
HODGES, Dr David, Research Supervisor, RMIT University	30
INGLIS, Mr Samuel Warwick, Director of Corporate Training, Marcus Oldham College	1
LIVINGSTONE, Mr Simon, Principal, Marcus Oldham College.....	1
LYONS, Mrs Marilyn Joy, Successful Masters of Education (by Project) Student of RMIT Hamilton, RMIT Hamilton Masters by Projects Students	30
McARTHUR, Ms Susan Maree, Teacher in TAFE, Former RMIT Masters Student (Project), RMIT.....	30
SCHOLFIELD, Dr Kaye Elizabeth, Manager, Community Partnerships and Projects, RMIT University Hamilton.....	30
VISTARINI, Dr William John (Bill), , Lecturer/Supervisor, RMIT Hamilton.....	30

Subcommittee met at 10.37 am**INGLIS, Mr Samuel Warwick, Director of Corporate Training, Marcus Oldham College****LIVINGSTONE, Mr Simon, Principal, Marcus Oldham College**

CHAIR (Mr Schultz)—I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry on the inquiry into rural skills, training and research. This is the ninth public hearing for this inquiry and is part of an extensive program of public hearings and visits designed to gather information from the people directly involved with the main issues of the inquiry. I take this opportunity to thank Simon Livingstone, the Principal of Marcus Oldham College, and his staff for making us feel welcome today and allowing us to use the college as a venue for these hearings. I would also like to acknowledge the presence of a very well known colleague, Mr Stewart McArthur, the member for Corangamite. Mr McArthur is the longest serving member of the Marcus Oldham College Council, with 29 years service. Mr McArthur served as chairman for 20 of those years. If you would like to make a few brief comments, Mr McArthur, we would love you to do so.

Mr McArthur—Thank you, Mr Chairman. Could I, on behalf of Marcus Oldham and the electors of Corangamite, welcome the committee to the heartland of Corangamite. It is a great honour for Marcus Oldham College to have the committee here at the college. Personally I have encouraged the principal and the college administration to put in a submission to the committee. As you will hear later this morning, we think that Marcus Oldham makes a major contribution to agricultural education Australia-wide and throughout the world. We are delighted to welcome you back, Mr Chairman, from New South Wales, and also your well known colleagues, including my good friend Gavan O'Connor, the member for Corio. He has had his passport stamped to move across the river this morning, and I have given some approval for that. I understand that you were here in the earlier part of your career in Geelong, so we give you a warm welcome. Also, I advise my good friend John Forrest from the seat of Mallee that it does actually rain down here in Corangamite, unlike in Mallee—although I understand you have had a particularly good season in the Mallee region over the last four weeks.

As you mentioned, Mr Chairman, I have had a long association with Marcus Oldham, having been chairman of the council for 20 years. I remain committed to the institution in terms of its philosophic approach, its commitment to a broad range of educational programs, its commitment to providing a first-class course of study, and its variety of presentation of material to different types of students. I think we have made a contribution to the whole area of education and training in Australia.

Around the world, as you will hear today, a number of educational providers have now joined forces with bigger institutions. We have seen some difficulties with Melbourne university in Victoria where they have subcontracted their vocational programs to other providers, but they do remain in the area of higher education and agricultural education. If you look at the situation in the US and the UK, you find there has been a reducing number of specialised providers of training and agricultural education. I think that is a great shame, particularly if that trend happens in Australia where agriculture is a key component of one of our major export industries.

Mr Chairman, thank you for being with us; thank you for coming to Marcus Oldham. I am sure the college is delighted that we are able to extend hospitality to you and your committee members.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr McArthur. Dare I say that so far the two-day visit to Victoria has been very constructive from our point of view; we have heard some very good evidence, and I have absolutely no doubt that that particular part of it is going to continue today. Today the committee will be hearing from a number of invited witnesses representing a broad range of people and organisations interested in the area of rural skills training and research. We will begin with Marcus Oldham College.

Mr Inglis and Mr Livingstone, although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament; consequently they warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. It is customary to remind witnesses that giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. Do you wish to make a brief statement in relation to your submission or would you care to make some introductory remarks?

Mr Livingstone—Firstly, Mr Chairman, thank you for coming and visiting Marcus Oldham College. I will start with a brief overview of the college because I think that is important to set the scene for some of the discussion. We are a national college—and that is significant in its own way—and are also international, certainly in the equine area. We have been operating for 43 years, so we are not a new player to the game. We are the only independent or private agricultural college in Australia, and we have an alumni of approximately 2,500 graduates. Approximately 30 per cent of our population is Victorian; the rest of the students we draw from around the country. We offer both vocational and higher education courses. The strategic direction of Marcus Oldham in the future will be to move further into higher education. As we move further into higher education our students will have access to FEE-HELP; that will certainly be an attraction both for students and also the institution.

One of the key things about Marcus Oldham is our educational philosophy; we endeavour to develop the individual educationally during the time that they are here, and also personally. We have just been through a walk of the facilities, and you saw that the residential area is a very important part of what we are about. Our total educational profile is quite unique in that our students learn with integrated case studies and have 28 contact hours a week for 35 weeks of the year. We have a strong business management focus. For 43 years that is what we have been doing—focusing on finance, marketing, people, technology. We sit on 200 hectares here, although we do not farm that and we do not use it so much for education, but our location certainly is an asset.

One of the features of our programs is that we require our students to have worked prior to their coming to Marcus Oldham. For our intake next year quite a few of our students will have worked for a minimum of two, maybe three years, so we are dealing with mature age students. Students pay \$27,000 a year to be here; that is tuition and residential. This year, 2005, has seen the highest student intake in our 43-year history, and 2006 looks strong.

There are a couple of key strengths to Marcus Oldham. One obviously is the courses and how we teach them. But to go back a step: one of the things is the quality of the students coming in.

Like any business, if the quality of your input is not there then it becomes very difficult. We also have the staff, and the governing council. For 43 years we have had a pretty strong council that has been committed to the organisation. The council meets regularly and, for a reasonably small institution, gives some pretty good governance. Through the hard times Marcus Oldham has had some pretty wise counsel, and I think that is a real strength. That is really some background on Marcus Oldham. Would you like me to pick some points out of the submission?

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr Livingstone—In my view, there are plenty of educational opportunities for people who want to study agriculture: they can do traineeships; they can go from certificate I through to PhD. That is not an issue. The issue is the image of agriculture, its poor image and the number of people that are entering. As I mentioned earlier, you can have a very good institution but if you do not have the people that see a career path in agriculture then there are going to be some issues. I believe that there are a lot of opportunities in agriculture, not only as leading farm business managers but also in the large service sector that is developing in agribusiness. If you want to be the CEO of a farm or an agribusiness it is very easy because there are not many people out there with good practical experience and tertiary qualifications. If you want to be a partner in a law firm or the CEO of an accounting firm, it is very competitive to get there.

There are lots of opportunities for a young person coming up, but there is this barrier of the image of agriculture. I often talk about the advertisements you see on television, the Woolworths ads and so forth. They do not do a lot to promote agriculture as a chosen career. There are plenty of employment opportunities. I think all agricultural institutions would say that the employment rate of their graduates is very high. That is certainly the case at Marcus Oldham as well, but the colleges are struggling for numbers. My view is that further down the track we are better to have institutions across the country that are full of students rather than having a lot of campuses that are struggling. I think that needs further consideration.

One of the issues that I have seen—and I spent some time in Queensland—is the growth of the large pastoral companies and the role that they are having in education. I see a bit of dysfunction there, certainly when you look at RTO status. Can large pastoral companies that are actually competing against colleges for enrolments keep up a quality product as far as educating young people and then give them tertiary qualifications? I have some reservations about that.

The other issue is about recognition of prior learning. I realise that has been advocated as an effective way of getting farmers' skills levels up. I challenge that because I have always seen recognition of prior learning as recognising people's skills. I do not think it has been effective in promoting lifelong learning for people. I doubt whether it has encouraged many people who have been given RPL to actually go on and do further study.

I think encouraging lifelong learning is the key to this. We all have a role in that, educationally and in the rural sector, and we need to be promoting it. Looking at the percentage of farmers who have tertiary qualifications, one of the issues is: are they going to be promoting young people to go on and do further study? You hear quite often that students do not go to college because they have to be back working on the family farm. There is never a really good time for people to go off and study, but in the long term we all know that if they get their advanced diploma or their bachelors degree they are going to be a lot more productive when they return.

I believe it is a good thing for students to study interstate. That is certainly the model we have promoted. I see students coming to Marcus from interstate, and just to experience what we do in Victoria, educationally meeting people, is very beneficial in higher education. In vocational education, I see an advantage in young people staying in their community and getting those skills, but I think interstate study should be promoted in higher education.

Regarding Commonwealth funding and its contribution to education, FEE-HELP has been very good. It will be very beneficial from an access and equity point of view. There is no reason why anyone cannot come to Marcus Oldham or any other independent or private institution that has fees in the future. People will not be discriminated against, because they can get the money and pay it back through the tax system. I think that is a really good initiative.

There are opportunities for funding leadership from the Commonwealth. Marcus Oldham ran a program for the department that Sam managed earlier this year in Canberra. The feedback was very positive. I think there is a growing need for that. If we are trying to get the leading farmers to be leaders then they need training in that area. There are also opportunities for more management training for farmers in the future. The vocational and practical skills are all well and good, but how can you manage businesses worth \$5 million or \$6 million in assets if you have not had some training? That is really a snapshot, Mr Chairman.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Livingstone. Mr Inglis, do you want to make any comments?

Mr Inglis—I support Simon's views, particularly those regarding the future role that the CEO of these agricultural businesses is going to have to undertake. It is not just going to be about managing the production system, the environmental system has to be managed as well. It is not just an understanding about your own patch of dirt; now it is an understanding about the wider community implications for that. I think that is going to be an important facet of future education; it is about understanding how your business fits into the total community. Being able to develop and progress that is an important part of this whole educational process.

Equity of access is another issue. While we have FEE-HELP providing opportunities for students to be able to undertake tertiary education, it is not necessarily just the educational component that causes the costs. A wife of one of our members of staff has been involved in some educational research up through the north-west of Victoria. She has just been up there recently talking to year 12 students. She found that quite a number of them are running two or three jobs as well as doing year 12. When asked why they were doing this, they replied, 'We want to go from Jeparit to Ballarat university to undertake education, but in order to do that we need to be able to live.' If the government had a role in being able to provide that level of assistance, not just in terms of education but in terms of the support that goes with it, I think that would go a long way to help.

I wholeheartedly support Simon's view about future leaders. The government is to be commended for its initiatives, particularly the young rural leaders programs, the young exporters programs and the young directorship programs. Sure, it is targeting people who are already in the industry, but if people outside the industry can see the examples that these people are setting and see that there is a future for agriculture and how they have a role in that future, then I think that is an important initiative that the government undertakes. Really, it is about spreading the good news stories rather than spreading the doom and gloom.

Again, agriculture itself is wider than just a production system; it is about the service system as well. The skills need to be transferable across both. That is why we have been committed to that business approach, because the skills associated with running a business can be transferable, from an agricultural system, to an agribusiness system, to the local fish and chip shop. I think that is going to be an important focus. The managers of the future are going to have to be business managers.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Inglis. It is pleasing from the committee's point of view to have heard in the last 48 hours concerns raised by groups that have given evidence to us about the negativity and the doom and gloom, as you described it. This has been voiced in particular by the national media, to the extent where there is a perception, as you quite rightly pointed out, that all is not well in rural and regional Australia. You make a very positive point that it is not gloom and doom operating out there; in fact, the exact opposite is the case. Despite the fact that people have come through debilitating droughts and have had some tough times in the last four or five years, the positive thinking of people out there has to be seen and heard to be believed.

It is disconcerting when you have this continual negative program being pushed into the public arena by media outlets. For example, all that was talked about in a recent article about western New South Wales was people moving off the land et cetera. It does not send a very positive message or encourage young people to stay in the rural areas. The government had a very successful campaign recently with advertising for exceptional circumstances assistance packages, but the take-up rate was not as good as it should have been. Do you think it would be wise for the government to consider talking up the rural sector with some advertisements? This could extrapolate out to the community the positives about agriculture and the need to ensure that those positives are conveyed to the community, to the extent that they not only feel good about agriculture, but more importantly young people take up some of the training packages that are available through various agencies across the country. Do you think that would be a positive contribution from the federal government in particular? I presume most state and territory governments would make some sort of a contribution in that area themselves. Do you think that would be a good idea?

Mr Livingstone—I think all positive media would be excellent. Obviously it comes at a cost, and where is the dollar best spent? I can think of one example that I saw on TV last night—a graduate of ours who is in olives. It shows how this fellow has developed his olive grove and how successful that business is now. I think it is for some business award. Isn't that a fantastic way to promote how things are going in agriculture from a business sense, rather than just about access to funding? I think that, well-constructed, it may well cover a few avenues for promotion.

Mr Inglis—I think it was a state government initiative that has been screened just recently. Yes, it is worthwhile, and there are some fantastic positive stories out of the youth leadership program that we ran in Canberra this year. Some of the young people from there are involved in environmental management, fisheries and forestry, but we just never hear about the things that they are doing. There are plenty of opportunities to highlight the pluses, and I think it would be a useful initiative to capture some of the people who are involved in those sorts of programs and promote what they are doing.

CHAIR—There appears to be a very poor marketing exercise in terms of the positives. Yesterday we heard from the Australian Dairy Farmers group, who, when they first heard about

this inquiry, immediately changed their thought patterns to a more positive approach to their industry. They are doing wonderful things as result of that fresh approach.

Regarding the issue of leadership, which you alluded to in your submission, do you think that there is enough leadership being shown by the farmer groups, in your case the VFF and the NFF and indeed all the farmer associations throughout the country? My observations are that there appears to be a reactionary approach to things rather than a proactive assistance package coming from those groups. I might be unfair in my comments on that, but that is they way I see it. I would be interested to hear your comments about that.

Mr Livingstone—I think they give it their best shot as far as promoting agriculture as a positive, but in a lot of ways a lot of those farmer groups are on the back foot. Organisations like PETA and so forth are putting pressure on farmers. It has reached the situation where it is very hard for those farmer groups to put forward the positives. I can see some of the positives coming from the individual farmers or groups of farmers. Looking nationally at the leading farmers and some of the things that they have done, there are some fantastic success stories. How do you get the message out to the wider community that if you want a return on capital of 15 per cent and everything else that goes with that success, that you should go into farming; this is how you can achieve that? As an industry or a sector, looking at individual cases can be very positive. Sometimes we just rely on the industry groups to promote all the good things going on. Some of the graduates of Marcus Oldham are doing fantastic things in every state of Australia and what they are doing needs to be promoted to the wider community. We certainly try to do that for our own business success, but it could be explored a bit better on a national scale.

Mr Inglis—People have also seen the agricultural communities respond to a lot of that. Groups like the Birchip Cropping Group, Southern Farming Systems and some of the other farming systems groups around the nation have seen the need for research that is not being done in their local community. They have been out and developed the initiatives, captured the funding, developed the research programs, and are applying it at a local level. I think there are models out there for community groups that have seen a need, taken the initiative, and been able to make it work. It might be just local communities trying to develop resources or industries for themselves to support employment. There are models and frameworks out there that can be used; it is about being able to use those in a much wider context.

CHAIR—Or identify them and bring them to the fore in terms of pushing the positive side of things.

Mr Inglis—Yes.

CHAIR—I read in your submission your positive comments about FarmBis, and also your comments about additional support being considered from government in the future for young farmers in the form of formal education at the tertiary level. What do you believe would be the best way to deliver those sorts of programs to the community, bearing in mind that, even with all the best intentions in the world, governments do not always get it right?

Mr Livingstone—I would have thought that if we were serious about lifelong learning—and the structure of FarmBis is a model that can be worked with—we need to somehow target those into farm management training and short courses. I always think that there is a huge untapped

talent out there working in the agricultural sector. How do you get them to have a taste of education and understand that they are going to get a return on that further down the track as far as being better business people? How do you get those people into the loop? They do certificate I and IIs because that is the stuff that they like: handling cattle, mustering sheep—that sort of stuff. You need to get them past that, give them a taste. That might be through FarmBis, but in the basic business management. Teach them something that they can go back onto the farm and implement straightaway, then follow up with additional things, and then into tertiary study. I know from working in a couple of institutions that is what young farmers tend to be like. They have this passion for agriculture and the practical but they have not experienced cognitive development, how they learn, and they do not know how they learn. You have to encourage them to do that. If there is going to be a role in a financial sense in assisting them, it is to put in structures that then lead into further study.

Mr Inglis—There are some very good models in industry; programs like the MLA Edge Program and GRDC programs. The industry has seen a need for ongoing training. This is across the whole of the sector, if you like, but it is also focusing on taking skills and applying them and being able to develop the management associated with that. I think supporting programs like those MLA Edge programs and the GRDC programs, where you are getting the research being applied into a very practical program, are really worthwhile. If FarmBis supports that then I think that is a useful initiative. I have been critical of FarmBis in terms of the overall way that it is managed and structured. To me it is awful unwieldily.

CHAIR—That was the next question I was going to ask in closing off. How do you believe the structure of delivering those programs from government should be set up?

Mr Inglis—The FarmBis one?

CHAIR—Any of the programs, whether it be FarmBis or a new program that you believe we should get involved in.

Mr Inglis—Taking FarmBis as an example, we run a national leadership program here every year and attract 35 to 40 people from all around Australia. In order to run that program we have to register it across six different states. The registration process is different for each state, so we have virtually said, ‘If you want to come down and do the course, you apply for the funds.’ It tends to get unwieldily. The other thing is that we are missing out on the transferability of a lot of these programs. If we develop an initiative here, why can’t we transfer it to Queensland and deliver it? Why can’t we take it to Western Australia and deliver it? FarmBis is limiting that to a certain degree, it tends to become far more localised. The local governments manage it and run it.

CHAIR—Are you saying that if there is a nationally funded program like FarmBis—

Mr Inglis—Then it should be nationally registered.

CHAIR—It should come direct from the Commonwealth to the organisations and they should apply directly to the Commonwealth?

Mr Inglis—The states can be the conduit for that to happen, but I think there needs to be a national register.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Just getting back to the image issue, and picking up on something that you said in your introductory remarks, Simon: your institution does not have a problem getting recruits here to study, but the sector is having real trouble attracting people into it, and I suppose out in the graduate world competing at that level as well as elsewhere. If you were sitting in our seat or in the minister's seat, what would you do to revamp the image of the sector to give it some appeal to young people, because we know that the sector is getting older? The second question is: if we get down to the local level here—in Geelong, because we are ideally placed here—can we give young people some experience of farms and what goes on on farms, and on some very sophisticated farms? Did Marcus participate in the careers expo that was held for the secondary students in Geelong? Has any thought been given by people in this region to holding a small expo for interested students, which might at least tickle their fancy? We have some very sophisticated farmers in this region. Of course I include the honourable member for Corangamite in that, who is here with us today. We have teaching institutions like Marcus Oldham and the National Centre for Cool Climate Wine Science at Deakin University. We have prominent agribusinesses such as Dalgety, big wool stalls, grain handlers, Southern Farming Systems and the Geelong Agricultural and Pastoral Society. I would have thought that agriculture in the Geelong region was well placed to project itself into the primary and secondary system in a very constructive way.

Mr Livingstone—Firstly, Marcus Oldham, like all institutions, has to work very hard for enrolments. This year has been good and next year looks strong, but you do have to work very hard. We find that even in Geelong a lot of our competition is not with Melbourne university and the regional agricultural colleges, it is next door to us; it is Deakin University. If you go down there and talk to people studying in the faculty of business and law, you find that a lot of them are from regional Victoria. They are doing commerce, they are doing law. So how does the agricultural sector compete with other occupations and careers? I reckon that is the challenge for us, not so much competing against the Queensland colleges, the University of Sydney and so forth. There are 39 universities in Australia that we are competing against, so we have to work pretty hard.

We work on our students from about school age. It is a big financial investment to come to Marcus Oldham, so we get to know the parents and the students and we work pretty hard with that. One of the issues I have found is that careers councillors in many of the schools are pretty negative about agriculture, so it is pretty hard to change that perception. Regarding the expo, one of the things that we have spoken about at Marcus is getting employers and our graduates together. I know Rimfire Resources that you spoke to yesterday have started that initiative, which is quite good because it is tailoring good graduates to specific jobs. We work within our own network here; we have functions at the college. This year the chairman of council ran a lunch here for prospective students and their parents. We do tend to work in that community; we do go to the expos.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—In your submission you mentioned the impact, in the Queensland example, of the pastoral companies getting into the registered training organisation status and the impacts that that might be having on intakes to institutions such as this and others. Is that quantifiable or is that just anecdotal?

Mr Livingstone—I would hope it is more than that. I worked in the Queensland colleges for four years. Nine years ago enrolments were quite high. It is my understanding that at this point they have fallen away to probably half. In my view, the pastoral companies have become competitors for the colleges because they can offer a career path and pay, so you can get a certificate II in beef production and get paid while you do it. I know of one company that has been doing that. It is attractive for people entering the industry, but it is pretty complex to run a registered training organisation, compliance competency based training, outcomes and all of those things. I feel that quite a few of the students that would have gone to the colleges have gone down that track. I cannot comment on how effective that training has been but they have become a major competitor.

Some of the colleges are expensive to run because of their contact hours. I have found that when you are teaching people about chainsaws, chemicals, how to break in horses and these sorts of things, you only have groups of 10 and it is very expensive training. Industry want really good practical people at that certificate level, but how do you fund that? The unit cost per student to get them up to speed with the industry standard is high. It is a worry, because the number of students doing the certificate programs is dropping. Who is going to pick that up? The farmers? Are they qualified to do it? Do they have the time to do it? I have found during my time in Queensland that the colleges were good, solid operations. They were expensive to run but they invested a lot of time into the training.

Mr Inglis—Part of the problem with the apprenticeship type programs in agriculture has been in providing the opportunity to be able to complete the studies associated with it given the production cycle that goes hand in hand with it. It is not ideal. I think that is probably why the apprenticeship schemes have tended not to really take off.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—I will defer now to my colleague as I am conscious of the time.

Mr FORREST—This inquiry has come out of the experience in Victoria where we have had to go through the rigour of watching seven agricultural and horticultural campuses being downgraded. Today you are giving us a positive story about your outcomes with growth in student numbers, but also for fee paying courses, which is quite remarkable. I am searching for evidence you might be able to give us on the keys to your success given the adjustment that is occurring. Clearly, there are too many providers in Victoria. It is a painful experience for communities to go through, but here at Marcus Oldham you have a success story to tell. Could I tease out of you for the record the keys to your successes?

Mr Livingstone—There is certainly no one example of success. I think that we, as a college, look at each year ahead and work pretty hard to get the enrolments. No doubt in the future there will be a turn different to what currently exists. We do not get too carried away with how we are going in terms of enrolments at the minute. There are a couple of really simple key things: our students work before they come here and that is attractive. I believe that males, especially, do not mature when they are 17. Quite often they do not know what they want to do or they just finish school and they want to go out and work. So they go out, they work for a while and, if they have a bit of go about them they ask, 'How am I going to run this business if I do not go to a college and get some education?'

I think part of our success has been having mature age entrants; another part is that all of our students have completed grade 12. As opposed to other institutions that are offering vocational, they can hopefully handle the academic program that is ahead of them. We do not offer training packages in our courses because we are in higher education. Our two diplomas have been written by the college, so there is some ownership in that, and in some ways we extend well beyond the training packages. We are offering 1,200 contact hours a year, as opposed to what the industry training packages would be.

I think another success is that the guys do work hard here. In some ways we are a cross between a university and a college, where our contact hours are high. If students struggle there is a lot of support. We have 123 students residing on campus. They all know the lecturers by name. If somebody is falling behind the lecturer says to them, 'Hey listen, I haven't seen you at a class for a while, you had better come in,' as opposed to university where the dropout rate might be 30 per cent, for example. So that is part of our success. Another success is that we have good students coming in and a high quality of students going out. They are doing a good job because they have the practical, the tertiary study and then the implementation at the end.

A further success has been sticking to our guns, which has been business management. Like all institutions we have been tempted when the enrolments get low to say, 'Maybe we should go into a degree in environmental management, or a degree in something or other.' I think we have approached the educational market reasonably conservatively during our period and that has been good, although we have had an outward focus. Educationally we have a small group of lecturers but we pull in experts—lawyers, accountants, agricultural engineers and vets. We try to draw in that expertise. We have a very strong alumni that think passionately about the place, and a lot of our enrolments come from word of mouth. It is a mix of all of those things that has helped.

Mr Inglis—Probably the key has been our niche market. We have taken a very strong focus on business management. Since 1962 that has been the principal reason for our being here. As Simon has indicated, that has been our core focus on the way through. I think that is now putting us in a position where we are the last one standing to a certain degree. We have the opportunity now to be able to capitalise on that. It has been a hard road to get there, and now we are starting to reap some rewards from it.

The other important part of our program is the fact that we have a high retention rate. That comes about because of this pre-entry requirement that the students complete a minimum of 12 months industry experience before they come to us. They know why they want to be here, they know what agriculture is about, and they know that in being here they are going to have to be dedicated to the program. That really gives us the retention rate and has been an important part of the program.

Mr FORREST—After 40 years in the marketplace you have a reputation of successful students in business. How have you been able to fight the temptation though to go to environmental land management, resource management, which a lot of the others have done? That is the direction government is enticing people: we have to be better managers of our resources. How have you resisted that?

Mr Livingstone—We have a business model and, as part of managing any business, you need to be aware of the environmental implications. Through our farm management program students study environmental management but it is incorporated into the overall management. We certainly do that and that is good best practice. I think being a smaller outfit, not being bureaucratic, being able to look at what is going on in industry and being able to develop our own charter has prevented the college from going down some paths that may not have proven to be beneficial. We have very strong links all over Australia. Not all institutions have that, but we are a national institution. If we had been operating solely on Victorian students we might look a little bit different to what we do now, but back in 1962 that intake of 13 students grew to be from all around Australia. There was risk in that but that was the charter that the council took at the time.

Mr FORREST—In your submission you have recognised the importance of the farming community taking hold of their own application of research and the Birchip Cropping Group. Do you encourage student contact with that group?

Mr Inglis—Yes, very much so. Our third-year students, as part of their cropping program, are taken to Birchip for four days. We could sit in front of a whiteboard down here and deliver the same background material, but we think it is far more important that the students have access to the people who are involved in the program. We get their principal consultants in to give them the fundamentals associated with crop production. We believe it is far better to see people doing it, and doing it well, than our telling them about it. It is the same with Southern Farming Systems, with whom we have very strong contact. Our students are involved in on-farm visits with their clients, and in the research days and so on. They are aware of what these groups are doing, how they are involved in the community, and then hopefully they are taking these as models when they go back home.

CHAIR—The college undertook a five-day residential leadership course in Canberra for 40 young men and women working in agricultural industries. Can you give us an overview of why you did that, what the outcome was, and whether it was a positive exercise?

Mr Livingstone—Just before Sam starts on that, the reason we took it on is that for many years, certainly since the late 1980s-early 1990s, the council and college have seen it as important to do more than educate our full-time students. We saw that getting involved in leadership and community engagement activities was going to be beneficial for those communities. We have been running youth leadership, our one-week program, and then this national program that Sam has organised.

Mr Inglis—The answer to your question is, yes, we think it was successful because we look like we are picking up another one in March next year. It has been an ongoing program that the federal government has funded. The March program will be the sixth one of these. We have only been involved in one so far. It is very much an initiative about providing people in the industry with the opportunity to develop some leadership skills, some personal development. It is about networking, understanding how government and industry operate and bringing people together to share common experiences. The big thing out of it was that across agriculture, fisheries and forestry they have all got the same problems; there was that common learning. When we were talking about the images of agriculture, these young people were saying: ‘There is a future in agriculture. We have the opportunities to be able to develop within our particular industries. Our

problems are common. Let's attack it from a common point of view. Instead of fighting for fisheries, agriculture or forestry, let's develop a common approach to it and attack it from that point of view.' To me, that was the really positive thing that came out of it.

CHAIR—Yes, that is another plus for the positive side of what we have been talking about during the last couple of days. What prompted you to get involved in that?

Mr Inglis—The opportunity presented itself to expand our leadership offerings. Again, we have been involved in youth leadership at a local community level. We have run our national leadership program. This was another niche, a different age group to focus on. We saw the opportunity to get in there, we submitted a tender, and we were successful in winning it.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Did you do it alone or was it a joint venture with some other organisations?

Mr Inglis—No, there were three of us in the consortium. We were the lead team and two other people who had been involved in our other leadership programs helped us.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Who contracted you to do that?

Mr Inglis—DAFF. One other issue that came out of the process was succession. If ever there is a limiting factor to young people getting involved in agriculture and agricultural industries it is the issues of succession. If we can develop a process where young people can get in with equity and the older generation can get out with dignity, then I think that is the focus we have got to work with. We have also been doing some training programs with some of the rural banks. They are very interested in this sort of process—enabling young people to get into the industry and at the same time enabling the older generation to get out of the industry. That becomes a real challenge, both for government and for the industry organisations.

Mr FORREST—You have also been doing some leadership development training outside the framework you have just described, like the outreach in modern Mallee and Kerang. That is in your own right though, isn't it?

Mr Inglis—That is our youth leadership program where we have been working with the local shires in Loddon, up through the northern Grampians and up through St Arnaud. We have run a number of programs there in conjunction with the local shires and the local community groups.

Mr FORREST—You are doing that more in your own marketing context?

Mr Inglis—I suppose it is a two edged thing. It becomes a marketing tool for us and also we are seen to be involved in community. That is another important part of the process that we are trying to grow.

CHAIR—It is a pretty good tool, isn't it, when you are doing a marketing exercise and delivering an outcome at the same time?

Mr Inglis—Exactly.

Mr Livingstone—A fair bit of thought from members of staff has gone into that and it is all intertwined. If we all go out there and develop some of the skills of the local people, they talk well about the college. That increases our enrolments and it spreads the word about what we are doing here. Financially, it is not big for us, but that is the commitment that the college has made. It has been very worthwhile, because you get to know the local council members and so forth.

CHAIR—I would just like to thank you both, Simon and Sam, for the contribution you have made. I mentioned yesterday and this morning that the evidence that we have received has been absolutely first-class so far and you have continued on with that very professional contribution. It is very important from the committee's point of view that we not only hear the concerns but also try to encourage people giving evidence to be open and frank about their concerns, whether it is about government or the direction education in general is going in the area. The bottom line is that we need to have evidence when we finish this inquiry that is going to allow us to put together a comprehensive report that is going to assist the whole industry nationally. That, of course, can only come about by taking quality evidence, which allows us then to put in some strong recommendations. I would just like to thank both of you for the contribution that you have made here this morning. In particular I would like to thank the college for giving us the opportunity to come and listen to and see the significant contribution that you are making to rural schools and, more importantly, to ensure that our young people are getting the right message about the value of agriculture.

[11.32 am]

BERRISFORD, Ms Lynette (Nickie) Mary, Executive Officer, Grains Industry Training Network

CHAIR—Welcome, Ms Berrisford. Do you wish to say anything about the capacity in which you appear?

Ms Berrisford—I work for two organisations: the Grains Industry Training Network and Partners in Grain.

CHAIR—Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament and consequently they warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. It is customary to remind witnesses that giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. Do you wish to make a brief statement in relation to your submission or would you care to make some introductory remarks?

Ms Berrisford—Just some introductory remarks. Firstly, I would like to apologise on behalf of both the chair, Barry Batters, and the deputy chair, Warwick McClelland, both of whom are producers. At this time of the year, I must admit, they are exceptionally busy. Also I thank you for the opportunity to present to the inquiry.

The Grains Industry Training Network is an organisation which acts as a broker of training. A lot of work at the moment is being done by Sue Kilpatrick, looking at the role of brokers. It is interesting that our organisation has been used a number of times in research with positive outcomes. We are not looking at being an actual provider of training but ensuring that the training that the grain industry identifies happens. The Grains Industry Training Network works with the grains industry of Victoria. The other project that I am involved in is a national project. Therefore, I have contacts and information about what is happening in other parts of the country.

Reference was made earlier to the changes that were mooted with the delivery of training in the VET area in Victoria, with Melbourne university's proposed changes. That was the catalyst for the Grains Industry Training Network to undertake a strategic planning exercise. It proved to be quite opportune, because in undertaking that we completed our workshops and were able to feed it to this inquiry. There were many significant concerns in the industry regarding the whole aspect of training. When we refer to 'training for the industry' we refer to extension, the delivery of research outcomes through the VET sector and the university area.

The most important things that came up were the fragmentation, the lack of cooperation and the failure at many points for delivery of training that meets the needs of industry. Industry is changing rapidly. Our positive business growers out there that are taking on new technology and new methods of production are concerned as to how they access their information and the top level training that they need. It is really good to have those positive growers, who are very concerned about their industry putting the time and effort into this particular program.

We have worked very much at an operational level in getting little programs happening on the ground. It is through the success of some of those programs, some of which are referred to in the submission, that we now see it as vital to move strategically to a far more cooperatively driven model—not just continuing to do small things at the bottom. The concept of a learning hub or a centre of excellence has come through with a pilot possibility for Victoria, but certainly at a national level. The more I go about my business, the more convinced I am that we must be taking a far more cooperative national approach at the education level, or the training level.

CHAIR—Thank you very much; that is very helpful. I lead off by referring to page three of your submission where you say:

In my experience there seems to be considerable time, effort and funding spent on researching what is needed, this is particularly so in DPI and yet there are not good linkages with industry or the training sector. There seems to be an attitude of let's develop or do it from scratch rather than work cooperatively and work together. As one GTIN Committee Member said *'how do we get rid of the egos and get them listening to our needs?'*

Based on those comments—and I compliment you for being so frank about them because that is what we need—what action could training providers be taking which would enable them to be more responsive to market needs?

Ms Berrisford—They need better links with industry. If we are looking at these in terms of producers—because we have had quite a discussion regarding what we mean by the agricultural sector, and whether that includes the service sector—there need to be much closer linkages with the producers. We can see pockets of where that is happening very well, and mention has been made of Birchip Cropping Group and Southern Farming Systems. There are areas of Victoria and other states that are being very well served; that is great because there is community development. I can identify significant areas of Victoria and other states in Australia where there are no clear linkages. Some of that is driven by what becomes a government initiative: 'Well you must do it this way,' or 'This is the policy at the moment.' We have had a lot of impact with environmental management. If that becomes the buzz word, the buzz item, where is the money that is going to management or the new technologies with the GPS control traffic and those sorts of areas?

Often there will be a committee only because the government or the funding organisation says, 'You must have a committee.' Is that committee really consulted and operating effectively? In many cases it is not. When you are looking at organisations such as TAFE and DPI, they have a committee and can produce the name of it, but do they meet, do they take on board that information? It is a key item that we actually increase the cooperation between those organisations. Producers are very willing to input that, but one of the things that have come through strongly through our strategic planning is that the producers have said, 'We must be more proactive in getting our message into the government sector.'

CHAIR—You will be very pleased to know that your criticisms are not the only criticisms that we have heard about that. There is obviously a very deep and real concern within the community as the recipient of the service delivered. More importantly, it is another indication of the need for more control over the way in which taxpayers' funds are allocated and the way in which they are used. I asked a question yesterday about accountability. It is quite obvious that there needs to be more accountability if we are going to deliver something that is going to

address the issues that we are sitting here today gathering evidence on. If we have to decrease the level of bleeding away from the industry then we have to take control of those things. I thank you for that contribution.

Mr FORREST—It might be useful if you can put on record how you went about achieving the successes you have had, like the header training program and spray management. Could you give us some idea of the battle you had to get the egos to listen? How do you get the support from the industry at the farm gate? I think that is the key. We will need to make recommendations on how to reinforce that, but some evidence on record would be handy.

Ms Berrisford—I think it is really important to know that the GITN committee has eight producers on it from across Victoria. We put our web out and find who is there; Warwick McClelland has been there since the commencement. Those producers do not get any money whatsoever to support my committee, so there are no sitting fees and no travel allowances. Occasionally I know that somebody is in a fairly desperate situation and we organise for them to travel with somebody else, or we pick them up. These producers are so committed to their industry that they totally give that time. We have a minimum of six to eight meetings a year, and you can take a day out of their work because we centre them around Victoria. Barry Batters, the chair, would regularly be putting almost a day's work into this program this year. I do not think he probably realises how hard he works.

Underneath all this are people who are working so hard and so passionately. The header course came about because we undertook some research in 2003. We were coming out of a drought period and producers were saying, 'Where do we get skilled workers?' Someone said, 'I kept mine on,' but others had let their workers go, and there are not a pool of workers. We did some research into whether there should be a part-time traineeship. Out of that came identification of some skill shortages. At one of the focus meetings, a farmer meeting, there was a contractor based at Donald who employed 30 people, had 20 machines and he did contracting work starting in Queensland moving down. He was doing his own bit of training for that. It was indicated to him that there was an opportunity to work with TAFE. The researcher went to Longerenong at that point and indicated to them there was an opportunity to get some TAFE training happening. It was building on the issue. Nothing happened and then we raised it some months later with our committee and moved forward.

The issue with the training was that we needed to have a skilled trainer, and we had that in the operator who had 30 years experience. We needed the training done on top quality machines, not something that was five or six years old. I have a passion about it being accredited training so that people then move on and can build career pathways, not necessarily doing a whole course but doing the relevant competencies. Funding was an issue, because effectively to train a young person on a piece of equipment that is worth \$500,000, with the size of it, we were not going to run classes of 16 or 20, and numbers were mentioned before. We decided on a class size of eight. I worked through to get funding to do that. The TAFE could put in a bit. There were all the issues about the person being qualified et cetera and we spent many, many hours writing submissions to get some top-up funding locally through the Victorian government, the CRISP funding.

It was a huge amount of effort and I think if our producers had not been passionate about it we would have said, 'Let it go.' We got funding and last year we put 24 young people through that

program. Every one of them got employment. Yes, there are jobs and that was really positive. We have been through the same process this year, spending hours writing applications for funding, which we successfully got. We have put another 24 young people through, all of whom have been offered work. We have also broken the back; we have made a deal now for CASE IH to support that by allowing access into their facilities and access to their technical people. We have the combination of top quality machinery—they are using the latest machinery—the technical expertise and the expertise from the contractor, who can tell you all the stories about canola when it is a few inches high and how to set up the machine for that.

We had a member of CASE IH at our last meeting and he said, ‘We can see you are not fly-by-nighters; what else can we do to help you?’ We have also introduced a one-day program for experienced operators, farmers who are saying, ‘Why are all these young people getting this wonderful knowledge? We want it as well.’ We have just had three different workshops with 60 people.

Mr FORREST—What does the machinery manufacturer or the supplier get out of it? Their contribution is to provide the machinery but someone has to provide fuel and all the rest of it.

Ms Berrisford—What we think they get out of it is this: if you train on a red one you will convince dad to buy a red one. I have said that to them. Part of trying to get funding was to give some remuneration to people, which we had to do when we used the contractor’s machinery. We could not expect a contractor to let young people crawl all over his machinery, so that also added to the cost. We wanted to involve agribusiness. Now that CASE have come on board, we just go to John Deere and say, ‘What do you want to do?’ In fact, we have had John Deere involved in the days for the farmers. A couple of people have said to me that if we do a good workshop for them they will come back to us for second-hand parts. They need to think about subtle advertising.

Mr FORREST—Has the spray management program worked out better? Are they used to you now? Has it been easier to get that hands on?

Ms Berrisford—With the spray management, yes, but we did that under FarmBis funding. It was excellent, a really useful tool. We are still going through the process of upgrading that workshop to the farm chemical users course.

Mr FORREST—Did you get the same participation of machinery suppliers in that one?

Ms Berrisford—Yes, the presenters from industry come in. Now they will often come for no cost, but it is also the cost of getting in technical expertise—the top person from the weather bureau. Is the person who can earn \$2,000 a day going to want to come to your workshop for a few hundred dollars?

Mr FORREST—There are a few handy keys in all of that; trying to get all those different players involved. The lesson has been the industry providing the motivation to get the provider of the training organised.

Ms Berrisford—That is the lesson. We can provide information and solutions to issues for individuals by telling them to go and do that, if it is not a general problem. I often provide

information and say, 'This is your problem, it's not a general problem.' But you can get a group of producers sitting around saying: 'This is an issue'—and the way we tackled the spray workshop was slightly different—'and what are all the other issues? We realise now we have a two-day program.' They want detailed information on droplet size and drift. We have now worked through it. The really important thing is that it is driven by the industry. They are sitting at the table saying, 'This is what we want; this is how we want it delivered,' and, in some cases, 'This is who we want to deliver it.'

Mr FORREST—Has that intervention occurred because there has been a market failure by the providers? In your submission, which the chairman drew attention to, who are the egos? Who do they belong to? Is it government departments? You can be frank. That is the beauty of these inquiries.

Ms Berrisford—There is never one main reason, is there? There are egos in government departments: 'I do not want to work with them,' or 'I've got the expertise.' It is on both sides. There is a reluctance in the VET sector. They are hamstrung by funding issues to necessarily employ the person that they want to bring in. In some ways they are really out of touch with the industry and what the industry needs. That is what I am saying about some of the committees. They might tell you they have a committee there and all these people on it, but you need to ask those people how often they meet or what information they really seek. The value of GITN is that they come to the table and say, 'These are issues for us; this is what we want.'

I am working with a couple of younger people within the department and the TAFE sector who are real experts. GPS is one of the issues, the controlled traffic area. There is a great young fellow in the department. He is at the cutting edge, he is now involved, he is going to set up a national group of farmers to look at GPS and those issues. I guess you can start to do some different things with the new generation. I do not know whether it is policy within departments, but I am extremely concerned to see the loss of expertise that is going out the other end of DPI with people who are approaching 55. There are three people near where I am who were taking long service leave for 12 months and then not coming back. There is a huge gap now, so the industry also is going to suffer with that.

Mr FORREST—We are hearing a lot about the withdrawal of support services, but it has driven probably a better outcome—for example, the Birchip Cropping Group. Farmers are saying, 'What we want is more application based support in language we understand,' and they are actually doing it themselves and growing. I know Mr O'Connor is asking a lot of questions about the withdrawal of state services, but I can see it is actually getting a better outcome because farmers themselves are more willing to talk to one another and share their information, as well as being more confident in making demands about the type of training they want to see in place. I think that is the place for your organisation.

Ms Berrisford—Yes. As I said before, I think what they are doing is really positive, but we have huge areas missing out because they are not within the catchment area of Birchip; they have a totally different soil and climate type. I am working with a group around Laanecoorie near Bendigo who were serviced by the department through TOPCROP, and they say, 'I stopped going because it wasn't relevant.' We are doing some work on stubble retention, looking at biological soil issues, and so they are coming back in again. They are getting some information

from Birchip or Southern Farming Systems but, when we move away from a state based approach through the department, some areas miss out.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—On page 3 of your submission you have put a very good blueprint for successful training; it is all very practical and logical. You make the point that there is a significant duplication of services and lack of cooperation between DPI and other providers. Would you like to enlarge on that statement?

Ms Berrisford—Yes. It comes, I think, from that lack of cooperation. We have to address the fact that we have a thin market, or a small market, and that is something that the growers have indicated. If you look at some of the things that people, such as share farm chemical users, require—their OH&S—it needs to be delivered on a very widespread basis. However, when you come to more of the sophisticated areas of training you need the cooperation. You do not actually need DPI developing up its spray drift course, and New Farm doing its spray drift; we need those organisations to put their various expertise in the pool and work together, because they all have degrees of expertise.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—How would you affect that? Is that driven out of the political system at a ministerial level, or is it driven at an industry level? How would you drive that sort of common sense and cooperation?

Ms Berrisford—The industry is starting to drive it. From a grains point of view, they are saying, 'This is what we want to see happen; we want to see cooperation.' I think it now has to come from a government level as well. Maybe we pay bonuses for cooperation.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—As to the statement, 'There are little or no linkages between the DPI and the VET sectors': would you like to enlarge on that and perhaps offer some comment on how they might be structured or improved?

Ms Berrisford—There are some really good models happening in dairy. It was interesting to meet Robert Poole—

Mr FORREST—He presented to us yesterday.

Ms Berrisford—Yes, and I was at a meeting and I was going 'yes, yes', because they are further ahead than grains. It was really positive for me to see that what grains are saying is what dairy are saying; we are thinking along the same lines. I would like to see the VET sector start to use the expertise within DPI. I understand that they can no longer do that for free, but they should be able to buy in that expertise so that we are not out there developing six courses on identifying weeds. Michael Moerkerk is a national expert in weeds based at Horsham. Are we using his expertise in the VET sector? No. Part of it is they do not want to, or they do not know it is there. Developing those information systems is difficult and takes time.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—That would seem to me to be a logical linkage to make between key agencies that deliver training to the sector and that are involved in the policy. It is much more difficult to achieve, is it not?

Ms Berrisford—It takes an attitudinal change.

Mr FORREST—On the same page you mention concern about the Australian Wheat Board developing training packages as well. We need industries talking to one another rather than have one part of an industry talking. In terms of the grain industry, why is that not happening and what can we recommend to make sure that it happens? The Wheat Board is a major player.

Ms Berrisford—Warwick McClelland is a director on AWB, and he has done a lot of work with them in talking about training. It was purely through our strategic planning exercise that their HR person came and spoke about that. One of her concerns was that the VET sector was not responsive to their particular needs. There are a number of issues. Another concern of course is they do not want to do their training along with Elders because they will give their information away. I think there are a lot of skills that we could be delivering to the broader industry, not just to agriculture, but to the agribusiness sector as well. I have made contact with the FertCare people who are doing training for agronomists in the management of fertiliser. I am meeting with the executive officer next week because I think some of what they are developing for their fertiliser industry, which is competency based, will be relevant to producers to be able to learn more about fertiliser management. They are really receptive. I think organisations like AWB should be encouraged to be able to access the funding that is available under the VET sector. We have a lot going into training with McDonalds and the fast food industry, and so other areas need to be accessing it as well. It is hard work to make it happen.

Mr FORREST—You mentioned Robert Poole and the good leadership that his industry has taken in terms of taking control of the places, or the hours at McMillan. Do you think that is an opportunity for the grains industry on a similar model in terms of Longerenong?

Ms Berrisford—It was probably a missed opportunity. I think the grains industry were not aware of the ability to access the hours if you were not a training provider. Another way of looking at it is: by not having control of the hours, are you in fact more able to say from an industry perspective, ‘This is what we would like to see happen’ and try to direct it that way?

Mr FORREST—Control the curriculum rather than the hours. There would be an opportunity there though for you to work with whoever the provider would be.

Ms Berrisford—Yes.

Mr FORREST—That was the first question I wanted to follow up and ask you after hearing Robert Poole’s evidence yesterday. That is a good model. It gives the industry itself the ability to manage what it trades, which has been your frustration for the last few years.

Ms Berrisford—Yes.

CHAIR—I refer to page 4 of your submission, paragraph 3, where you say:

There is within the farming sector people who are at the cutting edge—the early adopters, they are at the cutting edge. It is essential that they are involved in delivery as well. Thus the system must be flexible enough to involve them and to pay for accessing their services.

I think you alluded to that earlier, but would you just like to elaborate on that a little as to what your concerns are there?

Ms Berrisford—I think it is an opportunity that the training sector has to use that expertise, certainly when we are looking at the new technologies, and the GPS is one of those. There are three or four producers throughout Victoria who are far beyond anyone else; they are getting their information all the time from overseas. Now we need to be able to have those people pass that information on, to spread it more broadly. If we are going to use those people to be involved in the delivery, we have to be able to remunerate them sufficiently to leave their business to do it. Now some of them will not want to, but others will, and that is all part of that cooperation and using the expertise. The value of having the producer is that he is applying the technology in the paddock. The technical person from the company can talk about how it works, but the producer talks about how it really works in the paddock and gives those fine points. We saw a lot of that when we ran the day courses for producers; the technical expertise was there but there was a lot of interchange between those using the equipment.

CHAIR—Was the interchange from the practical applicator picked up by the other group?

Ms Berrisford—Yes.

Mr FORREST—I thank you, Nickie, for taking the trouble to make a submission. We have won a few wars but we lost the battle for Longerenong. There are still opportunities to make it work. I would like you to follow up with the dairy industry model. I think there is an opportunity there with the new provider to get in there and influence the curriculum, to reduce the frustration you have had to get those egos to change.

CHAIR—What about the issue of consistency? What are your views on how the government can help provide consistency in training delivery and accreditation across the states—in other words, a national approach to consistency?

Ms Berrisford—As a trainer, consistency is a really difficult issue. There is a level of consistency you can gain but, when you get down to the really fine points, it is quite difficult. I think that competency based training is extremely valuable; it is a really good tool to start with. And if we can move towards a real national approach. We have the competencies there but we need to work with a range of providers and ensure that those who are providing have the expertise that the industry wants. I have used examples regarding that issue. It is a very difficult one when you are trying to come from a national point of view.

I must admit I have some extreme concerns at the moment with the role that the Agrifoods Industry Skills Council has, the amount of industries that it has responsibility for and the number of people there. I was at an industry champions activity last week and there is such a small number of people trying to take on board huge industry issues. If you are trying to take on board information from so many industries it is a bit of a concern about where that might go.

CHAIR—Thank you, Nickie, for your contribution. It has, once again, been a very positive contribution to this hearing. I would like to thank you for coming in and giving up your valuable time to express to us the concerns that you have, and giving us some insight into what needs to be done in some areas of the training initiatives that are undertaken by various groups, including the federal government. As my parliamentary colleagues have consistently said, and as John alluded to earlier, we need that sort of input to be able to analyse the evidence when we finish the process of this inquiry and put together some comprehensive and realistic recommendations

for the government to follow. It is up to us then, as members of parliament, to ensure that the government not only has the recommendations before it but also has recommendations that we believe we need to keep the pressure on to ensure that some changes are made. The issue of training is a very serious issue. One of the things that are paramount in the evidence taken today are problems associated with negative thoughts that have been put out into the public arena, which creates other problems for the rural industries trying to help themselves. We appreciate the contribution that you have made.

Ms Berrisford—Thank you. I think there are significant opportunities to put out some good press with some of the young people and others in terms of what they are doing.

[12.13 pm]

BERRISFORD, Mr Peter Edward, Private capacity

CHAIR—I welcome Mr Peter Berrisford. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament; consequently, they warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. It is customary to remind witnesses that giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as contempt of parliament. Do you wish to make a brief statement in relation to the evidence you are about to give or would you care to make some introductory remarks?

Mr Berrisford—I have some remarks to make, because time has evolved since May when I made the submission.

CHAIR—Go ahead.

Mr Berrisford—I have had 16 years experience in TAFE and was Assistant Director of the Wimmera Institute of TAFE for eight years and General Manager of TAFE programs at the University of Ballarat for four years. Since retiring I have undertaken two consultancies in the area of agricultural training, one in the area of training needs for the grains industry and the other looking at accredited and unaccredited training that was occurring in Victoria as a whole across all industries. As a result of all of that, I have some fairly strong views on where things are at and perhaps what might happen.

Thank you for the opportunity of appearing before the committee. In my view, this inquiry comes at a very critical time for the agricultural sector. You have the chance to initiate and make some proposals for change that, in my view, are drastically needed. Much of the industry is in a period of rapid change now because of new technology and international competition. The delivery of education, training and extension, in my view, is becoming dysfunctional. The industry needs a bipartisan blueprint to solve these issues associated with the provision of training, education and extension and, to some degree, research. I do not know enough about research to make many comments on that, but some feedback I get is not good. Continuing with the current arrangements with some sort of patch-it-up type approach, to me, is not the answer. There have been a lot of inquiries over the years into agricultural education, but nothing really changes.

Quite a bit has happened since my submission. In particular, the major event is the decision of the University of Melbourne to finally get out of TAFE training in agriculture—a decision they made years ago but have not been able to put into action. This decision, and the way it has been implemented by government here, has further fragmented the delivery of TAFE training in Victoria. There was one major player and now that major player has gone. In opting out of TAFE agricultural training, the University of Melbourne has forgone the opportunity to propose the establishment of a world-class centre of excellence in grains. This is one of the things that I had proposed in my submission, and I had proposed it to the University of Melbourne as a possibility. My submission attempts to solve quite a few of the issues you will have come across in your investigations. My proposal would put training, higher education, research and extension

under a single management structure. In proposing the model, it was to be seen as a model for perhaps other commodities in the agricultural sector, and it would not be hard to imagine what other things could happen.

Before I come to what might be a possibility, why do we need change? Firstly, the TAFE market is very thin and competition policy hinders cooperation. TAFE providers are supply driven, not industry driven. I think these are things you are hearing all the time. As a general rule, much of the provision of agricultural education and training is out of date and the providers are out of touch. In talking to various people, there is certainly an indication that, even in the research area, industry does not have the input that it ought to have and does not get the results for its dollars that it ought to get.

One of the big issues is higher education training. To me, the faculty of agriculture has not moved from basically when it was established years ago. In a sense, it was established to train teachers and employees for the department of agriculture, and that still seems to be a focus of its core structure et cetera, but things have moved on a lot since then. I find it disturbing that I have heard academics say, more than once, that it does not matter what you teach in agricultural degrees we are only teaching students to think. I find this an absolute scandal. How would you like your doctor to have only been taught to think rather than being kept up to date with modern knowledge and skills that they need to treat you? You expect young people coming into the industry to be excited by what they were learning at university, because it is up to date and current and can take those ideas back to the workplace. We need providers in both higher education and TAFE who are able to teach modern practices and theories and keep abreast of all the changes that are going on.

The relationship between research and education and training and extension is also an area that needs attention. There do not seem to be any strong connections between those areas. They all seem to be functioning in their own castles or ivory towers, however you like to think of it. I propose the best model, or a model worth exploring, is to have all those services provided under a single management structure where you can influence the interaction between research and education and between research and extension and actually get results.

After much thought, I propose that you examine the establishment of a national, multicampus, dual sector, private institution that could deliver TAFE and higher ed. This organisation would develop a strong research arm, and it would be able to access TAFE funds from the state and Commonwealth and charge fees for its higher education programs.

It seems to me that things are critical because one of the things that will happen, or is certainly talked about, is that Melbourne university will get out of agricultural studies at the higher education level. Not only are they out of it in TAFE but in the long term they want to get out of it in higher education too. They say that agriculture drags down their reputation—both because of the TER scores of those students who enter agriculture and because they do not do as much research perhaps as other faculties. You can see in the press the importance they place on their standing, both nationally and internationally, and agriculture on the score card is seen to drag them down. I will leave it at that.

Mr FORREST—I would just like to thank Mr Berrisford for a good, short, punchy submission. You have put some recommendations. You have nine of them on the last page. It is

frank and you have not been frightened to criticise those who deserve to be criticised. That is what these committees are all about. The opportunity to get that sort of evidence on the record helps us as a committee. The only thing I would say is that since your submission the situation in respect of the seven campuses has changed.

Mr Berrisford—That is right.

Mr FORREST—Melbourne university have now committed that they are walking away. Can your idea of the centre of excellence still be made to work without the involvement of a university or would you need the involvement of a university?

Mr Berrisford—A key and critical part of it was the involvement of the university because of the skills and expertise a university brings to research, particularly Melbourne university. I have just knocked them, but they are a significant research institution, recognised worldwide as being in the top 20 or something like that. To me, being with Melbourne university would have enhanced the reputation of the research side of it significantly. But that does not mean you cannot establish a centre of excellence without them. It was an important element, but it does not mean that you cannot make it function. It was an attraction because I think the University of Melbourne would attract research scientists to the centre of excellence if they were the auspicing body. However, the reputation of the organisation, over time, would do that.

Mr FORREST—There is probably still potential to salvage the essential recommendation you have there.

Mr Berrisford—Yes, I think there is.

Mr FORREST—In your submission you criticised the problem with nesting arrangements—and it was not a term that I understood until yesterday. I understand it is the lack of ability for accredited training to be contributed to as an asset towards ongoing academic study. How do we fix that, because each successor institution has its own demands?

Mr Berrisford—The way the national rural training package was set up is the problem. It needs extensive revision so that you can achieve things such as nesting, which other industries have. A nesting arrangement is where, for example, the diploma qualification is up here and all the others fit in underneath it. There might be 2,000 hours of study to get the diploma, and the others sit in underneath it. At the moment each one is an individual qualification. When you do one you do not necessarily gain any points for the next one. They are individually defined. I think that package needs a lot of work and the industry is being delivered a disservice with that particular package. It does not look to me.

Mr FORREST—This is beyond just one particular commodity; it is not just grain you are talking about?

Mr Berrisford—No, it is in general. Within that rural training package, the idea is that qualifications are built up by doing competencies. Some of the competencies they describe are 260 hours long. That is not a competency; that is a whole course. Sewing a crop has all these activities you have to do that should be divided up into each one so that it is much easier and

more flexible for providers to deliver and easier for students to package their qualification together. No-one will try it if it is 260 hours because it is too long—you cannot fit it in.

Mr FORREST—The other thing I liked about your submission was the application of national competition requirements. Government has tried to make sure that it is getting value for money for the training that is provided, but you are recommending that because of the difficulties of providing training in rural locations that requirement be waived. How can the custodian of public funding test the market for value for money?

Mr Berrisford—The safeguard is the fact that in TAFE, which is what we are talking about here, the funding in Victoria at least is allocated on the basis of the student contact hours that an institute delivers. The measure of efficiency is that they are still going to have to deliver those hours. They are getting paid \$11 or \$12 a student contact hour to deliver those hours. The blocker is that you might need 16 in order to deliver to an actual class, but if you can only get eight and your competitor 20 miles down the road has another eight neither of you can do it and you are not allowed to talk about doing it together, whereas if you took away the problem of the competition policy you could talk about doing it together, get your cooperation going and achieve efficiency. It would be a much better situation. You would not lose from the point of view of safeguards because they would have to report on the fact that they ran this course for eight students. They way they did it was to work with another organisation who ran it for eight. They joined together and split the delivery.

Mr FORREST—We have had this problem with Green Corps who were approved to only have eight participants instead of 10 or 12. This is the first time we have come across any evidence that this is a problem. How widespread is it?

Mr Berrisford—I would see it as a major problem across all providers in rural Victoria, which is the area I know, particularly in agriculture. It is an issue in some other fields as well, but agriculture is the key one.

CHAIR—That would be so nationally too, particularly in the more isolated communities where you have 2,500 to 3,000 people separated by a distance of 40 or 50 kilometres. The point that you make has ramifications across the whole countryside and it is a very valid point.

Mr Berrisford—I think it is a key issue. I do not have a problem with competition. I think the competition that was introduced moved TAFE forward, but there needs to be a new way to get certain sectors to move forward again. A lot of that is just our lack of funds and small class size and not having the money to do stuff. The competition policy is a clear problem to me.

Mr FORREST—How could such an arrangement be made to work? You and your competitor each have eight participants. Does he willingly say, ‘You have my eight and make 16, and I will step out’?

Mr Berrisford—There are several ways in which it can be done. One way is that one of the providers says, ‘I will pay you for those students.’ So they do not do any delivery; they just pay the money to the provider. The provider then has 16 students, their own eight and the eight from the competitor who come with the training money. Then they have a budget which gives them a chance to deliver the course. Another way would be to say: ‘There are 400 hours in the course;

we will do 200 hours each. We will use our teachers here as we have the expertise, you use your teachers there as you have the expertise, and we will deliver it together.'

Mr FORREST—I think that would be easier.

CHAIR—In your submission you make reference to Melbourne university's delivery in both TAFE and higher education being supply driven. You say:

They are not listening to the industry needs. There is a shortage of trained people for the agricultural industry but University of Melbourne and other providers cannot meet that need.

You go on to say:

There is a shortage of skilled trade level workers and a shortage of agronomists, to name two areas.

Given your criticism that TAFE institutes do not have the size of delivery in agriculture to make them respond to industry needs, who then can deliver agricultural training? You say that TAFE institutes do not emphasise their delivery in agriculture to make them responsive to industry needs, and then you are critical of larger institutions such as Melbourne university.

Mr Berrisford—I would think that TAFE, as a general rule, has more ability to respond to industry needs, but it does not mean that they do it particularly well in agriculture. I do not think they do. Melbourne university just does not seem to have the culture of responding to industry.

CHAIR—How do we overcome the problem? TAFE do not have the means to do it and the university is not responding to it because they see it as being marginal and not related to the economic running of the university. How do we solve the problem?

Mr Berrisford—Melbourne university have basically got out of the TAFE area, but the problem is still there in the higher ed area. One of my recommendations was that there be a national accreditation system for agricultural courses at higher ed, in a similar way that engineering, accountancy or other occupational areas have accreditation of courses run at each of the universities. That is usually on a three-yearly basis, with a visiting panel asking a range of questions from how industry input is obtained to how many industry releases had the lecturers had and looking at the content of the course in terms of what is the current practice. An accreditation system would be a great lever to get change to occur in the faculties of education at the higher ed level. It would have to be structured a bit differently, but the models are there.

CHAIR—The evidence that we have heard more recently is that there appears to be a mindset in some of the industries that is focused negatively on the needs of industry and it is particularly so in the larger institutions like universities. How do we overcome that? Do you think we need to look across industry and across government at better marketing the positive side of agriculture and, more importantly, we need to acknowledge that there is a skills shortage in that area? And, if we do not address the issue, will it be compounded further?

Mr Berrisford—Promoting the industry and promoting employment opportunities within agriculture can be fairly easily done with a marketing campaign. I have made those sorts of recommendations before. However, it is a matter of someone picking it up and running with it.

The marketing campaigns just need to follow the sorts of marketing campaigns that the Army or any other organisation like that runs—that is, you play up the image. If it is grains, you play up the size of the machinery and the ability to get training and work interstate and overseas. If it is horticulture, there is plenty of modern equipment. You just have to have an image that it requires skills to be in this industry and it is not dirty but safe. Those are the messages you want to get across, and you can do that quite easily in a series of 30-second ads on TV. It is a challenge to get a large provider to change its course delivery, but having courses accredited by a committee would at least change the culture in the faculty, because you would be forcing them to recognise what was happening in the industry. As a spin-off, you might hope that they would then realise that there is a market there. For example, agronomy is an area where, in Victoria, companies that provide these services to farmers cannot get appropriately qualified people.

CHAIR—Marcus Oldham College, in its submission, referred to the fact that the total number of farmers in Australia may be decreasing because there is an amalgamation of farms, farms are getting bigger and fewer people are required to work on them.

Mr Berrisford—That is definitely going on.

CHAIR—They made the point that, at the same time, agribusiness and the service sector to agriculture is growing. From my observations—and my parliamentary colleague might like to make a comment on this—there seems to be a focus more on people coming off farms and farms getting bigger, which is creating a negative message out there in the community, and an ignorance of the realities that were so rightly pointed out by the college that the agribusiness and service sector of agriculture is growing. We seem to overlook that and we are not looking at the whole picture. That is one of the problems we have. It is compounded by the national press in particular picking up the issue of people moving off farms for all sorts of reasons—drought, young people not wanting to go on farms and farms being sold off and amalgamated into larger and larger super farms—rather than looking at the need for the agribusiness and service sector of agriculture to be recognised and enhanced.

Mr Berrisford—In the research I did for the grains industry at the end of 2003—just focusing on grains but it applies to a lot of other areas as well—there were clear indications that farms were getting bigger and the way in which they were run was changing significantly. Contract labour and contract services were being used right across all operations. That happens because of the need for expensive equipment that you do not want sitting in the shed for 50 weeks out of the year and a whole range of required skills that one or two individuals on a farm cannot have. In effect, people are starting to run their farms more as businesses. They are in charge of coordinating and managing tasks such as getting someone in to sow the crop, to spray or to harvest. That is the way things are changing. There will still be significant issues with employment because of the fact that, for example, harvesting starts in Queensland and moves south, so you have to have people who are very mobile.

CHAIR—Contract work.

Mr Berrisford—Yes, and the same applies to other things, although with spraying you have to use local people basically.

CHAIR—How do we get the message out there that that is a positive part of agriculture that people are ignoring? We are constantly getting negative issues about agriculture simply because people are focused on the fact that more people are coming off the land, selling their properties, and that their properties are becoming part of a rural based company that is a super farm?

Mr Berrisford—Maybe the same advertisements that are promoting agriculture as a place to work actually demonstrate that the jobs are not just on a farm; they might be with a contractor. You can pack a lot into a 30-second ad or a series of ads.

CHAIR—Yes, that is one of the reasons why I asked should government be involved in spending some valuable taxpayers' resources into promoting that side of agriculture. Mr Berrisford, thank you very much for your contribution. We do appreciate it. As my parliamentary colleague said, we like people coming forward and not being coerced into being open and frank about their concerns about specific matters related to agriculture. Your submission is very thought provoking, as has been the case with other submissions. It is very important for us that we get these sorts of messages, because it helps us to put together a more comprehensive overview of the problems in agriculture, particularly in rural skills training or the declining level of rural skills in rural and regional Australia. We will be able to do that with contributions such as yours.

Proceedings suspended from 12.46 pm to 1.30 pm

HODGES, Dr David, Research Supervisor, RMIT University

LYONS, Mrs Marilyn Joy, Successful Masters of Education (by Project) Student of RMIT Hamilton, RMIT Hamilton Masters by Projects Students

McARTHUR, Ms Susan Maree, Teacher in TAFE, Former RMIT Masters Student (Project), RMIT

SCHOLFIELD, Dr Kaye Elizabeth, Manager, Community Partnerships and Projects, RMIT University Hamilton

VISTARINI, Dr William John (Bill), , Lecturer/Supervisor, RMIT Hamilton

CHAIR—I welcome the representatives from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Hamilton. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament; consequently, they warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. It is customary to remind witnesses that giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as contempt of parliament. Do any of you wish to make a brief statement in relation to your submissions or make some introductory remarks?

Dr Scholfield—Although I work at RMIT University, Hamilton, I am actually a graduate of the Master of Education program. I was part of a small community group over 10 years ago who initiated the connection that led to RMIT University establishing a presence in Hamilton. Therefore, I think the point to be made from the outset is that it was a rural community who, on its own initiative, initiated a partnership with an urban tertiary institution. The resulting partnership meant that there was a site of RMIT University in our small rural community. I think RMIT University should be commended for the commitment it has made to the region, and also the initiative that the community took in building that bridge. The Master of Education is one of the significant programs that we had there and we piloted it in our community with a group of people from a wide variety of organisations. As a staff member and as a student in that program, I was able to see the benefit of this action research program, to upskill the local community and to build a research culture. I think David could probably say something about the format of the program.

Dr Hodges—The Master of Education by Project—and Dr Kaye Scholfield went on and did her PhD—is a little bit different from the typical research programs in universities. It has three very clear objectives. The first objective is that, as a consequence of people doing the program, they become more skilled. The second, which is fairly typical in universities, is that there is a contribution to academic scholarly knowledge but also a contribution to professional knowledge. The significant difference to other research programs is that people are expected to make some change. It is supposed to be connected to the lives of the local communities, organisations and businesses. It is designed for people coming from business to be making an improvement in those respective organisations or communities. When it is used properly, this workplace based research can be quite a powerful instrument for improvement or rural development or upskilling the people who live in that community or organisation. Those three objectives are quite different

from other kinds of research programs, which are typically people going out and doing research on other people, taking it back to an urban university and writing up learned papers, and there is no lasting benefit in the local community.

Mrs Lyons—Perhaps I could follow on from what David said. I am a masters student and a part-time teacher at South West TAFE in Hamilton, which is a small rural campus. My masters project looked at teachers as learners. In my other hat I am an active farm partner in a wool and cropping enterprise. That exercise of learning about action research was very easily transferred to what we were actually doing on the farm, and yet before I started studying I had no idea about action research or what it was. That is the whole idea of the community connection—that learning becomes an activity that has some credence, gains some notoriety in small rural communities and is not connected with airy-fairy learning away at some distant university and is actually based within the community, in farms, in families, in small businesses, where people are learning and developing and gaining skills. So that is the other side of it.

Ms McArthur—I would like to add a little bit to Marilyn's comments. I came to the masters as a person with problems and I did not know how to solve them. The masters provided me with an opportunity for part of me to be a witness to the problem and to look at problem solving through my study. I have lived interstate much of my adult life and I came back to this rural community environment with a lot of skills but without the ability to translate that into a small community and bridge the important parts of relating skills back to the community or problem solving. The masters gave me that capacity to work with the students I was working with, and also with the masters professionals, to resolve the issues that we were faced with. It was a magnificent opportunity.

Dr Vistarini—I grew up in a very small country town up on the Murray and went away to Melbourne to university. Since then I have worked for La Trobe University in Shepparton, where effectively a first-year degree course was run—students would start their degree in Shepparton and then move to Bendigo or Melbourne—and I have spent almost all of the last 20 years working on Australian aid projects. It has been illuminating for me to work on a postgraduate project that has its feet on the ground. I moved from an aid project in the Lao People's Democratic Republic home to Warrnambool and worked with a team of supervisors—and I want to stress we have a team of supervisors—to contribute to real community learning. For me, this has been one of the great joys of working on this program.

CHAIR—Can I lead off by asking a question centred around your submission, where you state:

The agriculture sector is as dependent on the vibrancy of the local community—including its ability to supply services such as training and health—as the community is dependent on the viability of the agriculture sector. Most post graduates concluded that there is no simple, or one size fits all, solution to the skills training and research needs of rural Australia.

Could one of you, or indeed collectively, comment on the links between the vibrancy of local communities and agricultural industries?

Dr Scholfield—Going back to the beginning, our partnership began when the wool crisis occurred in the early 1990s and our community wanted to connect with an urban university to avoid being caught short again without that connection to the centre—and that means how you

speak up for yourselves as a community, how you keep the skills current and how you keep that vibrancy about a community that can be on its knees, as we were at that time. In that sense, the connection between the rural community and what is needed is very much in the forefront of our minds. The people who undertook this program represented all sectors. I think there is a lot said about rural Australia and the need for skills, but it is not just skills; it is also thinking.

If there is one thing that the masters program brought, it was thinking and connectedness. It connected all of the people in this program. We had people from the library—so information services; from the health service; different education sectors; the university; TAFE; the department of agriculture; the local catchment management authority; other natural resource management areas; and also from farming. So you can see that connectedness that occurred amongst the students. I think that is the background to developing that culture of learning and new ideas and connections. Someone else could probably talk more about the vibrancy.

Mrs Lyons—The connection between vibrant other industries and vibrant agriculture can come right down to simply a marriage partnership. So many farms rely on another member of the family partnership working off farm. If those opportunities are not there, then that farm may become almost unviable because outside income is not available. The other aspect increasingly now is that we have a significant number of young graduates returning to Hamilton after being educated away at universities. They work in new organisations in our district such as Blue Gums and Iluka Mineral Sands. The community is expanding and our farming community is feeding on that interaction. The young people who have returned to farms are no longer the only young people in the district; they are complemented by lots of other young professionals in other areas. It is very important for young people to have that mix. So that is one way of looking at that sort of relationship.

Many of our young people who have a degree have returned to run family-farming enterprises or to work in commercial enterprises within Hamilton while their counterparts who have stayed in Melbourne are probably embarking on a second degree by now. A country university that can provide opportunities for research degrees and further education is vital for them to stay competitive compared to their friends and colleagues in Melbourne.

CHAIR—That is very interesting information from our point of view because one of the things that the committee has heard from different groups about is the impact that the national media in particular is having in creating a negative picture out there for rural and regional Australia. That impacts on young people, who are conscious of the traditional farming backgrounds, and the way in which their parents or their grandparents have worked hard on the properties for very little remuneration. If you paint a negative picture, it does not give them much confidence to stay in agriculture. It is pleasing, from my point of view, to hear about these young graduates coming out after having picked up some tertiary education and going into agribusinesses and associated industry businesses that are keeping agriculture going. It disturbs me, and I know it disturbs my parliamentary colleagues, to see the focus on the drought, the bad effects of drought, and that people are moving off their properties not because of the drought but because the young people have this negative image thrust at them all of the time and they decide that they do not want to work from dawn until dusk for very little remuneration, apart from the lifestyle, of course.

Despite all of that, there are things happening that are very positive. As an example, people are selling their farms and the farms have become part of super farms. The super farms do not carry the people on them that they used to, but the associated industries that support that in the way of contractors et cetera are expanding and creating more employment—and we do not hear about that. Would you like to make a comment about that aspect of it, and whether we as a government need to do more to not only promote those positive sides of agriculture but more importantly to look at some of the programs that we are funding which may assist in increasing the expertise that is coming out of these young people and attracting them back to our rural areas? That is not always the picture. Some of the young people have moved out to an extent that there is now an enormous shortfall of good young talent in our rural communities. I think the issue that you have just raised is a classic example of how that reaction by young people can be expanded with the assistance of government.

Dr Scholfield—I think there has to be some hope and some opportunity. The presence of the opportunities provided by the university in the model that we have is one opportunity for optimism. The reason that we were able to develop this program was that the Commonwealth government sponsored the places. The issue now for us is to be able to attract more students while we have this wellspring of people and enthusiasm and supervisors. Now that we have gone back to people having to find the full fee, we have found that there is not the money in the community. While we do have the model and opportunity there for the young people to keep up with their education and to find some sort of intellectual stimulation—you need those high-level skills for agriculture and natural resource management; it just has to be maintained—the cost is an issue. We are finding in getting our next cohort of students together that there is not the scope amongst the businesses in general to provide for that continuing professional education. The initial offering by the government was actually what kick-started it and it worked. I think that is something we can all take some pride in. Where we go from here, I am not too sure.

CHAIR—Your submission refers to the use of ‘Action Research’ methodology. Can you explain ‘Action Research’ methodology and its benefits?

Dr Hodges—I will demonstrate ‘Action research’ by use of an example. We have somebody who is doing research at the moment—they have not quite finished their masters degree—on farm safety. We know that, if we look at occupational health and safety issues, on-farm safety is a problem. Typically this student would look at the kinds of problems experienced on their patch. They would start to articulate and analyse the particular situation. The starting point would be what exactly are the problems? What is happening? This particular person gave an example at the start of his research: he was motivated because one of his friend’s sons was killed in a tractor accident. With your experience, I guess you could readily identify with those kinds of issues. There are two things. The first is to get a clear understanding of what people on farms and farm families actually do, not just looking at a whole lot of learned university papers that are totally removed. Then you may try some innovation: for example, instead of somebody falling in a grain hopper, you try and innovate.

As I understand it—I am not from the farm—Australian farmers are pretty good innovators. It is really trying to introduce that you just do not make innovations willy-nilly but that you are trying to do things after careful analysis and research. With all the messiness that happens in a typical organisation or on a farm or anywhere else, we are bringing to a particular location some rigour and analysis to a problem using those research skills. The university offers an approach to

research—researching a practical problem. The person then would go and try some change and would analyse again what happens. Over a period of time of gradual innovation, evolutionary normally, the people would be changing and reflecting—why did that work or why did that not work. A lot of the time the problems are associated with why people do not take up the innovation. The innovations are sitting out there, but what is preventing people from doing it. Very often it is a person problem rather than a technological problem.

Typically you would see this written as a cycle. The cycle is that you plan to do something, you actually go away and do it and observe what is happening and then you analyse or reflect on what has happened. It is a rigorous process. Once you have done that, then you would say, ‘For the next stage I need to incorporate the things that I have learnt into what I plan to do next.’ That would be the typical cycle of plan, do, observe, reflect or analyse and then start all over again—and, hopefully, there is gradual improvement. So we have students who are doing things like farm safety. There was a person who was doing work on agriculture conservation and how the environment could be improved. What was Lee doing?

Dr Scholfield—He was doing his program on how trainers actually teach farmers. The trainers were saying, ‘Oh, we just deliver a program,’ and he observed, planned, researched and worked with the clients and said, ‘No, you also have to help them learn.’ As far as I can see—and I am also a farmer; my background was not in education—you have all the knowledge and information in the world circulating there and the people that actually do things are down there, but it does not always meet in the middle. We found with this action research process that you are actually tapping into the expertise and the knowledge and bringing it down there to where you are and relating it to your workplace and what you do, because you want to make this particular change happen. It actually seems to cross that bridge in the setting that we have been operating in, to bring the knowledge into where it is with the assistance of supervisors who navigate you through, so that you can actually change your practice on the ground and think about it. You are always bringing in new information and using it where you need it. I think all of the students would say that we have actually adopted that process in our everyday life. Quite a few people are starting to think more about that whole approach.

Dr Hodges—One of the hardest problems as a supervisor in Melbourne is not working with students on practical problems but dealing with the university bureaucracy. The leading researchers in universities get their kicks from doing research which is written into learned journals, but the people who are out there doing it have not got the time to read those kinds of things. We actually won the award in RMIT for the best supervisory team, but the top researchers tend to look down their noses at us because we are out mixing it with the people who are doing things. A lot of people see it as not real research because you are not producing enough papers which the department of education and science can tick off. We would say that, if the student who is doing the work on farm safety can reduce the deaths or the major injuries by 10 per cent, that is far better than having 50 journal articles written. So we have this internal battle where we are fighting the bureaucracy in order to try and meet the needs of the people in organisations not just in rural areas but in Melbourne as well. When you are dealing with people like manufacturing managers you have a problem over there. The university has a bit of a difficulty—academics have a problem with that because you are sordid.

CHAIR—I understand where you are coming from.

Ms McArthur—Professor Fiona Stanley in Western Australia had a lot of trouble bringing in new strategies to Aboriginal communities. Her findings were that, if you walk alongside people, you have a greater chance of bringing about change. If you listen to them and actually hear what their problems are, then you can be there to support them. Theory based learning is often so far removed from reality, and the problems that we face in a country community make that not practical. Often we do not have the time to actually go away and research and reapply the theories. We actually need hands-on practical problem-solving strategies, and that is what the masters was for us. It worked not only for us as individuals where we were doing our own research but also for the people we were working with. It also worked with the community that we live in. So it value added the whole way through.

CHAIR—We can relate to that. We spend 70 per cent of our time wading through that sort of nonsense to get a positive message from our constituents to our own ministers.

Mr FORREST—I am not sure I get it yet, but can I ask the question a different way. There is a quote in your submission from a student which talks about the experience of learning. It says:

In the future, capacity may depend upon continuing to build on what has been learned, rather than what has been taught.

I think I get that, but can you just help me a little. In other words, there is not a lecturer sitting there writing the formula on the board like my engineering degree, $e=mc^2$; it is about a process of learning how more subjective things interact. Have I got it?

Ms McArthur—It was not my quote.

Mr FORREST—I do not think it is a quote from any of you. It is from another student.

Ms McArthur—We are so used to traditional teaching practice where there is an authority out the front who says, ‘I know what it is that you need to learn.’ In the country that is not the case. In most situations, in this busy life that we live, this amazingly fast life, it is not the case. There is no one authority there for us. We each bring with us a whole new and different scenario that we are faced with. We are the people with the problem and we are also the people with the solution. All we need is the strategy and the support to be able to transform the problem into an opportunity. Am I making sense there?

Mr FORREST—Perhaps if you all have a go.

Dr Hodges—It does not say much for our experience.

Mr FORREST—You are talking about subjective outcomes.

Ms McArthur—No.

Dr Hodges—No, on the farm.

Mrs Lyons—No, we are talking about very practical solid knowledge. If I can give you an example: in the late eighties the department of primary industry had a research station in Hamilton and most of their research was done on very small paddocks and very small numbers.

The farmers looked at what was going on out there as totally removed from what we were doing—because what would they know if they only had six sheep and whatever. The DPI made a conscious decision to move their research projects out onto farms and run the trials with viable numbers of sheep, in our case. Therefore, that research became much more practical because they had to work in an ordinary farm situation. The research was then reported on and field days were held on neighbouring farms, so people thought, ‘He’s a pretty good farmer, I’ll go and see what they have been doing on his farm.’

The research became much more available for people. I think we have moved to the next stage and, when David was talking about action research, that is what is actually happening with our farmer groups now. We have TOPCROP groups. We have small groups of farmers who get together and say: ‘We are having trouble with such and such. How are we going to get around it? Let’s try this, this and this. Whose expertise could we call on? Right, we’ll get some funding to get somebody,’ and they identify who that person is, and the internet allows you to do that. He will come in and talk about what his research has brought up. We will put in three different crops with three different dressings and nurture them.

These boys nurture crops the way we, as mothers, used to nurture babies. They are learning, so that is not airy-fairy, mystical stuff. That is practical, solid, in-ground research showing you that under such and such conditions and with that sowing rate, you will solve that problem. Those groups then turn around and say to one another, ‘Well we’ve solved that problem but we’ve created another one.’ It might be that it is susceptible to some sort of insect or whatever. So that is the action learning idea. They are developing the skills of being very clear about what they are trying to do, being very clear about documenting what they are in fact doing, and being very clear in then reflecting on what has happened and why it has happened and whatever. They are very concrete, usable skills in both business and in life.

Dr Vistarini—Mr Chairman, could I add a simpler dimension perhaps. I grew up on a farm and my grandfather learnt a lot from his experience, and my father learnt skills from him, and I did not because I left the farm. Farmers have always used this action research methodology. They always learn from experience. What they have not been able to do is to add to the literature, the things that other people have been saying about occupational health and safety on farms, and there is a lot written about it. They have not been able to add the rigour. Students have David and Bill leaning on them all the time saying: ‘What do you mean? We don’t understand it. Say it more clearly. Have you read this?’ We are just adding the university to the work that people in the country have always done.

Ms McArthur—Also the support. One of the biggest difficulties with people attempting to change anything is that if you are doing it on your own it is a hard business and it is sometimes heartbreaking. If you actually look at what you are doing and reflect on it, and talk with a cluster group or a group of friends, and say, ‘This is what I am having difficulty with; can we problem solve a bit here?’ you create a witness side to yourself by saying, ‘Okay, that’s what I did wrong, I can try this.’ If we do not have that objective side to us, we get caught up in being subjective: ‘I’ve got to be seen to be right’. Small communities are very much like this, where you try and get it right because how you are perceived in the community carries on for five or six generations.

Dr Scholfield—I think this is where top down meets grassroots in a way. These small models of learning, like Landcare and BESTWOOL, have been going on for a long time, but this takes it to another level. It is about being responsible for your own learning in life, but with that outside, which you really cannot get when you are doing it alone. A lot of people talk about the answer for regional Australia being more distance learning, but learning has forever been a social experience. I think that has been the benefit of working like this.

Dr Vistarini—Students can find supervisors easily instead of having to drive to Melbourne to find a supervisor who may or may not be there. If you live in Warrnambool or Hamilton it is a bit hard to escape from your students, not that you would want to, but there is that close contact between supervisor and student, which is an important part of this program.

CHAIR—The problem that we have experienced with this process is that people are starting to get angry or antagonistic towards the imposition that is placed on them as a result of the downward pressure to comply with occupational health and safety, chemical use et cetera. This happens to the extent where they do not have time to read the information; they just need this practical side-by-side contribution that you are talking about.

We have also experienced a situation where, as a result of cost cutting measures by governments of all political persuasions in the agricultural area, we are losing some of what I call 'the simple skills' that have been learnt by traditional application. A classic example of this is the simple skill of professional doggers—people who go out and learn skills that override the cunning of animals that have learnt to adapt to the guiles of man and their trapping methods. We saw this in Western Australia and we have seen it in the high country, and that creates another agricultural problem.

The point that I am getting to is that the simple skills that we need to maintain are also being lost, apart from the skills that farmers have to be educated with to keep up with the technology that is enveloping them on their on-farm pursuits. The farmers themselves are the first people to step forward when you talk about the environment and what we need to do for the environment. They are very good at what they do. There are no people more committed to the environment than farmers, but some of them move away from the bureaucratic impositions that are placed on them from people at arms-length from their community, who read from books rather than experience the practical reality of what they are actually doing themselves.

We understand the problems that you have raised in relation to the particular exercise that your group has undertaken. What does government need to do in terms of its use of resources, keeping in mind what I alluded to before, and that is that some ministers of the Crown, unfortunately, well and truly fit into the *Yes, Minister* category. I see them as managing directors of large companies. Instead of checking their line managers to see whether the initiative that introduces programs—which are there in the best interests of the people that need those programs—are carried out professionally, they leave it to middle line advisers or people within their departments to tell them how well it is going. They are at arms-length from the people that should be the recipients of the programs anyway. What does government need to do, from your point of view, to overcome those sorts of problems?

Dr Hodges—Far be it for me to dictate what government should do, because it is such a very big area.

CHAIR—Why would you not be ready to dictate it?

Dr Hodges—Having said I am not going to do it, I am going to do it.

CHAIR—That is what we are here for. We want it warts and all.

Dr Hodges—There are a number of very simple things. Kaye has referred to how student places are organised in terms of funding. It is not beyond the realms of possibility that a certain number of places would be dedicated to the particular regional universities. The universities do not particularly like that. I would not think that RMIT would because they have their strategic plan, and whether it is connected with reality in the outer suburbs of Melbourne, let alone in regional areas, is another story altogether. A practical example: why should you go out to Hamilton, for example, because that is very expensive? We have to get a car for the day; you drive up there and come back. Despite all the talk about the need to get close to industry, the systems in universities are pointing in the other direction. For example, to go out and work with rural communities or even manufacturing plants in the western suburbs of Melbourne is actively discouraged.

As a consequence, the universities are sitting there in splendid isolation and they are not engaged with the people. They are not seeing the real beneficiaries: they like to use the word ‘customers’. They need to go out, like I suppose the representatives of the House need to go out, and talk to their constituents. You cannot just have people coming to the door. There is great mindset in the universities. The way in which these kinds of activities in universities are funded is a problem. It is much more expensive. I think that universities need to change. The regime that governs universities needs to change as well—that is, the department of education—which is another area. I think the government should be targeting particular university places into the small rural communities. It seems to me there is a great need in small regional centres of between 8,000 and 10,000 people.

CHAIR—This leads me to the next question, which is what government needs to do. In the last 48 hours we have just learnt that the technology colleges that the government is setting up around the countryside do not contain any reference to agriculture. You can rest assured we are taking that up. There has also been criticism of where they are being located. Unfortunately, governments of all political persuasions, with all the best intentions in the world, do not always place these facilities where they ought to be from a practical sense. They tend to have some of them located on the basis of political propping up of individual members. That is a problem. Do you have any comments to make about the direction of these technology colleges?

Ms McArthur—Can I go back to your previous question? Personally, I would like to see government acknowledge and recognise that we have been through a whole cycle of research. We have had one group of masters go through. We have an excellent framework that works. We have trialled it. We have seen the flow-on effect into our community, educational bodies and farming communities. It works, and we have a great group of supervisors who can support that. In this situation we desperately need funding to allow this to continue, to value add throughout the community, so that the next wave of students can also benefit from this, so our whole community can benefit from this.

Dr Scholfield—I think what that points to is that we sometimes look for the silver bullet that can solve the problems for all rural communities. In fact, we have the means and the knowledge to do things differently. The key issue is to be able to deliver education where people live—it really is. The centre down the road may be appropriate for some things but it is not going to solve all problems. As well as technical skills, it is also the thinking that goes into it and the knowledge. The technical colleges do not cover the university level. We talk about pathways between education, but we have not built that flexibility.

The first thing that I would say is that when we are looking at delivery of training, research extension and education in rural areas, we need that flexibility. We need to be able to target, as David said, the Commonwealth supported places regionally, so that we can use them flexibly. It may be that we need this cohort this year and another cohort next year. We cannot help that we have not got a large aggregation of numbers in any particular area to make something viable forever. We need to have that flexibility so we can put it a little bit this way. For example, in the future we will desperately need graduate diplomas in secondary teaching to keep schools open to give rural kids even basic education. We all know there is a looming shortage in that area, and perhaps we need to put some places towards that for a while. We can see that basic education will be an issue in a few years time. Maybe after that it will be something completely different. As well as that flexibility we need the ability to be able to offer a range of training. We do have the knowledge. As Sue said, we have trialled this model, and we have trialled other models which work in regional areas.

Mr FORREST—It is a good model. A couple of times in the submission you talk about scholarships. It does not say, but I imagine all of the research projects are supported through scholarships. Who has provided the funding for that—the industry group that benefits?

Dr Scholfield—No. The Commonwealth government trialled them, as I understand it.

Mr FORREST—Were they pilots?

Dr Scholfield—Yes, years ago. When we first started at the end of 2000 I think it was to try work based training and the by project model that we have done. That is right, Bill, isn't it?

Dr Vistarini—I think so.

CHAIR—Did you have any feedback on the outcomes of that? Did they follow up?

Dr Hodges—We have done a study. We did an evaluation approximately 12 months ago. It is perceived by some to be expensive. In my case, I was going to Hamilton and Albury as well. They perceive that as expensive. Also, there were the simple things that Kate referred to. They look down there and say: 'You have three students. There is a cohort and now we have to cut that off. We have to have 20 people.' Getting 20 people in a town of 10,000 is a completely different scenario to having 20 people in an urban area. The bean counters inside universities these days do not seem to recognise that there is a difference.

Mr FORREST—I go back to the scholarship. Would it have happened, and achieved the success rate, if it were not scholarship supported?

Dr Hodges—The scholarship only allows people to get in to start with. Obviously, the success depends on the student working hard, the project they are doing and the level of support they receive from the university in terms of supervisory services. If you are asking whether people would have continued if they did not have a scholarship, we have a few people here—

Dr Scholfield—No way would the farm have been able to support me to do a PhD. Not most, but several of the people who have completed it, are now representing their organisations or their industries on state boards and many other forums. It has actually created a cohort of very articulate people—not me, but others. It has brought about benefits for their industries.

CHAIR—You are saying that it would not have happened if you had not had the support? That is what John is looking for.

Dr Scholfield—No.

Mr FORREST—Would all of the participants in the Hamilton experience have had scholarships?

Dr Hodges—Not every one.

Dr Scholfield—In that paper I think it said there might have been two on part scholarship.

Dr Vistarini—The scholarship did not provide any living allowance; it just provided payment of fees. In some cases students were partially funded by their employers. For example, South West TAFE said that if teachers were to enrol they would pay a percentage of the fees. There has been some employer contribution in some cases, but in most cases it has been a free place.

Dr Hodges—Currently the university fees for a part-time place in a master of education—and master of education is a very broad term— is \$5,200 per year. You will appreciate that, if you are from a very small rural business or from a farm, another \$5,000 to come out of your income is a difficult challenge.

CHAIR—Presumably for three years, so three times five is \$15,000.

Dr Hodges—We try to get them working hard so they can do it in two to save money.

Mrs Lyons—For many of us, we were already working to pay for private school education or university education and accommodation for our children.

Dr Scholfield—I have two children at university and one at school, so certainly our farm would never have been able to support another one and my education would have just stopped. I feel that I have been able to continue to make a contribution, as have all my colleagues, simply because we could continue our professional education where we live and work.

Dr Hodges—Most of the people who come into it are not on the sunny side of 30. They would be people who obviously had some practical experience in the workplace and were wishing to improve their skills. In fact, I doubt whether people who have not had that practical experience would benefit as substantially as those people who had, because they can draw on the kinds of

experiences that you were talking about: 'We will try this and do that.' They are ready to be moved to the next level.

Dr Scholfield—If you take the average age of farmers and rural community dwellers, we are probably still young.

CHAIR—On that note I am conscious of the time. We have some younger people that want to talk to us, in an informal way, about their experiences as younger people.

Mr FORREST—Just looking over the title of the theses, is that what they are called? I have done a Master of Science degree.

Dr Hodges—Projects.

Mr FORREST—Sue is now the expert on 'how can changing teaching strategies engage, empower and encourage ownership in students' learning'. Is it correct that it is not so much the area of expertise but the process of research and the skills that you have learnt that is the most important outcome?

Ms McArthur—Yes, and for me, it was just mind bogglingly wonderful to learn to trust my own knowledge, and to be open enough to actually say, 'I do not know but I am willing to trial a few things and find out.' The flow-on effect for our students has been quite profound as well, because not only have we learnt action research and are willing to stop and learn new things but also we are giving our students the permission to say: 'What works for you? How would you do it? Just as it works with farmers, how would you solve this problem,' rather than telling them, 'This is the way you must do it,' and losing them altogether. We are engaging our students by saying: 'Okay, so what do we need in our community? How do you think you would run that? Would you like to put in a submission and actually set up that?' That gives our students a flow-on effect of engaging with their community, and with their own problem-solving skills. I do not think we can put a value on how important that is.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your contribution; it is appreciated. I hope I encouraged you to be up-front, warts and all, about concerns because that is what this committee is trying to achieve. We believe we get more positive evidence from people when they feel relaxed and speak their minds about things. If you do not speak your minds we do not know, and if we do not know we cannot put together a report that carries recommendations that are compelling indicators to the ministers of the day, and the government of the day, about the problem that is out there.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Forrest**):

That this committee authorises publication, including publication on the parliamentary database, of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Subcommittee adjourned at 2.25 pm