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STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND
FORESTRY

Reference: Rural skills training and research

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FORESTRY

Tuesday, 11 April 2006

Members: Mr Schultz (*Chair*), Mr Adams (*Deputy Chair*), Mr M. J. Ferguson, Mr M. D. Ferguson, Mr Forrest, Mr Lindsay, Mr G. M. O'Connor, Mr Secker, Mr Tuckey and Mr Windsor

Members in attendance: Mr Adams, Mr M. J. Ferguson, Mr Schulz, Mr Secker and Mr Windsor

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

1. The availability and adequacy of education and research services in the agriculture sector, including access to vocational training and pathways from vocational education and training to tertiary education and work.
2. The skills needs of agricultural industries in Australia, including the expertise and capacity of industries to specify the skills-sets required for training, and the extent to which vocational training meets the needs of rural industries.
3. The provision of extension and advisory services to agricultural industries, including links and coordination between education, research and extension.
4. The role of the Australian government in supporting education, research and advisory programs to support the viability and sustainability of Australian agriculture.

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Committee met at 8.59 am**WYLIE, Dr Peter Bruce, Representative, Horizon Rural Management**

CHAIR (Mr Schultz)—I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry for its inquiry into rural skills training and research. This is the 18th public hearing for this inquiry and it 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. 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.

Welcome, Dr Wylie. 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?

Dr Wylie—I can make some introductory remarks, if you wish. By introduction, I would say that the fundamental chicken and egg problem with rural training and rural skills is the connection between low profitability and management skills. We have a problem in agriculture where, according to ABARE surveys, more than 60 per cent of farmers do not make a profit and have not made a profit for the last five years. In fact, the percentage of farmers not making a profit is increasing. It will be substantially higher in the next couple of years when the effect of high oil prices and low commodity prices feeds through to farmers' bank accounts. So we have a problem with low profitability. I think farmers have been let down to some extent by the training industry in Australia in that they have not had access to good skills training in farm management and still do not have very good management training. This whole connection leads on then to farmers not seeing a need to access training and not being profitable enough to find time to have their employees have better training as well. There is a whole conundrum there in terms of this low profitability problem and basically a lack of motivation for training. Those are the major thoughts I want to mention in introduction.

CHAIR—Thank you, Dr Wylie. Your submission suggests a model of a skills passport. Could you expand on your suggested passport model and could you also explain to the committee the advantages and disadvantages of a skills passport?

Dr Wylie—I think the skills passport model is appropriate as far as agricultural workers are concerned whereby they might undertake basic training at an institution like, for instance, the Dalby Agricultural College in the town I come from, but they need to go on and have ongoing or more advanced training. A skills passport can provide them with those opportunities to add to their training on a slightly more formal basis than they would otherwise by doing in short courses or extra training on particular aspects on which they might need to upgrade their skills. I would include in that needing to go beyond the basic skills training which they gathered at some of these colleges, such as learning how to drive a tractor and doing some welding, to do some of the more involved or advanced training in aspects to do with management.

CHAIR—Would you see this skills passport as a national document or would you confine it to a state area?

Dr Wylie—Logically, if it could be done on a national basis it would be better because there is certainly a flow of farm workers across state borders in this country and it would help to have some sort of more standardised training and/or skills background. In other words, if a farmer is employing someone and he has a skills passport, that should be able to give the farmer better evidence of what that person can do or has done in the past.

Mr WINDSOR—Dr Wylie, you made the comment that there is relatively low profitability in agriculture. I do not want to put words in your mouth, but I think you were suggesting that it is looking pretty gloomy in terms of profitability down the track. Do you see training, though, just in relation to improving management skills? We heard yesterday about precision farming techniques, for instance, and how that has given some farmers, on the right soils, the capacity to develop a new margin, and that the training institutions were not really delivering that sort of training package as yet. Where do you see that gains can be made? Or do you see that, because of the cost of production and the way world agriculture is on a bit of a spiral downwards, management training can overcome that? How is that going to increase profitability in the global economy that we live in now?

Dr Wylie—To expand the gloomy prognosis for a moment, I did not mention that, despite the fact that more than 60 per cent of farmers are not making a profit, the top 20 per cent of farmers are still doing quite well. The better farmers that we work with have, on average, over the last five years, made a return on capital in excess of 10 per cent. This suggests that, despite the ordinary terms of trade, it is possible to make money out of farming. The conclusion from that is that one of the major differences between good farmers and bad farmers is management skills. The rider I would put on that is that it is more about attitudes than skills, that those farmers who are good managers have a better attitude towards management and in fact a better attitude towards keeping their knowledge up to date than does the average farmer. It is a whole mix of attitudes and skills and ongoing search for knowledge as much as it is a search for training.

Generally speaking, farmers are not looking for training. We talk to farmers. I have been involved in some surveys of farmers. You ask farmers about training and they say, 'Yes, training is good, but not for me, for someone else.' This is the basic problem in farming—farmers do not see a need for training; they see a need for solutions. This is where the whole mix of training, extension and technology becomes blurred. We have a massive industry out there in the GRDCs of this world that are providing millions of dollars of what I call 'titbits of technology' and in a way I think they are doing a fairly good job of keeping farmers up to date with aspects like precision farming, fertilisers and other things.

However, where we are not helping farmers is in things like labour management, marketing, succession planning and financial management. These are the areas which the GRDCs of this world, the tertiary institutions and the colleges are either ignoring or in which they are quite incompetent. Most of our institutions do not have the sort of background or skills to provide farmers with relevant training in this area. In fact there is only one agricultural college in Australia that has any credibility with farm management and that is a private college, Marcus Oldham. We have Queensland students who, if they are serious about doing farm management training, end up going to Victoria. We are letting down farmers right from the word go. We are

not training new farmers in management very well and the older farmers we are not training in management very much at all. That is the situation as I see it.

Mr WINDSOR—Yesterday we took evidence from the Queensland government and others and one of the subjects was the revamped arrangements in Queensland in the agricultural colleges. None of us are from Queensland so we are not that familiar with what the problem was, that they had to be amalgamated, and that there is hope that the new structure will be better than the old one. We are hearing in other states that the agricultural colleges are delivering. We are not hearing that here.

Dr Wylie—I do not know the full story of the agricultural colleges. The impression I have gained is that farmers have lost some confidence in the agricultural colleges; therefore, enrolments are down and the colleges are in trouble, and some are in financial trouble. Dalby College appointed a receiver-manager to try to get out of its financial problems.

Mr SECKER—Who did that?

Dr Wylie—I believe the Queensland government appointed a person who is, effectively, a receiver-manager. It comes back to the fact that they need to restore confidence in their product, and perhaps improve their product so that they can restore the confidence of the customer: the farmers who are going to send their sons or daughters to the colleges.

Mr WINDSOR—Would you classify Longreach in that fold as well?

Dr Wylie—That is why I say that I do not know the exact details of the whole college situation. I am only relatively familiar with the southern Queensland situation, which is basically Dalby. I cannot really comment on Longreach, Emerald or Burdekin as to whether the same crisis of confidence is there in terms of the product the colleges are producing.

Looking on as an observer, I think the colleges probably do a reasonably good job at a basic skills level, but I think there is a need for more than basic skills. There is a need for the ongoing updating of skills. There is a need for more management training, which those colleges are not really doing much about. There needs to be a career pathway, too, for farm managers—that is, young people who see themselves as either a self-employed farm manager, taking over from dad, or a farm manager employed by a corporate farm or a larger agribusiness farm. At the moment there is no real pathway or career, and a lot of people going into those jobs are heading off to do a university course, which is not necessarily the right course for them in that career pathway.

Mr WINDSOR—Are you familiar with the Cotton Basics training package?

Dr Wylie—Not intimately, but I am basically familiar with it.

Mr WINDSOR—We have positive vibes about the way in which it is client focused. It is a package structure that delivers the services the industry wants, and the industry itself has been part of putting together the course. We have heard a similar thing about the mining industry in Queensland in that the Mining Industry Skills Centre, which has taken over the development of packages for that specific industry, has been funded by the Queensland government. Would you

like to comment on the structure of those sorts of courses, and particularly on the client focus that seems to be coming through?

Dr Wylie—Client focus is certainly the essence of what is needed, but I think there is still a problem there: ask farmers what they want, and they more or less want everything in the trained person. They want the trained person to be a welder and a mechanic, a trained technician in almost everything, so I think they want the impossible in a labour person. They do not necessarily see a need for better understanding in areas such as management and labour management. Some employees move up the line into a foreman type role on the farm and they are not equipped for that role, because there is never any training at any sort of level in terms of staff management. I am not saying that there is no training but that there is not to any great extent. A lot of these things are not seen as relevant by farmers.

We are still talking about having fairly basic training; too much of the training, I think, is at a basic skills level. A lot of farmers say to me, 'We're happy to train people in the basics of how to drive the tractor and how to run the boom spray,' because they would rather train the workers in the way that they do things rather than retrain them after someone else has had a go.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—Dr Wylie, your submission is quite critical of farm leaders. For example, on page 2, at point 5, you state:

Farm leaders tend to focus on external factors affecting farm profit and excuse farmers for not managing drought and not making a profit. They do not provide any peer motivation to spend time on management.

Further on you state:

New initiatives are required, with commitment and peer acknowledgement by farm leaders.

Who are these farm leaders whom you are critical of in your submission?

Dr Wylie—I say that because one of the general problems is motivation and attitude towards training. Farmers say that training is fine, as long as it is someone else. Part of this problem is that there is no peer pressure in agriculture for training.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—Where should it be coming from? Who are the leaders you are critical of?

Dr Wylie—In some cases the leaders who stand up to be counted are the leaders who go into roles in groups like NFF, QFF, AgForce and the like. I do not want to single out a particular organisation.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—I understand that.

Dr Wylie—In general terms, without trying to be too rude to those organisations, their farmer members see their major role in life as trying to get more money out of Canberra. To do that they try to make excuses for farmers by saying: 'Isn't it bad down here on the land? Isn't it terrible with all these subsidies around the world and the decline in terms of trade? We need more help for farmers.' But the better farmers would probably say: 'Get on with it. We've got the

environment. We can make money. Let's forget about trying to get more money out of the government for this sort of problem. Let's just get on with it.' So I see it as a problem of lack of peer pressure for training. To a certain extent the leadership is pushed on by, dare I say it, the bottom rung of members who say, 'We want some more help from Canberra.'

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—Do you see an attitudinal problem more among the older farm managers rather than among younger ones?

Dr Wylie—Yes, there is possibly a difference. The younger farmers see themselves in terms of careers more as managers. The biggest problem with older farmers is that they do not see a need for change. They are doing the same thing they have done for the last 20 years.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—How do we go about achieving an attitudinal change? That is the only way we are going to get them to take up training, isn't it? The crux of the problem is attitude.

Dr Wylie—Yes. The main way to do that is to change some of the messages about training and say things like, 'Agriculture can be profitable if you put your mind to it. There are solutions out there.' We need to put the training in terms of solutions rather than training outcomes. This is one of the problems of the way we have gone down this track with FarmBis. We have said we want accredited training according to VET-accredited courses and that sort of thing. That is fine to some extent, but farmers do not want accreditation. They want solutions to problems.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—Thank you.

Mr SECKER—You mentioned a crisis in confidence in ag colleges. What do you think has caused that and how can we fix it?

Dr Wylie—All I am saying is that the evidence is there that the enrolments have gone down. As I understand it, they are about half what they were a few years ago. To me that says that the customer does not have the same confidence. There are farmers I work with whose sons seem to be going off to university or are doing other things rather than going to an agricultural college. I think agricultural colleges need to have a greater leadership role in agriculture. They need to be seen to be up there with the latest technology. They need to be advertising the fact that they are producing a good product. Perhaps, as we were talking about before with Mr Windsor, there needs to be more farmer involvement in the whole process. In other words, the customer needs to say more about what they want to get out of the process.

Mr SECKER—On a different matter, we have heard quite a bit of evidence about FarmBis. You have had a bit of experience with that; what would you see as the advantages and the disadvantages of FarmBis? Are there ways we can improve on it?

Dr Wylie—I think FarmBis in general is a good principle from the point of trying to encourage farmers and to take away one of the barriers to training, which is the cost. It is certainly not the biggest barrier to training but it can help, so FarmBis is generally a good program. It has tended to focus on accredited training, which is fine, but I understand that farmers are giving it a miss in droves. As I understand it, in Queensland it would probably take 20 years to spend the current three-year budget, so there is something wrong there.

Part of the problem is motivation, and attitude and/or outcomes. Training needs to be sold to farmers more in terms of solutions to problems rather than accredited training. That is an issue because we are almost encouraged not to do that as far as advertising programs are concerned. There is no support for farmers in terms of mentoring or coaching. We are not allowed to do that because it is not regarded as training.

Perhaps the biggest problem with training is that there is no component in FarmBis to help attract farmers and to help provide the motivation to organise farmers and encourage them into training. If FarmBis were to provide a component for getting farmers involved in training and a bit more at the other end, I think it would be a better program.

CHAIR—We have heard evidence from a number of organisations and individuals on their concerns about the way the bureaucratic process and requirements slow down the process, and that it is costly because of the time loss. What is your experience in developing, for example, an advanced diploma in rural business management? Have you gone through the critical process of bureaucratic nonsense, with reams and reams of paperwork? Do you have any views on that?

Dr Wylie—Certainly it has taken a lot of time, which means money for me in terms of aligning training to the VET standards and which is what I have done in looking at subjects related to an advanced diploma in rural business management. So it has taken time, but I guess I have got to the stage where it is certainly possible to roll things out on that basis. But, as I was saying, the farmers are not necessarily concerned about whether it is part of an advanced diploma in rural business management. They are interested in whether they have a succession planning problem and what the solutions are to it. If there is some other problem, they are interested in whether we provide the solution to it.

As far as red tape is concerned, there certainly is red tape and it could be freed up a lot. There are a lot of things for which I do not think everything has to be approved prior to beginning—you get a group workshop and someone does not turn up, and then someone else wants to turn up at the last moment but has not got approval to come. Those sorts of things are somewhat restrictive to making FarmBis training better.

CHAIR—Would it surprise you to know that, throughout this inquiry, we have heard evidence from agricultural colleges about making application for a specific course which has involved up to 1,000 pages of paperwork to get through the process? The criticism is that it is not only time consuming but also a very costly process.

Dr Wylie—It is. I have an advanced diploma in rural business management course in 1½ filing cabinets. It is probably 3,000 or 4,000 pages. That is mostly done in my spare time, but it probably would have cost thousands and thousands of dollars. One of the problems is that by the time you have finished it, it is out of date. The colleges have a worse situation in that by the time they have finished their program it is probably five years out of date. There is a bit of a problem with the development of courses and accredited programs.

CHAIR—It is a pretty frightening process when we are concerned about training people and getting into research and we have a process that takes so long to wade through for the people delivering the course to the extent, as you put it, that it becomes irrelevant after you have gone through the process.

Dr Wylie—It does and it also avoids the potential that is there in trying to bring in experts. Take succession planning, for instance. Last year I ran a program on succession planning. Rather than deliver the course that I have in my filing cabinet, I involved an expert, who is a lawyer from Brisbane or an accountant. We presented a day-long workshop and then followed up the course with appropriate material to discuss it. In the running of those sorts of programs, some of these courses should or could use more current expertise from outside, for want of a better word.

CHAIR—Or indeed from within the industry itself?

Dr Wylie—Exactly. That is what I am referring to. Another example is a marketing course. I ran into FarmBis problems with the guy who is presenting the more detailed marketing program. He is not an accredited trainer. Can we use him or not? It is all of this sort of thing. He is the expert on marketing and he does not want to be an accredited trainer. But we involved him in the marketing course that I ran over five half-days with farmers.

Mr ADAMS—You were talking about farming and where it is at. I am wondering whether the market will sort that out. Will inefficient farmers go out of business?

Dr Wylie—I guess it is happening. A lot of farmers in Australia are struggling on by off-farm income. Typically, the wife is a teacher or something.

Mr ADAMS—So what about the corporate farmers? Are they the future?

Dr Wylie—No, I do not think the corporate farmers are the future at all. The corporate farmers are less efficient than family farms. The most successful, profitable farms are the family farms, and that is still probably 80 per cent or 90 per cent. If we ignore the big pastoral industry in the Northern Territory or whatever, the big bulk of farming is still done on family farms.

Mr ADAMS—They make up the 20 per cent that turn over most of the income?

Dr Wylie—Yes. Generally, farming is not profitable enough for corporate farming in those situations. Land prices keep on rising to a point where farming remains unprofitable. There are only particular industries, such as cotton and extensive beef, where the corporates have really got a leg in.

Mr ADAMS—I find that the market does not work there. Somehow, land prices stay up. Even though you come before this committee and say that 80 per cent of profitability farming is dysfunctional, the market is still there and land is still worth X dollars. Is this a market failure? If the corner store is not making enough, it usually goes on the market; if a guy's fishing boat is not making enough, it will go broke. But land prices stay up. There must be something in the process. Do the banks keep the prices up because they are worried they are going to lose money?

Dr Wylie—I do not think so. I think there are two issues there. One is that farmers in general as businessmen are prepared to accept a lower return on capital than other businessmen.

Mr SECKER—They always have.

Dr Wylie—Yes. Beef farmers in particular at the moment are paying big prices for land and are lucky to be able to show a two per cent return on capital even though beef prices are relatively high. The second aspect is that a lot of farmers are actually investors in real estate rather than farmers. Over time, they make more money out of real estate than they do out of farming.

Mr ADAMS—Is that because they inherit a farm and there is not the normal business practice of operating and needing to get the return to pay off the mortgage?

Dr Wylie—That is true to some extent. But farmers can become very wealthy because of land price rises over their career.

Mr WINDSOR—I wish to go back and look at better farming land, the impact that no-till technology has had in terms of increasing productivity and some of the environmental positives that are there. A seminar held in Tamworth recently looked at the reasons why a lot of people have not adopted that technology even though there has been an increase in productivity for those who have. Given your training and experience, how would you have driven that agenda over the last 10 years so that more farmers would have adopted the technology?

Dr Wylie—As a little bit of background, I was one of the people who helped start the group called Conservation Farmers, which I believe you are hearing from or have a submission from. We started that group almost 20 years ago to try to get more farmer support. In other words, it was to get farmers to support other farmers in implementing what was a fairly difficult bit of new farming practice. The idea of that was to bring together information that we had from research with practical farmer experience and economics. Having put all three together, we then tried to run field days, programs and networks whereby farmers would support other farmers. If they wanted to get a new planter, they would go and talk to two or three other farmers to find out how their planters were working before they bought a planter. It was about that sort of thing. That is what we did with Conservation Farmers and I think that has helped over the years. But you never really get to the final 25 per cent of farmers with some of these things. They are not prepared to change traditions of farming that go back many years.

Mr WINDSOR—So the training has actually been delivered by peer groups, networks and neighbours, rather than by agricultural colleges and universities in terms of that productivity leap?

Dr Wylie—I think a lot of it was. That is not to say that there was not a lot of support. There was a lot of support from private agronomists in the first place. For instance, we had a lot of support from agronomists working for Monsanto, who held farmers' hands to get minimum tillage up and running. Then those farmers who had it up and running and had solved some of the problems helped pass it on to many other farmers. I think it is fair to say that is how a lot of it got going. It was many years later, for instance, that the agriculture college at Dalby decided that minimum tillage was right for it. It was probably one of the laggards in the adoption of it.

CHAIR—The committee has received evidence that there are locational, attitudinal, cultural and monetary barriers to the agricultural industry's attempt to attract labour. One suggestion has been that the industry should look to attracting labour from urban areas. What are your views on that proposal?

Dr Wylie—I am not sure that is really going to be terribly successful. I think that the further west you go, the trials and tribulations of living out in the bush are more likely to be handled by people who have been bred and brought up in the bush rather than by the people going there. I would say one of the major problems with labour is in fact the management of labour. We have on a lot of farms a fairly paternal, old and simple attitude towards labour by management. That has to change.

Farmers have to become very much more modern in outlook in the way they handle employees if they are going to survive. Retaining employees is the main thing, in the face of the much higher wages being paid by industry. We have gone down the track in our part of the world now. The mining industry have caught up with southern Queensland. They are building power stations and coalmines and offering people \$1,000 a week while farmers are only paying their workers \$700 a week. So farmers need to get a lot smarter in terms of keeping their labour. That is more important than trying to attract labour from the cities. The most important thing is to retain labour and not have it trot off to the coalmines.

CHAIR—What about migration as a viable option to address the skills shortage in agriculture? For example, we have heard that there are no training courses available in beekeeping and, as a result, the beekeeping industry is importing people from overseas to fill the gap. Do you think we should be looking at that as a model or should we be revisiting what we are offering to people in the way of training courses—which you have alluded to in your submission anyway?

Dr Wylie—I think that is right. I do not see too many situations where training is not on offer; the problem is that it is not taken up. There is the basic problem, as I have mentioned, that training in rural business management in this country is woefully deficient. But that is not a problem of importing it; it is a matter of improving it. In general enterprises like beef, wool, cotton and grain we are not short of skills. I do not think we need to import any skills in those areas. We just need to get better at skilling our workforce—our managers and farm workers.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Dr Wylie. We appreciate the time you have given to the inquiry this morning. It is very important for compiling information which will eventually end up in a report. We have a recommendation from government that we hear a broad cross-section of information and concerns from people such as you. Thank you very much for your time this morning. No doubt the contribution you have made will play a role in assisting us to put together what we are reasonably confident will be a comprehensive report with some very sound recommendations. Whether the sound recommendations are picked up by ministers of the Crown is, of course, another issue, but thank you for your time.

[9.39 am]

ALLEN, Mrs Wendy, Manager, Training and Corporate Partners, AgForce Queensland

CHAIR—Welcome. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I advise you that these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament and consequently warrant the same respect as proceedings of the parliament itself. It is customary to remind witnesses that the giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament. Would you like to make any opening remarks?

Mrs Allen—Yes, I do have a statement. Thank you for the opportunity of meeting with you this morning. I have a couple of pieces of information, which I gather you are interested in. The first is a small statement regarding the Every Family Needs a Farmer advertising campaign that AgForce has recently launched.

AgForce Queensland has developed the Every Family Needs a Farmer campaign to rebuild links between the city and the bush. The campaign highlights the positive aspects of Queensland agriculture to our urban population, many of whom no longer have any understanding of farming and farming practices. Agriculture in Queensland and the businesses that rely on it are coming under increasing pressure from various groups, such as the environmental and animal welfare lobbies, who are using their influence over the urban population and government to introduce increasing levels of counterproductive regulation. It is critical that the positive image of primary industries and farming practices is projected to the urban community in a bid to counteract the damage done by anti-farming groups.

There is also growing support amongst consumers for Australian produce, and this is a sentiment which Queensland farmers and the companies which produce their produce should capitalise on. AgForce engaged the services of an advertising agent to develop a state-wide television campaign as the first step in establishing a positive perception of Queensland farmers and farmers in general and to reinvigorate pride in the bush.

The key messages in the campaign are to reinforce the positive contribution of Queensland farmers in producing food, caring for the environment, caring for their livestock and utilising the latest technology. The story is being told through the activities of a real farming family, who are AgForce members, because families are what people in the bush and in the cities have in common. The core campaign is based on a targeted, state-wide television campaign, but the Every Family Needs a Farmer campaign also includes a range of PR and other targeted activities built around the central themes and messages within the television commercial.

The fundamental aims of the Every Family Needs a Farmer campaign are to strengthen and rebuild the connections between the city and the bush; promote a positive image of Queensland agriculture to urban and regional areas in relation to our environmental, animal welfare and economic credentials; to increase the visibility of rural Queensland to government and the broader community; and to instil a greater sense of pride amongst Queensland farmers and related businesses.

I would also like to introduce AgForce Training. AgForce Training is an arm of AgForce Queensland. Training and skills development have become increasingly important to us for effective, successful producers and sustainable enterprises. AgForce Queensland sees training as an extremely important component for primary producers. AgForce Training is a registered training organisation in its own right and sits within AgForce Queensland. The role of AgForce Training is to address primary producers' needs in ongoing learning and skills development so that producers have viable, sustainable businesses.

AgForce offers a range of training programs such as the Rural Safety Management program, Covey's *7 habits of highly effective people*, the ClimEd-Managing Climate Risk program, a chemical accreditation program, as well as a number of other programs. AgForce Queensland organises workshops and courses of interest for primary producers as well as putting producers in touch with other training courses and providers.

AgForce is currently working on a submission to conduct research into a number of aspects of training under the new Targeted Industry Initiative, or TII, funding within the FarmBis program. This will enable us to fully investigate training needs and demands and to identify the types and modes of training people are prepared to continue when there is no training subsidy. The research will look into the current demand for training and the availability to meet demand, as well as the price-point value questions surrounding training and the level of awareness of opportunities.

Marketing training programs and opportunities is assumed to be critical in the uptake of training, and the research will aim to identify the most appropriate type of marketing for different sectors of primary production and the differences in marketing approaches and their effectiveness. Following the research, AgForce will be looking for funding to enable us to implement the findings of the research to ensure an increase uptake of worthwhile, quality training within the primary industry sector.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—In your opening statement on Every Family Needs a Farmer, you referred to anti-farmer groups. Out of interest, who are these groups? In working out your advertising campaign, did you use focus groups and, if so, what attitude did their responses reveal?

Mrs Allen—Yes, our research did look at a number of aspects, particularly the animal welfare lobby groups. The media has been very much on the case of those groups and publicising them to the detriment of farmers. Obviously not all of the reporting is accurate—a lot of it is sensationalised—and it therefore hits the market for getting a go on TV news and various other programs.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—Across the focus group, did you find among the different ages a bigger negative reaction to anti-farmer group campaigns—younger people more concerned than older people?

Mrs Allen—No, not necessarily. It is interesting that, while the perception probably is that young people who may have been influenced in university or other aspects may be those negative people, it really was a good cross-section. A lot of younger people are seeing the benefits of farming through various types of activities. I think there is a huge lack of

understanding—that is probably the problem. Once you talk to people who have some anti-farming sentiment, talk them through the issues and question them on those issues, you realise that they do not understand and that is the problem. The issues are not being addressed properly through the media. As I said before, the sensational aspects are being portrayed and not what is happening in farming practices generally—not necessarily the correct information.

CHAIR—You would think we would have learnt from the very effective campaign in the 1980s and early 1990s of the environmental movement in the timber industry that we have to educate young people at secondary school level as to the advantages of agriculture and the true story about agriculture. More importantly, I suppose it is dependent upon the attitude of careers advisers in schools. Would you like to comment on careers advisers? We have heard evidence that would indicate to us that rather than agriculture being promoted in many of our schools, it is actually dumbed down.

Mrs Allen—It is not one single aspect this is going to make a difference. The ad campaign and associated activities is one campaign. There is a range of areas that we need to really look at and focus on. Within this campaign is a whole range of activities that are focused on the younger children as well. We have recently participated in Rural Discovery Day, which is part of Primary Industries Week in Queensland where a whole day is devoted to a number of industry commodity groups talking to children. They bus them into the RNA Showgrounds in Brisbane. They rotate the students and talk about particular commodities—bees, cotton, grain, beef, et cetera. We also have a huge industry promotion at the Brisbane Show, the Ekka, in August, which again goes towards that. We have the meeting centre, which promotes the industries that AgForce represents, as well as a food and fibre trail. Obviously, younger children need to learn about it at school.

We were instrumental in speaking with people in Canberra at a promotion of agriculture in schools. A loose group met last November to talk about all the things happening throughout Australia and to try to pull those together in some shape or form. Following on from that, we formed a loose group in Queensland for the same promotion of agriculture in schools. Out of that has come a number of issues. We held a meeting last week to look at forming that into a formal structure, so there is a promotion of agriculture in schools group in Queensland. How we are going to get the funding to run that group and the structure of that group are yet to be determined. Certainly I agree, from personal experience, that careers advisers are not necessarily up to date on what is happening in careers generally, not just in agriculture, and tend to be people who are past their use-by date in their teaching practices—that is a major generalisation, I know. So the obvious way to keep in touch and to still be in school is by being a careers adviser.

We have evidence that people have gone to their careers adviser seeking a role in agriculture and asking what they can do and being told, ‘Don’t go anywhere near it.’ That is a big concern. Also AgForce has a school to industry partnership person—only one person to cover the state. That person started with the schools to industry project, funded by Department of Education, Science and Training, through Rural Skills Australia. That was a two-year project which was to end at the end of the last financial year but it was extended to November.

We felt that was an essential ingredient in going some way towards the promotion of careers in agriculture. We have sought funding from some state organisations and the state government to continue that. We are hoping that will roll into the new Blueprint for the Bush, an initiative on

which AgForce has been working with the state government to enhance rural communities and get people back into the bush. That person goes to schools and talks to careers advisers and school teachers. Often it is the teachers, more than the careers advisers, who influence students because it is not until students say they want to have a career in agriculture that they get to see the careers adviser. It is to do with the influence of teachers within the classroom. Agriculture can be used across the whole broad spectrum of curriculum subjects—maths, science or what have you—and that is the whole push with a lot of that as well. But careers advisers certainly play a role in the promotion of university and the whole broad spectrum. A lot of people think agriculture means you either have to care for animals or dig in the dirt and grow crops. There is a whole spectrum of agricultural opportunities in science and analysis of data where you are not necessarily on the farm 24 hours a day. There is a whole range of career options that enhance farming that need to be publicised and promoted.

CHAIR—What about the issue of state governments withdrawing or cutting the funding of agricultural colleges? Are we not in a situation where the state governments themselves are contributing to the dumbing-down of agriculture by withdrawing funds? In the case of Queensland, I understand that the Queensland government is restructuring its agricultural colleges. What does that mean? What is involved in the restructuring? Does that mean we are going down another level on the ladder, as far as agriculture is concerned, as part of the restructuring process? Would you like to make some comments on that? In New South Wales, for example, the Isolated Children's Parents' Association has come to us with concerns about an ag college losing its funding. Knowing that there is a market there, they wanted to get advice from us on how, with the assistance of the federal government, they can continue to ensure that agricultural college continues to operate. These are examples of what we have heard in the inquiry. I would like you to comment on, firstly, the withdrawal of funding from agricultural colleges right around the country and, secondly, the restructuring of agricultural colleges by the Queensland government.

Mrs Allen—Queensland is probably in a better position than a lot of other states in terms of agricultural colleges. In New South Wales there is not an agricultural college that functions the same way as the Queensland colleges; a lot of them are delivering short courses. Agricultural colleges provide the ideal opportunity for hands-on skills development for younger people in the industry. If we do not have younger people entering the agricultural sector, there is basically not going to be one. We have to get better at delivering training opportunities to those young people. It is not just about selling the bush and selling agriculture; it is about giving them the opportunities and skills to be useful employees in the industry.

The Queensland government has not pulled or reduced the funding of agricultural colleges, but it definitely has restructured them. AgForce believes the restructuring is a good thing. It is basically designed to form one college, but all the campuses are still there. There has been a lot of movement of personnel within those colleges. At the moment, it is not functioning well. The restructure has been a very long and drawn-out process. Things really are not back to where they should be at this stage; that is my belief. However, I think the colleges have a really important role to play. They are the peak places for young people to go, but I do believe we need to look at the courses and how we deliver them. They need to have a much greater practical component in them. If there are five colleges delivering similar courses, why not have one area that deals with the compliance issues, finance et cetera and not duplicate the admin across five different campuses? It makes a lot of sense to pull it all together.

Each of those colleges, those centres of excellence, delivers quite unique training in terms of where they are situated. Dalby agricultural college is in a prime position for farming practices and those sorts of things. Longreach is more for beef cattle and wool. There is no farming there. The Burdekin college, the Australian College of Tropical Agriculture as it was, is ideal for tropical fruit and intensive farming. That is where the opportunity lies. I do not believe they have got it right and it really has to be bedded down in terms of moving to get the core structures organised and sell those courses to young people.

As you say, there is the dumbing-down factor. It is my belief that agricultural colleges were looked at as being for those who were slow at school or were really not interested in the academic side of it, so you left at year 10 to hoof off to agricultural college and you were right from there. That has to be overcome. I do not think that schools have the pastoral care facilities to do that. I think, given the fact that we now have school based traineeships, that if young people are interested in agriculture at school they should go on to year 12, doing their school based traineeships while they are in years 11 and 12, and then go to the agricultural college when they are more mature and are ready to learn about the intensive farming practices that are out there. They should be able to then get into the technology side and a whole range of things. Perhaps there should be a raising of the bar compared to what courses have delivered in the past.

There is a difference between doing the course, getting the tick and coming out of it and being competent and industry ready. That has been a big issue in Queensland. There has been a lot of discussion about overservicing and using a lot of training hours to get those students ready to be employed. To me that means there has to be a readjustment of their training course. Maybe they should have a year in the college, a year out as a practical component and then come back and finish it off. The industry needs people ready to be employed—useful young people who can actually go onto the farm, start working and be a useful component of the farm. Farmers do not have the time to be doing all the training on their farm. They are busy keeping their enterprises going and dealing with a whole range of other things such as the drought. I think having the young people industry ready will make a big difference.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—I got the impression yesterday that agricultural colleges are for kids who have finished year 12. Is that right?

Mrs Allen—It has not been so in the past.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—So I got the wrong impression yesterday. I refer, just out of interest, to the Canberra meeting last November that you referred to. Who initiated that and what has really come out of it? Obviously, you have done something in Queensland. What is happening nationally?

Mrs Allen—It was initiated by a group of people. Cameron Archer from the Tocal agricultural college headed it and drove it. It was a group of educators who felt the need to bring together people interested in the promotion of agriculture in schools. It was a loose association of people who had been brought together. The idea was to invite people you know who have an interest in it to come together and speak about it. It is very early days. That was in November. It was really about getting together and looking at it. The whole idea is that there is meant to be a one-stop shop. Maybe there will be a web site with all the information as to activities and, in particular, curriculum. There is a whole host of curriculum based agricultural activities out there but the

trouble is that everybody does not know that they are there. People are saying, 'We need more resources in the sheep and wool area to be delivered to schools.' There is already a lot out there but nobody really knows what is out there. The aim of this was to pull all those together so everybody could go to one place and know what resources were available.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—The reason I ask is that the previous presenter was quite critical of peak organisations, such as the National Farmers Federation, not really doing enough on these education issues to try to attract kids. What is your view on that?

Mrs Allen—The National Farmers Federation were involved. They were there and headed that group and welcomed people. AgForce—and I am not boasting—have been a leader in terms of training and education, because we feel very strongly that if we do not educate and train young people for the industry we will not have an industry in the future. We have been fairly strong on that. We have had a training arm within our organisation ever since it commenced. Other statewide organisations are only just doing that. As far as the National Farmers Federation are concerned, they certainly do have a role to play. But when it comes to implementation on the ground it comes down to the state based organisations.

CHAIR—Wouldn't the NFF be playing a very constructive role for its constituency if it undertook an exercise to find out the very thing that you have raised—where the funds are and what is being offered through those funds—and to come up with some suggestions as to coordinating it to the point where you do have a structured model and people know that they can go to that particular model to access funds or make inquiries about courses et cetera? I would have thought that would be a prime role for an agriculture based organisation such as the National Farmers Federation.

Mrs Allen—I certainly agree. I think what is happening is that they are lending support to this group that is now getting going, because they are the experts in the field. I think that is how they view that. Obviously, like any organisation has, they have only a certain number of staff and they would rather support—this is how it looks to me on the outside—this group of people who are the experts and have the passion. Passion drives lots of things, and if people are there with passion hopefully it will come off. I agree that the National Farmers Federation certainly needs to support not only statewide organisations but organisations on a national scale as well.

CHAIR—The point is that if they were truly orientated to be a 'national' farmers federation, they would not have their head office situated in a place like Canberra or Sydney, as most of these organisations have. That has been a criticism of mine for many years. My view is that those people should be out in rural areas. They should take their organisation out into rural areas and do the work from rural areas. That is the only reason why I asked the question. I would have thought they would be better placed to coordinate that sort of thing.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—I gave him the lead-in for that.

Mrs Allen—It is my personal view, not necessarily that of AgForce, that the reason why you sit in Canberra—AgForce has an office in Brisbane but we also have six regional offices around the state—is that you have to have ready access to the politicians that make the decisions so you can get in their ear.

Mr SECKER—Yes, you have got to go where the action is.

Mrs Allen—We certainly get out and about. We have people travelling throughout our state—and I can speak only on behalf of a statewide organisation. All the time there are numerous people out and about. I quite agree that it is essential that you be out there. If you are not out there with the people that you are representing, finding out the issues and what is happening, you have lost it.

CHAIR—It's good to know that somebody agrees with me.

Mr SECKER—We have had quite a bit of evidence about recognition of prior learning. Does AgForce get involved in that? We often hear the complaint that it is convoluted and there is a lot of paperwork and red tape. How are you finding it? How do you think we can improve on it?

Mrs Allen—Recognition of prior learning is a tricky one because you really have to have the evidence that people do have skills that you can recognise and tick off. We do it in only a small number of courses. We often team up with other providers. As a registered training organisation, we are different from probably every other registered training organisation in Australia in that we are there to meet the needs of farmers and if there is something that needs to be developed and it is not out there in the marketplace we will develop it. Otherwise, we are there to work with other training organisations to actually get the needs of farmers fulfilled.

I know there is a lot of discussion about whether training should be accredited and whether farmers are wanting pieces of paper. Sure, farmers do not necessarily want pieces of paper in terms of a qualification. But we are finding within the industry, given the struggle that a lot of producers have had with drought and economic conditions, that once farmers actually exit farming then those pieces of paper become quite valuable. Unfortunately, in this day and age you have to have pieces of paper to prove that you have the skills. So while it is an add-on, I think you need to look at the issue that they need to get the skills out of the training that they need. They need to have something that fulfils their need. To me, it is a bonus that they get the qualification. Obviously, some say, 'No, I do not really need it,' and some say, 'Yes, I do.' Some are also using it for off-farm work. They might be doing some consultancy work and that sort of thing off farm. I am a bit critical of people who say that training packages and accredited training are a lot of work and a lot of paperwork and that training packages are inflexible. I believe they are as flexible as you want to make them and if you do not make them inflexible that is your fault, not the training package's.

Mr SECKER—You mean 'you cannot make them flexible'.

Mrs Allen—They are flexible.

Mr SECKER—Yes, but I think you said that—

Mrs Allen—A lot of people are saying that they are not flexible, that they are inflexible. But it is up to you to make them flexible to fit your needs, rather than you fitting your needs to the training packages.

Mr SECKER—What do you think makes a good RTO? You are saying yours is the only one in Australia that responds directly to the needs. Do you think all RTOs should do that?

Mrs Allen—Definitely. What I mean is that we are very small. We are a tiny part of an organisation and basically one person runs that part of the organisation. It is responding to the needs: ‘Don’t develop a you-beaut course that you as training providers think is excellent when you actually haven’t asked the people you are wanting to market it to.’ They might identify the need and then develop the course, but if the course does not fit the people, it is not going to be taken up. The market is going to drive it. Sometimes people go along to the course because the marketing has been very good and it sounds terrific. They have spent quite a lot of money in getting to the course and they then do not get the outcomes which are going to make a difference to their bottom line. Unless that happens, the training is not worth while.

Mr SECKER—That has been one of the complaints we have had—that RTOs tend to cherry pick the things they can do rather than respond to what industry wants. Do you have a few experiences of that?

Mrs Allen—Definitely. I think the last round of FarmBis brought out an enormous number of training providers who are doing just what I said—going out to the bush because they could get some farming subsidy and they could bump up the dollars. In Queensland there was a huge number of training providers delivering training all around the bush. You could go to a training course every day of the week if you wanted to. Then there was a lull between the last FarmBis round and this FarmBis round, and now FarmBis is around again. The number of providers out there is not what it was before. To me, that says something about the dollars. In Queensland it got to an 85 per cent subsidy, so the producer was not paying a lot. I believe it should never have got to that. It should always have been the 50 per cent that it is now because unless you pay for the training you do not value it.

Mr ADAMS—Marcus Oldham College in Geelong stated in its submission to this committee:

... we have seen in Queensland one or two pastoral companies gain approval to operate as registered training organisations (RTO) and this has impacted on some agricultural colleges and resulted in declining student enrolments.

Have you any comment on that?

Mrs Allen—One of those was Stanbroke Pastoral Company, which no longer exists. Some bigger pastoral companies have seen the need to go down the RTO line just because they are remote. Their properties are a long way away from any training provider. They have a large number of young staff in jackeroos and jilleroos who come through and they felt by having an RTO under their own company structure to fulfil that need they would not have to send their staff long distances and have them away from the property. They are not really doing a lot. The Rural Industry Training and Extension right in Charters Towers does a huge amount of training in the beef industry in the Gulf area and in the far north-west of the state. So I think a lot of them are reverting to that model rather than doing it themselves. It is a lot of hard work being an RTO and being out there while complying with all the paperwork as well.

Mr ADAMS—You suggested to us that, if you did not have a compliance process of some rigour the idea of having programs and courses that nobody would get anything out of—we need

some rigour. The need for rigour in outcome is what it is about, is it not? You talked about client focus a minute ago. I want to get your views on the rigour needed for the outcomes of a course. When you go to a course, you get something out of it.

Mrs Allen—Definitely. Sorry, what was the first part of your question?

Mr ADAMS—There are a lot of courses but people need to get something out of a course.

Mrs Allen—If they do not get something out of a course, it is not worth while. We need to make sure that the course does have the structure that meets the need. It has to be a good situation so that they do get practical outcomes.

Mr ADAMS—There has to be somebody auditing to make sure—

Mrs Allen—There has to be someone monitoring the quality of training. Unless it is accredited, there is no other way of doing that. Accredited does not mean that it has to be a full qualification. It does not have to be a certificate in agriculture necessarily. It can be some competencies out of the packages and meeting those competencies. There is a whole flexibility to build into that course—the actual needs of those producers.

But having it under the national training framework creates a level of quality that has to be stuck to. There has been some shoddy training out there, and there still is. We have to have a way of doing it and the only way that I see is to comply under those national training packages—and it does not have to be a burden. I think it is a burden if you let it become a burden. Sure, you have to comply and you have to go through an audit process. As for the audit process, we need to make sure, particularly for people involved in rural training, that there is someone in that audit process who knows about rural training—and the Queensland Rural Industry Training Council has been that to date. As you probably know, the whole industry training advisory board structure has gone at a national level and it is now about to go at a state level. The Queensland Rural Industry Training Council are looking at how they can sustain it into the future, because they offer a lot more than just the audit process. The Queensland government is looking to take that under its umbrella and actually identify and prioritise training. I am not sure that is necessarily going to work. It may work in one way, but there is a whole range of other things that need to be guided in terms of rural training, and an independent body is the one that has to do it. It cannot be under government, for a whole host of reasons that I do not necessarily have time to go into.

CHAIR—I refer to the point that you have just raised. We have had evidence that the accreditation process is too bureaucratic and burdensome and that it is creating massive problems in terms of time frames and cost to get the accreditation to undertake the courses. So the point that you have raised is very relevant.

Mrs Allen—It really has to be an independent body and it really has to know something about rural training and whether it is fitting the need. It might look beautiful and glossy and have lovely resources that are printed so as to look nice, but the industry people that are independent of government will know whether that is really going to fit the need and really produce what the producers are looking for and help their bottom line or not. If we do not keep that body independent, it is going to be a sad day. And it really has to be quality training. As I said before,

an awful lot of trainers are out there delivering training that is not necessarily meeting the needs—and the producers are not going to know that it is not going to meet their needs until they have done the training. But then it is too late—the training organisation have already delivered the course and they have already got their money and they are happy, but, at the end of the day, the producers have not got the outcomes that they want. We really need to look at that.

Mr ADAMS—I really think that the student should get something out of the course as well and that the student, not just the producer or employer, should gain from it.

Mrs Allen—Sorry, when I am talking about producers I am talking about the people that are going to the courses, because it is our producers that are going to the courses. So the producer is the student.

Mr ADAMS—Okay, that is fine. So, whatever the student is there for, there should be an outcome.

Mrs Allen—Definitely.

Mr ADAMS—So somebody that leaves farming will have these skills with which they can go off and produce. We have noticed that as well in many other industries. You have people that have worked in an industry for 20 or 30 years, then the industry goes out of business because of globalisation and that person does not have any ticket to say, 'I've done this for 20 or 30 years.'

Mrs Allen—Which is why there is that recognition approach and why learning comes in for the producers that are out there. We have put an awful lot of producers through that RPL process to get advanced diplomas in rural business management, because they have been running their enterprise for a number of years and they have got the skills. It is interesting to note that it is an attitudinal thing as well. A lot of producers who leave the land say: 'I've got no skills. I've got no qualifications. I'm nothing'—and there is the depression and all the things that come into that. But, once they have done the RPL process and they have got an advanced diploma in rural business management, if they do, or even if they do not, exit the land, they feel they are worth while, as they have actually got some skills and are recognised because they have an advanced diploma.

Mr ADAMS—I remember the chairman saying that maybe the National Farmers Federation could play a bit more of a role in some of that by bringing its members in to focus on some of that stuff.

Mrs Allen—The difficulty with the RPL process is that it obviously does cost money and, particularly in times of drought and bad economic situations, obviously those things are not going to be done and taken up quite as readily as they are when things are a bit better.

Mr WINDSOR—What is your advice, in a few sentences, to this federal committee of inquiry into training and research?

CHAIR—Seriously, we need to know, warts and all. Contributions from people like you are very important to this committee, because what you tell us will go into our report and all of the recommendations will be centred on the information received from people like you. Some

people get a bit hesitant about telling us what we should be doing. This is a bipartisan committee, working together to try and get a positive outcome for research and training.

Mr WINDSOR—What do you want this committee to do for the Queensland farming community? What can we do to help you?

Mrs Allen—There has to be some continuation of funding for training. Obviously, the talk is that FarmBis will only go to the end of this round; it is a four-year round, which started last year. I do not believe that it ever should be higher than the 50 per cent, as I alluded to before.

Mr WINDSOR—Should the time horizon be longer than four years? Is the political cycle keeping hold of the pressure valve?

Mrs Allen—The different FarmBis programs have been of different lengths. This will probably be the longest one. I also think that funds have to be put into industry organisations and industry groups, not necessarily farm organisations, that can target the training to the particular need. I do agree that it has to be linked to accredited training. So it does not necessarily have to be—

CHAIR—What is the time frame for the funding itself? There has been a hell of lot of criticism about government funding being only short-term and the momentum that is gained is lost because everybody is concentrating on chasing the dollar to continue the program. Do you think that a 12-month training program is insufficient and that we should be looking at a three-, four- or five-year package of funding to make sure the programs get up and, more importantly, produce the outcome that the funding was originally designed to stimulate?

Mrs Allen—Definitely. It is not a one-year-fix-all; it has to be long term, whether that funding is to develop the program or to market it. A lot has to be done in marketing to producers as to what is in the programs, because FarmBis funding only subsidises the producer to go to the course; it does not fund the industry or the RTO to get out there and tell them what is in the program so that they can then assess whether that training program is for them or not. Unless they go to the course, they do not find out what is in it. So there is a gap there.

There has to be that marketing of training and funds put into the industry organisations to look at the need. I do not think anybody really knows what the needs are out there. We profess to know some of it; but we never know all of it. That is why we are embarking on this research project to look at what the best mode of delivery is. At the moment, most of it is delivered face to face, in a workshop or short course type capacity. Is that really the answer? And why aren't people taking up the training? We do not know for sure why they are not. Sometimes people say that it is the cost of the course. Is it the cost of the course? Or is it because they have to be away from their enterprise for a week or two days or whatever the course length may be? Maybe it is because they do not know what is in the course and whether it is going to meet their needs. That is why we felt the need to do some in-depth research on what is happening out there and what people really want. Do people value training? Do they look at training as something that you do when you have some spare time, or do they look at it as a core part of their enterprise in which they need to be continually improving their skills and their outlook on market access and a whole range of other things?

While we, as a farm organisation, think we know—and we probably have a lot better knowledge of this than many other people—I think we need to do a bit more on it. We are going to partner with an organisation to do that. But there is no funding. The TII funding in Queensland is \$1 million across all industry sectors. So there is not a lot there.

In terms of our getting to the schools, we have to do an awful lot on training. Maybe we have to look at whether career advisers need to be in schools. Should it be somebody who liaises with a whole range of schools and not just somebody who is sitting in a school—a careers adviser per school. Maybe it should be a careers adviser per industry or a number of them.

Our school-to-industry partnership person is doing a fantastic job across the state, but it is one lone person in however many schools we have across Queensland—and that is just a drop in the ocean. We would like to have eight or 10 of these people around Queensland. They are industry people. They can relate to industry. They bring farmers in if they need to bring them in. They cover a whole range of things. They bring universities together so that universities can speak to the school students. They are forming regional groups that have like-minded interests, that can come into the schools, that can advise the schools and that can get some agricultural practices happening within schools and in the curriculum. It all comes down to funding these people. We are hoping that the state government will take up some of our points with that project in the Blueprint for the Bush.

CHAIR—What is the time frame for your research and how long will it be before you put your information together and deliver the outcomes?

Mrs Allen—The TII funding round has actually not opened. It is just about to open in Queensland. After Easter there will be submissions. It is really only a 12-month funding program.

Mr SECKER—What is your involvement with the local community partnerships? There should be a whole heap of them in Queensland.

Mrs Allen—There is a whole heap of community partnerships. Our school-to-industry person actually works very closely with those community programs.

Mr SECKER—I needed to clarify that because you said there is only one person. So that one person works with all the local community partnerships?

Mrs Allen—She travels around the state. It is a huge job for one person.

Mr SECKER—It would be.

Mrs Allen—As I said, it is just a drop in the ocean. You need at least a dozen of them.

Mr WINDSOR—This is a little bit off the subject but I would be interested in your views. One of the speakers this morning, Peter Wiley, talked about 25 per cent of the farming community making money while the rest is not, about there being gloom and doom out there and about people selling themselves short even though they are really skilled. Related to that is the

fact that we export 80 per cent of what we produce to other markets, and there are all sorts of arguments about subsidies et cetera.

I note your advertising campaign is essentially aimed at non-agricultural people and environmentalists—greenies or whatever you want to call them—to try to educate them that we are all carers of the environment and doing great things. What is AgForce doing to change the focus in relation to renewable energy, rather than a focus on food that no-one wants to pay anybody for so the profitability is low, to one on using some of that product for home based energy sources? That would send a different message to the same market that it is environmentally friendly and that the carcinogenic levels are lower in terms of fine-particle emissions from cars. I am talking about the ethanols and biodiesels but also in relation to the sugar industry, the grains industry and those sorts of industries. What is AgForce doing in relation to that because, to be serious for a moment, the National Farmers Federation are doing absolutely nothing on that issue. So what is AgForce doing?

Mrs Allen—AgForce is very much involved in ethanol. It gets huge publicity here. We are very much behind the push for an ethanol plant in Dalby; we have been really pushing for that. We have our grains person driving around in a car that has been lent to us by Mitsubishi. It has 'ethanol' all over it as it is powered by ethanol. To send that message, he drives around the state in that. We are actually supporting and helping to host the international ethanol conference being held here in May, so we are very much behind publicising ethanol as much as we can. The ethanol car is really a great car. It has got great graphics on it and the ethanol story is all there. We actually launched that at our conference in Kingaroy last year and had huge media coverage of the very fact of what we were doing with all of that.

Mr WINDSOR—I am hearing that the Dalby plant people, for instance, are looking at downgrading the size of the original plant because the market out there is not big enough and there is not enough government policy driving the initiative.

Mrs Allen—I am probably not the best person to give you in-depth answers about all of that. Certainly there is a push by the state government as well, and you see the ethanol stickers and all those sorts of thing on all the government cars. In fact in terms of the actual logistics and what is happening there, I am probably not the best person to answer your questions on that.

Mr WINDSOR—In relation to sending that message, it is a very important message to urban communities because people in them do not have an Uncle Joe living in the country like such people used to have 30 or 40 years ago. So it is about sending a message that what the farming community does is worthwhile.

Mr ADAMS—Uncle Tony.

Mrs Allen—Certainly. Our ad campaign is one ad. This is an ongoing campaign; it is not a once-off. I think you have to get the perceptions out there first. Then you can really target some more specific initiatives and issues, like what you are talking about with the ethanol and those sorts of things. You are very correct in saying that years ago everybody in the city environment had some relation, friend, aunt, uncle or grandparent that lived in a country area somewhere, so they had some knowledge of what happens in the rural environment. That has been lost now, and an enormous number of people do not have that link or relationship at all. I think we have to get

the perception out there that farmers are not reapers and pillagers of the land and then we will need to go into some more specific issues. We will be looking at that.

The next lot of advertising will be radio advertising similar to what we have done on the television. We will run our ad again later on in the year. Next year we will be looking at the same messages, but with a different focus, to again tell the story. We would like all of Australia to do what we are doing in terms of the ad campaign. Obviously national farmers are the ones to drive that—I quite agree with you there. They have been looking at a media campaign to do the very thing that we are doing. I suppose we got impatient with that. Also they said that television was not the way to go. I think you have to get it into people's lounge rooms because, if it is in the paper, people have to read it but, if it is in their lounge room as a television ad, they see it whether they want to see it or not and subtly the messages sink in.

We have had evidence of that already. We have only run a five-week campaign so far. At Rural Discovery Day at the Ekka last week we had a poster of the end tag of the ad. The city children who came to it recognised it and said, 'We've seen that on TV.' We asked them what they knew about farmers, and they could just about recite word for word, 'Farmers are environmentalists; they are animal carers'—exactly what was on the ad. So it is getting through, and that is only from the initial bit. We were really excited about the fact that they recognised the television ad from the poster and then could actually tell us what it was about, not just that it had cute furry animals or whatever. The child at the end of the ad says, 'Farmers are environmentalists.' He trips on the word 'environmentalists' because it is a long word and he is only a young primary school student. They said it in nearly the same way as the child on the ad did. So they are obviously listening and the message is getting through, which is great feedback for us in the initial part of the campaign.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your contribution. It was a very enthusiastic contribution containing a significant amount of information that is very important from our point of view. Once again, I and, I know, my committee are overwhelmed by the spontaneous way in which people like you talk about your concerns about rural skills training and research in this country. I commend your organisation for what it is doing to try and assist agriculture in Queensland. Hopefully the flow-on effect of what you are doing will assist farmers and rural based industries in other states. Thank you for taking the time to come here today. We very much appreciate your contribution. As I have said before, the information that we have gleaned from you today through this inquiry process will go substantially towards what we believe will be a very constructive report. I say it again—it will contain recommendations which hopefully ministers of the Crown, who tend not to take up recommendations to the extent that they should, will pick up as far as rural skills training and research and this inquiry are concerned. Thank you very much for your contribution.

Proceedings suspended from 10.28 am to 10.43 am

JAMES, Mr John, Past President, Australasia-Pacific Extension Network

LEACH, Mr Greg, Member (ex Management Committee), Australasia-Pacific Extension Network

PRICE, Mr Neale Raymond, National President, Australasia-Pacific Extension Network

CHAIR—Do you have any comments to make on the capacity in which you appear?

Mr Leach—I was also on the management committee dealing with policy for extension.

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. 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 James—Firstly, I will explain that APEN is a professional organisation with about 550 members at the moment, mainly spread across Australia but also Asia and New Zealand. We have three main objectives: firstly, to encourage the professional development of our members; secondly, to encourage networking around the nation and abroad; and, thirdly, to represent our members. It was on that basis that we put in a submission to your inquiry. The main thrust of our submission is that we need better coordination of extension across the country. We feel that it is isolated at the moment within states and that there is not enough happening to have federal cohesion as such. We often talk about RD&E—as in research, development and extension—but the extension sometimes seems to lag behind the others. We are putting forward a case that we need strong extension cohesion across the country.

In the material we submitted to you we made reference to SELN, the State Extension Leaders Network, and that is now working very well. We have had three or four meetings where the state agency representatives for extension come together to at least talk about what we are doing in each of our states, but it is very much an operational level activity that we are involved in and we would be very pleased to see a more strategic activity occurring to bring together the work that has been done with extension.

Mr Leach—Following on from what John said, the APEN organisation has been functioning now for over 10 years as a representative networking organisation. Emerging through these times there has been quite a need for some representation and some work with extension policy on a national scale, because it seems quite problematic that there is limited coordination and collaboration among state and federal quarters in extension policy in Australia. Some of the meetings of note that we have had on that include a gathering in 2003 and a National Extension Policy Forum in 2004, which was looking specifically at the extension policy needs in Australia. From the 2004 event and succeeding that, there has been some effort put towards developing a national extension framework for Australia. This is coming from the practitioner standpoint,

because practitioners are finding that they require a formal framework in which to lodge themselves and find legitimacy for their operations on a national scale.

In the submission you will see that a draft national extension framework has been proposed. The message that I am bringing here today is that there is a lot of enthusiasm and need for that, but we require greater collaboration with the Australian government and between state governments and the Australian government for developing this framework and also some greater collaboration with the private sector to do that. At this stage it is a great concept and principle, but we require some leadership to make it happen.

Mr Price—I have been president of the organisation since November last year. It is a voluntary organisation. We rely on membership subscriptions and income from a conference every two years and an international conference every four years. I have a background in research and in training and I have worked for a couple of rural research and development corporations. I am now a consultant, and one of the reasons I took on the role with APEN was to try and drive greater collaboration and linkage between education and extension. I personally believe that the education sector has failed agriculture, and extension is a key part in bringing the information from research together to get change on the ground, which is what we are trying to achieve, and to be able to engage with the people on the ground. Our organisation is growing very much in the NRM area, so we are not purely scientifically or technically based. We cover the full spectrum, with a great interest in moving forward with regard to rural and regional communities and trying to build a stronger and more robust set of communities through greater professional development for our members.

CHAIR—Given those comments, I encourage you to be open and frank with the committee in relation to any criticisms or other remarks that you may feel appropriate to address the problems of rural skills training and research. It is very important from our point of view, and I say that at the outset because the evidence we have received so far has been excellent and people are sometimes a bit reticent about expressing very valid points about the failings of the system. So I encourage you to do so today. As I have said to other people, give it to us warts and all.

Mr WINDSOR—In your submission, you say:

A key issue ... is that political, funding and infrastructural support for leadership and coordination within the increasingly diverse extension system is lacking in Australia.

That is a fairly heavy comment. Given that this is a federal inquiry, what is your network doing and what should we be doing to overcome the particular problem that you have highlighted there?

Mr Leach—APEN came together initially as a networking coordination type facility for professional development needs, but increasingly we have seen the need to have some leadership and coordination more nationally and within states for extension as a policy instrument and as a delivery function. As a network, we have tried to have some national forums and processes to do that. We have come up with a draft framework, and what we require now is some engagement with and support from DAFF.

Mr WINDSOR—Just for the *Hansard* record, to put it on the public record, can we have a little bit of a summary of that draft framework?

Mr Leach—Okay. The draft framework is available on a website. I can give that to you later. A number of different segments make up the framework at this point. The framework that was agreed at the 2004 forum and that has been progressed since then has the following components. Firstly, there is a look at why we need an extension framework and what is in it—so that is more instructional. Also, there is a look at the extension infrastructure that exists or does not exist in Australia. There are some principles about what extension is and is not in today's environment. The State Extension Leaders Network has developed a paper that goes some way toward some work on what the principles are for extension.

Leading on from that, the next section is about the values of extension, who is involved in working with extension practitioners and what their value systems are. The next part is about professional support, in terms of fostering the discipline and the profession, which is quite lacking in a coordinated sense across Australia. The next section, about the value proposition of the extension policy instrument, is very important. That is about what it is worth to invest in extension—what the outcomes are and what is achieved by investing in extension. In today's environment, there is a glaring need for some further work in identifying some of the value propositions of investing in extension, alongside science, research and other capacities of working with rural and regional Australia.

The next section of the framework is about roles and responsibilities, given the fact that state government is still the biggest investor in extension delivery throughout Australia but that is changing. What are the roles and responsibilities of different practitioners across Australia? What is the private sector role in delivering extension? What is the state sector role? Where is the market failure zone? Where is the public good zone? Who is delivering in those respective areas?

The next section is about funding and who is funding extension. It has traditionally been funded by state governments, with increasing contributions from the Australian government and increasing contributions from the private sector, but how is this funding mix working?

The second-last section is about choosing the right instrument. It is about putting the extension policy instrument against a whole number of other policy instruments that are available for influencing and facilitating change in rural and regional Australia. Extension has a role within that both in its own right and as a facilitator of other instruments. The last section that we had in the extension framework was about continuous improvement, in terms of monitoring and evaluation of extension's role in the change environment.

That is a summary of the framework that was proposed and has been further worked on since 2004, but at the moment it rests as a framework that is required by a voluntary organisation. It requires some funding and leadership to bring it forward.

Mr James—Putting it simply, a national extension framework for Australia will give us a coordinated approach to extension across the country. So, instead of each of the states and territories sometimes reinventing the wheel, it will be a coordinated approach. We are not saying that it has to be a regimented, uniform approach, but at least let us have an integrated approach

to it across the country. That will obviously benefit the farmers and those involved in NRM activities. It will also involve those working for agencies and other employers. It just means that we are all singing from the same hymn sheet.

Mr WINDSOR—I will just quote an example. You may or may not be able to comment on it—I am not aware of your particular backgrounds. Probably the most significant change in cropping agriculture in the last 20 years has been a movement to conservation tillage practices. That has been accepted in different areas at different rates. The extension services have played a role there which—in my professional view, anyway—has varied depending on the area, the soil and the state. If that framework had been in place 20 years ago, what would have happened differently to what has happened now, where we have virtually developed a system of conservation farming based on the farmers doing most of the legwork themselves, backed up by some agriculture departments and interested creatures along the way? What difference would that framework have made in the adoption of those basic principles?

Mr Price—Personally, I would question some of your premises—and the next people making presentations are probably going to be better suited to do that because of where they have come from. Conservation farming and any other new technology practices are no different. It just happens that conservation farming has taken a while to roll out. In the agricultural sector, as with anywhere, you have people who are early adopters and people out there who will do things early. But, traditionally, for anyone in the agricultural sector to change, they need to have a reason to change. Predominantly, the reason has been more money.

Mr ADAMS—Usually a good reason!

Mr Price—Technologists going forward trying to sell something are trying to sell the technology. Instead of beginning with the end in mind, you have to structure something to meet the end requirement. The farmers want a better life, whether that means being able to send their kids to uni, being able to pass something on to the next generation, making more money or whatever, and it is in the selling. The selling is part of that extension program. You have to be able to structure things in such a way that the end user market wants to buy what you are trying to sell it. Sometimes, in the past, extension has basically been science push and not market pull.

By having a national framework in place, you have the ability to get everyone together and say: ‘Okay, we want to move to conservation farming for a whole lot of reasons. How can we sell this to our different farmer groups?’ And the sell is going to be totally different between, say, the grains industry and the sugar industry. There was a conference down here at Gatton probably about six months ago. There were 30 or 40 people from the sugar industry who actually went to look at conservation farming. Everyone says that people in the sugar industry are rapists and pillagers and that they are the ones who are killing the reef, but I know for a fact that there are a considerable number of groups in the sugar industry now doing conservation farming because of going to that conference. People have worked with them to take what was learnt from the grains industry to use in the sugar industry.

By having a national framework in place and people across state borders and across industries talking to each other, you will look at the basic methodology being able to tweak to take stuff that has happened in the grains industry into sugar, or stuff that has happened in the cotton industry into the cattle industry. Instead of starting from scratch in one industry and moving

forward, you have that communication, talking to each other and learning from the others, rather than, say, the GRDC spending a heap of money and HAL spending a heap of money and MLA spending a heap of money to come up with basically the same answer.

Mr Leach—It is better coordination between those RDCs and with state government and regional bodies—CMAs in the natural resource management sector. You would still have professionals working with very much the same people but having a much more unified and coordinated message, I guess. In response to your question: having been a soil conservation guy for quite a while, I know that if I had had such a framework 20 years ago I would have had much more ability to work with the private sector guys who were working in Central Queensland where I was working, rather than just working as one state government person. That would have been the reality of it for me.

Mr WINDSOR—I am a little bit interested in that, because personally I think that one of the main drivers that occurred was not so much the availability of the technology. I think the technology was there, but a lot of it—I am generalising here—was driven by the price reduction in one chemical, Roundup, in some areas; not in other areas. But, as soon as that price factor was taken out, the economics suddenly changed and the take-up rate exploded, even though the technology had probably been there for 10 years prior to the explosion.

Unless you want to comment on that, I have one other question. With the change that has occurred in the last 20 years from essentially state government departmental extension work for the farming community, where that has been weaned back to a certain degree and professional extension officers are virtually taking their place, can you comment on the acceptance by the client base of that change? Or do I get the same answer—because I guess there are some similarities in the question?

Mr Leach—I guess there is somewhat of a divide in terms of the public-good areas and the private-good areas. The private-good areas—and maybe John and Neale can comment better—I think are increasingly well catered for. I think the public-good areas, particularly the natural resource management extension delivery, are in somewhat of a crisis state in terms of the lack of surety of the Commonwealth funding through NAP and NHT2 for the regional bodies, for CMAs. So that creates a fair deal of uncertainty about extension delivery for that public-good, NRM area, and I would say that that is a big market failure area. Unless there is some more surety and some organisation in terms of the CMA regional bodies into the future, extension for natural resource management is going to be in a bit of a heap.

Mr Price—I think that during those same 20 years there has been a change in the definition of extension. I will preface that with the fact that I have never been an extension officer and I have never worked for a state department. I have seen extension from outside as basically, traditionally, ‘We do it to you,’ ‘We do it for you,’ to ‘We do it with you,’ and it has traditionally been either one on one or in small groups. The rise of the private sector has seen a more holistic approach to the way people do business.

I will give an example from overseas in another industry: a certain country developed genetics in the pork industry to such a stage where the sows could not look after the number of piglets they were producing. Technology had driven down one way, and there was not a holistic approach, looking at the lifestyle, the landscapes and the livelihoods of everyone. An extension,

obviously, that may have had a small area of expertise now needs a broader area of expertise or more people involved to be able to work with people across their whole business rather than just driving one particular bit of technology without taking into account the impact on—

Mr WINDSOR—What about the criticism that often arises, where people would say the private sector providing advice to the farming community is not necessarily neutral advice if they are working for a particular chemical company or industry agency?

Mr Price—I will quote what I quote to farmers: if you go to your local GP, you tell him a whole heap of your symptoms and he tells you a certain answer, if you are not happy with that answer you go somewhere else and look for information. They know that, if they are dealing with an agronomist from, say, Elders, Landmark, Simplot or wherever, they are going to give biased advice. As a business person running a business, they need to take that advice on board, filter it and work out what is best for them. They make a decision on which commercial people they deal with.

I would argue that, in certain cases, state government extension officers also were providing biased advice based on the fact that they had been taught certain things and they may not necessarily have been up to date with other things. So it is up to a farmer as a businessperson to filter all that advice and work out what decisions they are going to make on a business basis. A lot of them are very good at filtering out the stuff that does not apply to them and the stuff that they know will not work. The majority of farmers have far greater skills between their ears for what they are doing on their property and in their region than they are given credit for.

ACTING CHAIR (Mr Adams)—On the issue of the public good versus the private good, how much do you think there is overlap in working on getting the right direction? Take the natural resource management issue: are we getting a focus on what is the public good versus what is the private good, or are there some issues that we are not getting right in the system we are presently using?

Mr Leach—I work for a state agency in natural resource management—

Mr WINDSOR—You do now, or you did?

Mr Leach—I do now. I think, from a state agency standpoint, we have not identified well enough the role of extension in the market failure and public good domain. There has been a gross shift in the role of extension from the state agency to the regional bodies without, I believe, a great deal of coordination and thought about the coherency and continuity of that effort. With the shift from state agency to regional bodies, there has been a concurrent loss by the agency of institutional capital in terms of the capacities of rural people to work with natural resource management issues. There is an issue of lost capacity.

One of the real big issues in terms of the ability of the regional body to deal with the public good area is their inability, because they have very limited funding, to attract the professionals who have longer term relationships in these areas and credibility and standing. They are more able to attract the short-term employees. There seems to be a fair deal of institutional churn and roll-over and that has a fair impact on meeting the public good issues. From my agency's standpoint we have a few challenges ahead of us in meeting that public good area in terms of

extension and non-coercive change support. We are pretty sharp and we are getting sharper in terms of regulation, legislation and compliance but we still have quite a gulf to address in terms of the non-coercive support.

ACTING CHAIR—What do you think of Neale's point of view? Do you accept that extension officers probably played a pretty good role up until the changes started to take place? Neale was pretty critical of them I think, but extension seemed to have got farming in Australia to where it was. Maybe we needed to change. We are getting a holistic view now but there seem to be a lot of holes. It seems that some groups get good information—those who can buy it and those who have the business skills to work through it—and a lot of others do not, and they are the ones who seem to be falling down. I would be interested in your views on how we can get people upskilled into that area or do you think we are going to lose that percentage of rural practitioners?

Mr Price—Our group has a database of 550 extension professionals from around Australia from across all industries and across all disciplines and those people are able to work together and get access to the information. If an extension officer goes to Bill Smith's property, he can answer certain questions within his skill set and he is able to go back to a database and know that Joe and Fred have worked on other things. They are far better skilled and professionally developed to get access to that other information.

ACTING CHAIR—Is he going to give that information? We are operating in a market here, aren't we? Why is he going to give you that information? Why is that information going to be available free?

Mr Price—Because it is about building a relationship. The majority of people on the land rely on relationships. If you have a look at a whole lot of statistics, most of the information that farmers get they get from other farmers and people they believe—

ACTING CHAIR—That is how the old extension system worked. In the field days people talked to each other. That is where farming got to in Australia using the old state government extension services. That was how information was passed on. That is how it got around. What has changed?

Mr Price—The fact that those services are not there.

ACTING CHAIR—And there are these other extension officers, for want of another word, there operating. There are a lot of gaps in this. You have people with money buying it from the private sector, you have people trying to save the world and all the species and you have people saying that this is in the public interest but nobody has any money to say we are going to help these people. They are saying, 'You have to keep this,' or, 'You cannot do this with that.' There seems to be a lot of gaps here in advice and information that does not seem to be working.

Mr WINDSOR—Part 6 of your framework actually revolves around this very issue—the value you put on extension. I think a very important area is how you actually deliver that, and it is not just about the monetary value that occurs at the point of delivery. There are a whole range of things there, aren't there? There is trust and how you value that and there are long-term benefits in terms of sustainability or whatever the issue is. And we do not value that.

ACTING CHAIR—And ethical issues. There is a person's ethics in delivering advice. Would you agree with that?

Mr Leach—Yes. Historically there have been quite a few limitations in terms of extension disciplines and the ability to communicate back what some of the value has been in investing in extension. That is what we are trying to identify here as being a big gap that needs to be worked on pretty pronto. It needs to be worked on now.

That was one of the propositions that was put in here and why it was put in here. A national framework really needs to identify and work with that. This is not about being self-serving but about saying that this policy instrument achieves this outcome for this investment and this is what it can do. There has been work done by some professionals around Australia, but it is minimal and patchy. We need to bring that together.

Mr ADAMS—Maybe we have not defined all the goals that we want to achieve. Maybe there needs to be better goal setting. What are we trying to achieve here and where are we trying to go in different communities? I have seen some pretty bad decisions being made and people going in the wrong direction, ending up with some pretty disgruntled people.

Mr James—I would strongly agree with you and I believe that extension is the glue that holds the system together and that we need to be looking at a higher order objective. Instead of just breeding better varieties or better animals for a particular purpose, we need to look at what we are trying to do so that we get greater impact from the work that we are doing. Recently the SELN group coordinated a meeting in Sydney with the various representatives from the research and development corporations—the extension managers or communications managers—and we put forward the proposal to them that we need to design projects for a better impact. That focuses around the extension so that we are looking at what changes we want and then at what research and development needs to be done in collaboration with extension. Instead of just saying, 'Here's a new widget that we can invent,' and then, 'What do we do with it?' let's work out what we want, start with the end in mind and work back from that. That is all about national coordination.

Mr Price—I think you will also find that there is no longer the huge divide between public sector and private sector extension. There are numerous times when there is a great deal of collaboration and information sharing happening around Australia.

Mr ADAMS—Do you think we have lost some of this, though—that over the last 20 years maybe we have lost some of that information that we should have recorded?

Mr James—I believe it is a more fragmented system now, especially where you have national, state and now regional bodies. If you look at the regional bodies, there does not seem to be a lot of coordination, networking or sharing of information going on between each of those within each state, let alone across the country. So we are not learning from our mistakes and what we can do better. We are reinventing the wheel many times over.

Mr SECKER—I hark back to a court case probably 25 years ago where the extension officers of the South Australian department of ag were sued successfully over advice they were giving about yarloop clover producing infertility in sheep and so on. I think I am right in saying that the

response from the state government as a result of that was to cut back on extension services and also to be wary about giving advice. I have to say, personally, as a farmer, I do not think I have used an extension officer for over 20 years, whereas at one stage you used to be able to get them one on one. I am not sure that was very efficient, because a small band of farmers used them but probably 90 per cent did not, whereas now I think we have a more efficient and successful set-up where they get involved with RIRDC and various farmers groups and have field days. I know you are all about networking and getting the ideas all across Australia, but do you see that as a positive change or do you lament the loss of the old one-to-one way?

Mr Price—I see that as a great positive change, because people in PIRSA, people in Rural Solutions SA and private consultants in South Australia are all members of our organisation. They actually talk to each other. There was a conference with almost 300 people at it held less than a month ago from all around Australia across a lot of industries. They shared knowledge across industries and they are not caught in their own little niches anymore. You have people from the Northern Territory talking to people from WA who are talking to people from Tassie about the problems. The problems are very similar across a lot of industries, so those significant changes I think have been a huge positive in a lot of areas. What we are looking at is how you can take those learnings and those lessons across state borders more formally and try and develop a less layered type of system, as John was just talking about, and come up with something more cohesive and common so that you can encourage that collaboration and communication across all industries and all areas.

Mr SECKER—I think that is a great goal. How do you think we as a federal committee can help to achieve that goal? You are doing your talking and networking, but you have also given the advice that even in regions in states, let alone between states, you still do not have a lot of cohesion. But there is a lot of work going on positively between those groups. How do you think we as a federal government can help you achieve this laudable goal?

Mr Price—As mentioned earlier, we talk about RD&E. My understanding is that AFFA puts a lot of money into RDCs—I think the figure quoted is \$450 million a year across all those RDCs. That goes part of the way down the D, and traditionally the rest of the D and the E have been looked after by the states. That is not happening now, so there is a disconnect there. Also, my understanding is that DEST puts a significant amount of money into rural skills training through the VET sector, which from my background is not necessarily connected to the extension sector. The preference for most farmers seems to be to use extension type people who are willing to work with them locally, on the ground in their backyard, as opposed to going in to get a cert IV or a diploma through the traditional formal education system.

If the federal government is interested in the end point being a greater, more robust and sustainable industry, I think there needs to be a level of redirection of funding to try and get a number of those people talking to each other and working together so that there is collaboration and learning from those other organisations to support those organisations. We are one of those organisations to carry that forward because we do not have that state-centric background. We are a national body. We represent people across that sphere. We represent both the technical primary industry side and the NRM side, and we have the ability to work together.

Mr SECKER—You would have a substantial number of members who have dealt with FarmBis, for example. We have had quite a bit of evidence to say there are real problems

between states, it is treated differently in one state and another and some achieve things and some do not really achieve things. Have you as a group come up with some recommendations on what we can do to make FarmBis better?

Mr Price—This is not on behalf of APEN; this is from my experience. I have worked for the organisation in Queensland that administers FarmBis mark 1 and I have had experience of trying to use it across every state through another program. En masse, I believe it has achieved next to nothing.

Mr SECKER—That is a pretty bold statement—and we want to hear that.

Mr Price—From my point of view, the fact that there was a particular course that got between a 25 per cent and 90 per cent subsidy across the board was absolutely ludicrous. People did training for the sake of doing training, because they thought they would get something for nothing. There was little or no follow-up because, with the ability to get FarmBis, a lot of consultants jumped into areas and left. The glory of having people on the ground is that you have follow-up, that there is a relationship created between the person wanting to learn and the instructor. For my personal perspective, I believe that offering taxation incentives for farming and going back to the training guarantee levy or something like that would be a far better way of spending money than necessarily providing that level of support through FarmBis.

Mr SECKER—So you would not even agree with the idea that they should all be 50 per cent; you think there should be a drastic change to the whole education process?

Mr Price—Personally—not speaking for APEN—yes, that is what I believe.

Mr SECKER—Thank you.

Mr James—Patrick, if I may go back to your previous question. In my opinion, if there was one thing that you could change that would make the greatest difference it would be with the R&D corporations. You would change them to RD&E corporations and make them responsible for the extension component. They do not necessarily have to do it, but they need to ensure that it is done—they can delegate it. At the moment it seems that the R&D corporations resent the extension component—

Mr SECKER—Really?

Mr James—and would much prefer to have dollars invested in the research, not actually having change on the ground as a result of that research.

Mr SECKER—Pointy heads in white coats rather than actually getting the information out to the farming community?

Mr James—That is right. There is a lot more that can be done than just producing a research report and putting it out on a website and saying: ‘See the great research we did? This is now the development of it.’

Mr SECKER—I agree with you. In fact the best information dissemination I have seen is where they have had field days and farmers actually go through the research that has been done over a beer and a sausage sizzle or whatever. It works well.

Mr James—Yes, because that is where change happens.

Mr Leach—Patrick, can I just go back to your statement. You are in farming, as is my family

Mr SECKER—He was a private consultant for 15 years.

Mr Leach—My family is the same. I am here representing APEN from the natural resource management standpoint, indicating that there are some issues there in terms of the longer term professionalism of people involved in that sector. In answer to your question about why we need such a thing now, I see that there are some real gains to be had in greater professionalism and coherence in the people being involved in extension for natural resource management. My family, to follow that example, are in contact now with those sorts of people. They are having some difficulty getting some traction with, ‘Who do we call up this week?’

Mr SECKER—Thank you.

CHAIR—Gentlemen, thank you very much for your contribution. It is very much appreciated. As I said earlier, it is very important that we get an overview of the concerns of people in the evidence-taking process of this inquiry. It is very important that we get a broad cross-section of community input. I thank you for the time you have taken to come here and give evidence today.

[11.28 am]

BURGIS, Mr Michael Thomson, Executive Officer, Conservation Farmers Inc.

CONDELL, Ms Jillian, Consultant, Conservation Farmers Inc.

ROCHECOUSTE, Mr Jean-Francois, Consultant, Conservation Farmers Inc.

CHAIR—I welcome witnesses from Conservation Farmers. 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 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 your submission or would you care to make some introductory remarks?

Mr Burgis—I would like to make a few introductory remarks about who we are and what we do.

CHAIR—Please feel free to do so.

Mr Burgis—Thank you for giving us the opportunity. Conservation Farmers is a farmer group with members from Central Queensland down to Dubbo in New South Wales. Our role is to provide a service of information transfer. I guess we are in the extension world. We are promoting leading and cutting-edge technologies. We are finding that farmers cannot get enough of what we have to offer and there is great difficulty in finding skills to fit those needs. Farming today is very complex and very broad in nature. Many people who work in that sector have to be a jack-of-all-trades. It is very dynamic. We are moving very quickly and its very hard for people to keep up with the technology.

Some of the change that is happening is that some of the large companies are now taking training on themselves. The AA company these days train staff before the staff join them. They may be companies that are able to afford to do that. There are a lot of other companies out there who cannot do that.

We at Conservation Farmers are swamped with people wanting to work with us. We are very much at the ground level working with farmers. I think the key to getting some on-ground change is actually looking at the family unit as one. A lot of the training has been targeted just at the man or maybe his son. Family units these days are working very closely together, and the daughters and housewives are very important. Some of the marketing messages coming from some of these big companies completely miss the person they should be talking to.

The two people I have here certainly have the skills and understand the educational needs of farmers and industry people. In fact, we are, as written in our submission, doing something to that effect. We do not classify ourselves as trainers; we are information providers and gatherers and we share information between growers and scientists.

CHAIR—Thank you very much.

Mr WINDSOR—Firstly, as a farmer as well as a member of parliament I would like to congratulate you on this submission. This submission outlines a lot of things that real people actually feel in terms of some of the technologies and the extension work et cetera. I would encourage the secretariat to look at some of the issues in here. I would like to ask a few questions based on a few of the suggestions. One of the things that struck me was your view on younger people and their knowledge of technology before any training takes place.

Ms Condell—You have really hit on something that is extremely important and is going to have an enormous impact on agriculture in the future. I actually think that this is a full education issue, not just in agriculture, but agriculture has an opportunity at the moment to make some changes and embrace what is actually happening. We have very technically literate students coming into our TAFE colleges and our training organisations and they are confronted with—I think I have written it in the submission—materials that are so boring that they think we are putting sedatives or depressants in their food. I certainly put that in there for a reason. The material and the delivery strategies are exactly the same strategies that my 84-year-old father had when he went to agricultural college. They are not staying with the times. They are not using learning platforms and the technology that is available that these children can use—they can use it far better than us.

What really highlighted it for me was a comment by my daughter, who is 19 and studying science at university. I asked her about her emails and she said, ‘Mum, you’re the only person I email. It’s for old people.’ They use instant messaging; they have moved beyond us very quickly. I said in the supplementary submission that they are the ‘engage me or enrage me’ set. If we as educators do not stay with them and provide some fairly engaging learning to them while they are at agricultural college or even via extension, we will enrage them and turn them off. We have an opportunity now and it needs to be addressed, so I guess that is why I raised the issue.

Mr Rochecouste—There is also a lot of support from the parents of that generation. I have talked to a number of young farmers while trying help them set up a videoconferencing system. The people who are most supportive of the technology are their fathers because they see that as an option to be able to keep contact with that generation out there on the land. They cannot get workers—it is just too expensive to get outside workers now; you cannot get managers on farms. Those kids are really important to them and the kids want to be connected. A farmer rang me and said, ‘I don’t use it, but I’ve found out all about this website thing.’ He did a whole lot of research off his own bat so that we could set up a link with his son. They see technology as an avenue to keeping the next generation on the land.

Mr WINDSOR—I was impressed by the comment on the family—I think the submission highlights the role of the wife or mother. That is a very real, on-the-ground observation.

Ms Condell—We did a survey of 40 women in this region—the partners of grain growers—and we discovered quite a number of very interesting facts. It was conducted under the CFI auspice and funded by the Grain Research and Development Corporation’s Partners in Grain project. The overwhelming information that we got back was that a large majority of women did the books and marketed the grain and the men exclusively grew the grain. There was quite a division in the labour that people do. There were some exceptions and they tended to be

organisations—for instance, where a number of families were farming together. Often a mother or someone else would have responsibility for the business and there were daughters-in-law and so on who did not have that role. But overall the women largely had that role. The other thing we discovered from the survey was that women find a lot of training and extension not very user-friendly. Particularly in this region they travel quite some distance to attend training. They often find that the training is not tailored or relevant to their farming needs or their enterprises—so they have travelled for two or three hours to attend a seminar and the information they have received is not that useful to them.

Other barriers to them attending were child care, travel and other issues, yet these are the women who really need to be very sophisticated in their business management skills. We found no programs at all that direct education, training or extension at women in these roles, so we have set about developing a trial using a fairly innovative strategy involving teleconferencing. Women do not have to leave their farms and can dial in to attend a teleconference. The learning materials are sent to them via the internet.

Basically, any education, training or extension is a waste of time if it does not produce a sustainable change in behaviour. I see that there are a lot of programs around that have no way of measuring what the sustainable change in behaviour has been for the farmer. I think that, without that, there is really no point in running anything. Our goal was to measure what the sustainable change was for these women. They blew us away. It was not just for the women; they went back and taught the skills to their husbands and also took the skills into the local P&Cs. We thought, ‘This is a family benefit and a community benefit from one small trial that we have run so far.’ I think that women will really hold a leadership role in the future of farming. I think that the most sustainable changes in behaviour—I will go back to that one—can be brought about through the women.

Mr SECKER—That is because we do as we are told!

Mr Rochecouste—They work with the bank managers and tell you what to do. I think one important part of that too was the fact that what they chose to study—to put it that way—was at their direction. We did not say, ‘We are going to teach you this.’ I think that is a very important fact, because they could then decide what was important to their business.

Ms Condell—It was relevant training. The process we used—I think I have outlined it in the submission—was to ask, to collaborate and then to generate the information so that we ensured that it was relevant to their learning and that we would achieve a sustainable change in behaviour. I would pull back from being critical of other training organisations, but I think they should adopt a collaborative approach with farmers about the delivery. It is the same with extension: there has been a lot of extension but not necessarily a lot of sustainable change in behaviour. I think they should truly consult and collaborate. I think that is the real key. They have consulted, often with an agenda, but they have not really collaborated. I was really interested to hear the men before. If you go out and you kick the clods of dirt with the farmers and walk the paddocks with them and discuss it, you will get sustainable changes in behaviour. However, if you lecture them and provide them with lots of glossy brochures and CDs that pile up in the rubbish bin, there will be no change in behaviour.

Mr WINDSOR—I was interested, particularly listening to the previous group, in the comments at the bottom of page 4 of your submission supporting research going to farms and the comments about extension. I have one final question. This is a federal government inquiry; if there are one or two things that government should be doing, what are they?

Mr Burgis—If you look at the supplementary pages that we sent you, we have put a solution down the bottom. There is a diagram down there of what we see and what we have not got. What we have now is in the top one.

Mr WINDSOR—I have not got that.

Mr Burgis—You did not bring it? I sent it by email. I rang up yesterday to see if you had got it. We are suggesting that the model needs to change to that.

Mr Rochecouste—The issue with research, which has probably been alluded to in some areas, is that research progresses along and stockpiles all this information, but I think one of the things we need to do is to have that available to give to people when they are ready. If we are researching something to do with soil potassium or something, it does not mean that at the time of that research all the farmers are ready. Somebody might want that five years from now when they are ready. I think the issue has been that we keep piling things up and then trying to push them down onto farmers. They all have their own farming systems and they are all at different stages, so what needs to happen is that there needs to be a knowledge base that is ready to provide that information when that person is ready for it.

We have to change the way the paradigms shift by saying: ‘We are going to give you information. What do you need, and what do we have available already?’ A lot of the time we are reinventing the wheel, so if we have a knowledge base we need to start to say, ‘Let’s have a consultation process about what is needed.’ I do not necessarily mean we have five people in a room and we discuss what farming needs. My view is that we should go out and start talking to farmers about where they are at.

I went to a conference recently where they were talking about no till. Everybody wanted to change every farmer to no till. It is an admirable idea, but some of those farmers do not want to go there. It is not that they are objecting to it; they are not ready for it. It does not suit their farming. We need to be able to work with that and accept that. It is their own personal business, so let us go and work with them. I would say that the first thing we need to do is change the direction. That is not going to be an easy process, but I think we just need to change the paradigms and say there is a knowledge base and then start to look at the extension side. Did you want to add any more to the discussion that we had?

Mr Burgis—I think that the current system, and the funding which has been put into the system, is on the basis that the funding will go through to the RTAs. They are interested in training. So they are focused on training but they are not focused on the customer who is receiving the training. Therefore, people do not come to the training because it is not appropriate. Some of these guys need to go away and think about the customer. It is like selling nuts and bolts. You have to join the nut and the bolt together. I think there are a lot of nuts over here and a lot of bolts over there which never get joined together, yet people are being paid to deliver something that does not necessarily meet the needs.

Mr Rochecouste—Maybe that is the issue—they are getting paid to deliver instead of asking what is needed. I guess that is the paradigm shift we are trying to get people to make.

Mr Burgis—From a funding perspective, it is a bit of a nightmare just going through the maze even to make it happen. I do not think this is the proper forum to discuss that.

Mr WINDSOR—The common denominator we are finding, though, is that there are a lot of organisations out there that are delivering training that is not client focused.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—Given your criticism of VET, the restructured agricultural secondary colleges, what changes should they make in delivery of training?

Ms Condell—A significant change for the delivery of training would be in their collaboration. They have sat in isolation and not truly collaborated with agriculture about what it is that they deliver. They do consult—and I have said that in the submission. They certainly have an AQTF process and they can legitimately tick the boxes. I have been there; I know what they do. We do tick the boxes, but is it meaningful? No, it is not. It does not really get at the heart of what farmers or agriculture really need. I would make that as a broad statement.

I think it is a flaw in the system—not just in agriculture but right across the VET sector. I think if they made that significant change they would start to achieve amazing outcomes. They would actually have satisfied clients. At the moment, I think they have fairly unsatisfied clients generally speaking—and right across most sectors, not just in agriculture. That would be a very significant change. It is a big thing to implement. People are quite wedded to doing things the way they have always done them, so for the directors of colleges to implement that kind of shift is big.

The other thing that has happened, and I guess it really goes to your fourth question, is funding. They are actually not funded to do that. They are funded to deliver training; they are not funded to consult or collaborate. I prefer the word ‘collaborate’ to ‘consult’ because if they have true collaboration they are sitting with someone and saying, ‘Let’s work this through.’ It is a ‘with’ process rather than one of saying, ‘Let’s do it for you.’ I do not think farmers necessarily need people to do anything for them; they would rather it be with them. I certainly think that that would be a huge change and a really beneficial one.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—In your original submission you correctly raised the question of retaining labour given the competition with the resources sector. What ideas do you have for the purposes of trying to retain labour?

Ms Condell—I am extremely supportive of school based traineeships and traineeships in the agricultural sector generally. I know that there are a lot of areas that have been quite critical of that process. I think it is a fantastic framework. It is a brilliant way to support young students before they leave school to go back to their properties, and if they want to go on to other tertiary education they receive credits—higher OPs and things like that—by doing their school based traineeships. It really is not a waste of time for anybody.

Unfortunately, in this region the system has been fairly poor. There has not been a seamless process. The agricultural colleges have been in disarray, so when farmers have decided to put a

toe in the water they have received poor service. They have said: 'We've had a go at that. It doesn't work; let's not go there; it's too complex.' To get it going again in this region will be quite difficult, unfortunately.

Another thing we mentioned was the dissemination of information around traineeships, particularly agricultural traineeships. Traditionally, schools have not had a good base of people who understand what is required, so the guidance officers in schools lack professional development in this area. Another issue they have is that, when they do organise it, they are often very badly let down by the training providers.

I think we have seen a peak in this region—we got up to 60 students, I believe, and it is back down to about 16 or 17 at the moment. That is right across all training organisations, so it has not been wonderfully successful, which is a real pity because there is a fantastic framework there that could be great if it was well supported and well promoted. Farmers generally do not know about traineeships. Of those 40 women we surveyed, none of them knew that a \$4,000 incentive payment was available if they put on a trainee.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—All I can say is that I do not know where all the Commonwealth money has gone that was made available for traineeships and apprenticeships. It is like a big black hole. But, I tell you what, there is plenty of money out there.

Ms Condell—It has not gone into agriculture; it has gone into other industries. In fact, I would say that a lot of the money has gone to the mining industry and some other industries that are quite good at finding and grasping opportunities. They have the money to do that and they do it very well. Some industries have exploited traineeships and training extremely well and put themselves in a very good position. I say, 'Good on them.' I think agriculture has an opportunity to do that, but it just has not seen that opportunity. The other thing I would mention is the New Apprenticeships centres, which have the responsibility to promote traineeships. If I were running a New Apprenticeships centre, I would have a business decision to make: I could go after 10 business traineeships within a couple of blocks or I could go after one traineeship in agriculture that I have to drive 60 kilometres each way for. It gets down to a business decision by the New Apprenticeships centres—where they are going to target their business. It is not good business for them to target agriculture, because there is too much distance to cover, particularly in this region.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—ACCI has been responsible for a lot of the delivery of these New Apprenticeships centres. When you think about it, they are in no way focused on your industry, are they?

Ms Condell—No.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—They may have done exceptionally well, but they are not even anywhere near agriculture.

Ms Condell—I have spoken to the New Apprenticeships consultants in this region, and they have a very limited knowledge of even who the providers are, let alone about marketing the training. They really only know that there is TAFE and the Australian agricultural colleges.

CHAIR—Page 5 of your supplementary submission, under ‘Solutions’, says:

Change will only come from real engagement and providing relevant material that has steps for change.

And one of the solutions is:

Better use of farmer groups who have technical experts that speak on behalf of farmers. They also understand the broader economics of farming.

Given those comments, why hasn’t an organisation such as the National Farmers Federation picked up the very point that you just made about—

Mr Burgis—They are politicians. You have a different level—you are talking to a farmers group here and not politicians.

CHAIR—I have been saying that for some time and it is good to hear somebody else say it.

Mr Burgis—Just shove them in the little box where they should be.

CHAIR—I appreciate that.

Mr SECKER—I actually agree with you that the school based traineeships are—

Ms Condell—You do not agree with us?

Mr SECKER—No, I do.

Ms Condell—Thank you.

Mr SECKER—I think they do a very good job and VET in Schools gives great opportunities for pathways. Different regions do it better, as do different local community partnerships. And you are right about NACs that the incentive is there for them to do 10 down the block rather than going out there, although I do know that there are some NACs in my region that have gone out of their way to try and—

Ms Condell—Can I ask where your region is?

Mr SECKER—The south-east of South Australia is the region I am particularly talking about, but I am also—

Ms Condell—So it is still fairly vast, like we have.

Mr SECKER—Yes. I represent an area bigger than Tasmania, so they would say I basically have four regions. And I can see how some work better than others, just from that area. I am really concerned about the information we are getting about agricultural colleges being no longer relevant. I went to one a bit over 30 years ago in South Australia: Urrbrae. I got a really good basis for being a farmer, a lot of what I would call not top-level but medium-level information,

where if I wanted more information at least I knew where to go. I learnt farm management, welding, mechanics, fencing—all sorts of basic stuff. Is that no longer happening? Is that no longer relevant to farmers? Why has it changed, and what do we need to do to change it?

Mr Burgis—It is fairly relevant, but they have cut back the teaching arms and the time together to make that happen. I did that too, and it is really important. It is not a one-year thing or a one-semester thing; it is—

Mr SECKER—Mine was a two-year course.

Mr Burgis—more like a two-year course.

Mr SECKER—It was a two-year course.

Mr Burgis—You need to make it face to face, and you need to make it happen, but that has been withdrawn. Under the new system which has been enacted more of a TAFE type system has been put in front of it.

Mr SECKER—So you just do two blocks?

Mr Burgis—So you are going to turn out first-year jackaroos, if you like. That is all you are going to get. So really all the training has to be done back on the farm again.

Ms Condell—I would say that the farmers in this region of your generation, Patrick, who attended Dalby Agricultural College are extremely fond of that institution and look back on their time very favourably. I would say that part of the reason that they did fall over is that they were clinging to what they had always done and had not stayed abreast of change, and then eventually they became not viable and had change forced on them. From where I sit, I personally see that they need to experience the changes that they are experiencing. They cannot survive and continue without making those changes. But, as Mike is rightly pointing out, the process that they have gone through lacks true collaboration about what it is that farmers really need on the ground. One of the things I would say there is that the cotton industry have rolled together the Cotton Basics program, where they have dejargonised. I said to you guys that farmers glaze over as soon as we start talking about performance criteria, competencies and—

Mr SECKER—Absolutely. World's best practice—blah, blah!

Ms Condell—they are not interested. So they have taken all of that 'education speak' and jargon out of that training, rolled it together and truly collaborated with the farmers on the content. On the grapevine, it is a respected course because it has actually been made for them. There is a cue there for all of us. There is some learning there with that collaboration. I think they can continue to do what they are doing and keep it viable, but if they added true collaboration they would actually be able to meet their farmers' needs again. Large organisations spend lots of money on knowing their clients. Education and training traditionally have never done that. They have set themselves up as the experts. If you take the high road, it is very difficult to stay there, isn't it?

Mr SECKER—Thank you for that, and I do like your word 'collaboration'—

Ms Condell—Thank you.

Mr SECKER—rather than ‘consultation’.

CHAIR—But you never do that in the parliament!

Mr SECKER—I collaborate with you all the time!

CHAIR—Touche!

Mr ADAMS—There are issues, though, in relation to how agriculture is looked at by the general public. There is this perception of people wanting to go into agricultural science at an academic level, to get a degree, right through to somebody looking at working at certificate I or II level. Would you like to comment on that and on what solutions can be found for that?

Ms Condell—That is a very hard question.

Mr ADAMS—The failure of the National Farmers Federation to lift the profile?

Ms Condell—I would agree that there is not the respect for the industry that it probably deserves from the general public. Once again, I am not sure that farmers have not got some responsibility there themselves. Once again, I think collaboration would address that to some extent.

Mr Burgis—We do not sell that very well. That is basically what it is. I think young people go into agriculture either because they have something to go back to or there is a generation of people who say, ‘I’d love to get into agriculture.’ But agriculture itself has a lot to offer. It is very diverse. It is quite dynamic. You can learn a lot of things about normal life by working as a jackaroo or a jillaroo.

We do have some other impositions which are being put forward—some of the work health and safety stuff is being brought forward. It is putting more pressure on farms to manage it. Some responses to that are, ‘Let’s not employ anybody.’ Whether we agree or disagree with it is not the issue here. I am just saying that it is another imposition that is being put on people, and some people do not know how to manage that. We have one client who has gone out and put his own work health and safety plan together. He spent an awful lot of time on it, yet we know we could have picked something off the shelf that could have helped him. He spent a lot of his own time putting it together first up.

Young people also get into agriculture and there is no path forward. If you look at the large pastoral companies, they have problems with that themselves. They have big businesses, they have promoted people from within or have taken people from outside, but they have no format for the new, young people who are coming in to become, say, a manager. They just have not got the roles. Needless to say, we still have a lot of large family farms and they are still not going to give too many people opportunities unless they are a member of the family in some way or another.

Mr ADAMS—There are a whole range of issues coming down the pipe—animal welfare, health and safety, natural resource management—that are going to hit farming in the next decade.

Mr Burgis—They would have to get on and do it.

Mr ADAMS—How are they going to deal with that and still encourage people to go into this collaboration?

Mr Rochecouste—I think there is a structural problem in that a farm is like a small business. With the amount of time that they have available to go and research, even small businesses have a better option. For example, I have a business in Toowoomba. It is easier for me to access things than it is for someone who is living 50 kilometres out of Roma. Because of that, I think they are not abreast of a lot of things that are going on. I think one of the opportunities that we see to change that is the learning circles where women are able to interconnect via videoconferencing or systems like that. They see being off the farm as time wasted—you travel two hours to get to something and you never know before you get there whether it is going to be relevant or not. You could get there and somebody could just talk about something way over your head or so basic that you think it has been a waste of time. I think that the opportunity for remote areas is to develop the ability to be able to access information, people or experts and ask questions without necessarily having to leave the farm to do it.

Mr ADAMS—Four or five years ago I was in New Zealand with this committee, I think, on an exchange with the New Zealand committee talking to their beef producers. They were sending videos and they were talking about 85 per cent of their members looking at them. That is an incredible figure; they were passing information out. We somehow have not used technology; we have not moved forward. Is that a failure of leadership?

Ms Condell—Part of a problem is that—poor old Barnaby Joyce!—these women actually have very slow dial-up speeds and very high dropout rates. We have a few who have satellite broadband.

Mr SECKER—They drop out too.

Ms Condell—Our organisation has been looking at using Skype, an internet phone provider, to basically videoconference. We can put our materials up and we can use a whiteboard all at the same time and they can sit in their home offices. It is cutting edge technology, but they do not have the technology at the other end. What I find really frustrating about that is that a lot of those women actually have the ability to use the technology. They have been off and have got their degrees—they are teachers and nurses—they are actually able to use it, but there is nothing there for them to be able to do that. The slow broadband download leaves lags when you speak. If you are trying to actually teach someone something they lose concentration. It does not work. We have explored all that. We are ready to go, but the technology is not there.

Mr ADAMS—You are telling this committee that technology and the lack of it is an impediment to skills training in regional Australia?

Ms Condell—It is a huge barrier.

Mr Rochecouste—It is their opportunity. Driving long distances to come to a face-to-face meeting is only a limited option.

Ms Condell—I feel sorry for the farmers. They have been the early adopters. I could not find any farmers who did not have the internet—they all had it. They all look up their weather maps constantly, they watch their market reports on the internet, they all have CDMA phones and they all use two-way radios. They really have used technology, and they see the value to their bottom-line of using it. I feel sorry for them, because they are frustrated.

Mr WINDSOR—A lot of equipment now is GPS oriented. There are a whole range of downloads in terms of fertiliser seeding rates et cetera. The urban view of the farming community is one of being dumbed down—we have heard that a bit in this committee. The real picture is one of adopting very quickly the technology where available.

Ms Condell—If it works for them they will use it.

CHAIR—We cannot do that until such time as we fix the 1980s technology in our exchanges. That is part of the problem. You have exchanges that have 1980s technology. We are encouraging people to take up broadband and all of this up-to-date equipment, which they are keen to do and they are doing, but they cannot get the speed through the system because the current technology at the exchange level will not handle it. There are other things.

Picking up on the complimentary remarks by Mr Windsor at the beginning of this evidence, your submission has gone to the core of the problem. It has identified what we have been able to pick up in dribs and drabs from right around the country. You have done it a lot more constructively in a lot more depth and in an open and frank way. I think, quite frankly, that, whilst we have had very good evidence over the 18 hearings we have conducted so far, your contribution today has been exceptional and it has been significant in terms of highlighting some of the issues that need to be addressed.

One of the things that many of us are critical of—and it does not matter what side of politics we come from; and this committee is a good bipartisan committee—is that governments seem to throw a lot of money at things and there are those who are very keen, which you have alluded to in the mining industry, and are able to take advantage of that money, but we do not seem to be chasing up and enforcing reporting that delivers evidence on the outcome of the funding packages that are made available. You have made a very significant contribution, which will go a long way to us putting out what we believe will be very constructive recommendations for the appropriate minister of the day. Hopefully, he or she will pick them up and run with them. If they do not, then we have wasted a lot of taxpayers' resources and we have wasted a lot of time in highlighting the very serious issue that is going to impact on the ability of the farming community in rural and regional Australia in general to be able to significantly contribute to the economy of this country without the fear of going out backwards. I thank each and every one of you for your input. I know the members appreciate the contribution you have made.

Proceedings suspended from 12.10 pm to 12.29 pm

McKAY, Mr Malcolm Ernest, College Director, Australian Agricultural College Corporation

MURRAY, Mr Ross, Director, Education and Training, Australian Agricultural College Corporation

CHAIR—I now reconvene this hearing of the inquiry into rural skills training and research and welcome our next witnesses. 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. I invite you to make an opening statement.

Mr McKay—Thank you. The agricultural workplace in Australia is characterised by a range of things that make it fairly unique, and I will mention some of these. There are many small enterprises within agriculture, which generally results in a fairly low level of supervisory support within those enterprises. Workers generally operate in hazardous work environments—workplace health and safety records would suggest that agriculture is the most dangerous industry in Australia. There is a need for multiskilled workers because a very wide range of technologies operates within any agricultural enterprise. The small size of the workforce means that any one individual needs to have a range of skills.

Agriculture tends to deal with fairly long production cycles—be they for field crops, tree crops or livestock production—which workers have to understand and work across. Many of the stages of those cycles are critical. Mistakes cannot be easily repaired and the consequences can be quite long term. An aspect that is not recognised as well as it might be is the constant advances in available technologies that need to be incorporated into agriculture if it is to maintain its position within the international community.

The combination of those factors leads to a unique set of characteristics that require entry-level workers to be more skilled and more experienced than in most other industries. I think that feeds into a lot of other comments that we would like to make today. Our organisation attempts to provide a training environment that operates on a farming scale within representative farming systems so that entry-level workers experience the activities on the right scale, go through full production cycles within their training and understand the implications of the various skills they are learning and how those skills relate to the production cycle within the agricultural framework.

We are involved with trainees and with experienced people currently working on farms. Our role with them is to augment that practical experience with more formal, theoretical and academic components to allow them to be effective workers in the agricultural industry. That is basically where we are coming from. There are a range of issues that we would like to discuss, including specific matters of concern around the way the vocational education and training system interacts with higher education and the way it is funded and organised at the moment. We would also like to look at how the interaction within research and extension activities could be enhanced to the betterment of agriculture.

CHAIR—Do you wish to make some remarks, Mr Murray?

Mr Murray—No, not at the moment.

CHAIR—For obvious reasons, our questions may be a little broader than the areas you might like to pursue. We are here to get as much evidence as we can across the whole spectrum of the rural skills shortage and the problems associated with training and research. Recently—in fact, on 21 April 2005—in an *ABC Online* news article, AgForce's president, Mr Peter Kenny, speaking on the proposed amalgamation of Queensland's four agricultural colleges, commented that local communities and rural industry must have input into the new direction of Queensland's agricultural colleges and that it is absolutely crucial that the advisory board has industry input. He also said that the vocational studies reflect the future farming practices that industry requires into the future and that the focus on agriculture is maintained. Given those comments, to what extent have local communities and industry been involved in the restructure?

Mr McKay—Quite considerably. We have an advisory board appointed by the Minister for Employment, Training and Industrial Relations in Queensland. That advisory board has met and is meeting again in the next couple of weeks. It has been an integral part of looking at the strategy that we have enunciated for the Agricultural College Corporation and will be very much a part of the finetuning of that process in terms of the way in which we will move forward with the new programs we want to offer and the way in which they will be integrated within industries. In parallel with that has been a very concerted effort where we have been engaging peak bodies within the various industries, particularly at a regional level, where we have been working together with those organisations to ascertain their skills needs and then try to put in place a program that will respond to those particular skills, and to implement that within those regional areas.

We are pretty strongly committed to the view that we need to have a strong regional industry focus in the training that we offer rather than trying to have a total industry wide, across-Australia focus, because there are many variations with any one industry sector in the crucial issues that are important to them. So we believe that a regional industry focus is the way to go. That is alternative to an enterprise based exercise, because if you focus all the training at an enterprise level then there are several things that you miss out on. It becomes very much a specific enterprise skills base that they are looking for. The ability to engage a range of people and a range of ideas that might benefit the industry and the region in a broader sense cannot be taken advantage of. The other aspect that comes is that, if you can engage the region and the industry at a regional industry level, you create a culture of training and skills development within that particular region which then can expand across into other regions. If you can demonstrate successful training in one area, it is relatively easy to transport it across into other regions.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—Could you just explain—because we have had mixed messages over the last day and a half—at what age the kids enter these colleges?

Mr McKay—They can enter from basically the beginning of year 11, at the end of year 10, and right through to any age you like. But that is the minimum age level. We have 15 years as the minimum age of enrolment into our organisation.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—When they complete the two years, what do they graduate with?

Mr McKay—They do not necessarily enrol in a two-year program. They enrol in basically a certificate course. Generally, if they come in at the end of year 10, they will go into a certificate II in agriculture or whatever it might be, which is now set up as a one-semester program based on a competency based process. They may then go into the workforce, or they may continue on into another semester program, which is a certificate III program. In the second year, if they decide to stay on, they then move into a certificate IV. After the fourth semester period, which is at the end of two years, they would then graduate with a diploma in agriculture or whatever the course might be.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—That then leads into that study being recognised for traineeships and apprenticeships?

Mr McKay—Yes. There are no apprenticeships in agriculture, but in traineeships they are directly equivalent—that is, between the certificates from full-time study on our campuses or from traineeships offered within industry—in terms of the awards that are offered.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—One of the criticisms that has been made is the failure of farmers to take up traineeships. What do you think can be done to enable the promotion and spread of traineeships in the industry?

Mr McKay—I will make some opening comments, and then ask Mr Murray to make some more comments. I think one of the big problems is being able to service traineeships successfully in what is a very diverse workplace. It is quite different from servicing welding traineeships et cetera where they might be large organisations in metropolitan areas. These are dotted all over the countryside, there is generally only one trainee in an organisation and they are very diverse, so the actual physical difficulty of servicing them is quite a significant hold-back in being able to have a successful outcome. If you cannot service the students well, then the whole scheme gets a bad reputation.

Our philosophy is to try in the first instance to work with larger employers who do have a number of trainees, and we have been working with, for example, the Australian Agricultural Company and the Northern Australian Pastoral Company where they do take quite large numbers of new workers into their program and you can get some sort of concentration to be able to provide appropriate services to those students and those trainees while they are in employment. If you can then demonstrate a successful outcome, it is a much easier sell, if you like, to other farmers. If we can develop a model, we can service them reasonably.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—Where does group training fit in, and would it be appropriate for government to consider making your college a new apprenticeships centre?

Mr McKay—I think group training fits in and that it is an intermediary at the moment in terms of being able to go out and find the host employer et cetera and then manage it—you clearly understand the process. One of the problems we find is always keeping the level of communications appropriate in a multifactorial arrangement. We have an RTO ourselves in the process, you have the trainee, you have the group employer and you have the host employer.

Keeping the communications between those four parties is a really difficult exercise, and unless each of those parties understand their responsibilities and obligations as well as the opportunities that are available to them, you do not always get a successful outcome. It is a concern that there are so many parties involved in the process—that makes it more difficult. The fact that we are dealing with a geographical spread and a small number of students makes it even more difficult. There is quite a significant problem in that regard.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—That is what I am getting at. As you evolve, you are reinventing yourselves. Do you think it would be smart for government to think about expanding your traditional role into chasing the traineeships, group-training opportunities et cetera so that you have a one-stop shop?

Mr McKay—I personally think that would be quite a useful proposal because it would cut out many of the communication difficulties that exist at the moment and give us a better opportunity to manage this. One of the great strengths that we have as an organisation is that we have campuses from Mareeba to Dalby. We have campuses at Mareeba, Burdekin, Emerald, Longreach and Dalby, so we have quite significant resources in each of those areas to give a good solid base to something like that.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—One of the criticisms has been that all of these NACs seem to be really not interested in your industry. They are too interested in doing some sweetheart deal with the security industry or the retail industry et cetera and you have been completely neglected.

Mr McKay—Yes. It could be.

ACTING CHAIR (Mr Adams)—You said that the minimum age to start at college is 15. I was just wondering if people leave the college and do some work and then come back to the college within a two-year course. Can you just point this out to the committee so we can get it in the evidence.

Mr McKay—Each of the qualifications are discrete in themselves, so they can enter into the qualification, undertake that qualification, complete it, move out into the workforce and come back in again. In some instances, of course, if they have spent a considerable amount of time in industry and have gained a whole range of skills, if they went out at a certificate III level, they may not come back in at certificate IV because they may have gained all those skills in their workplace and may just need some sort of gap training. They will come and go in the process.

ACTING CHAIR—Do they get a diploma at level 5?

Mr McKay—The end of the fifth level is the diploma level.

Mr Murray—At the end of two years.

Mr McKay—Yes, at the end of two years. It is at the end of two years if it is full-time or, in the processes of certificate II, certificate III and certificate IV, level 5 is called a diploma.

ACTING CHAIR—So they would come back. Having done two years at college, they might have gone out and done four or five years and by that time be in a managerial role or whatever, would they come back and do a three-month course to get a diploma?

Mr McKay—A small number of students would do that. That has not been the history of the ag colleges up until now.

ACTING CHAIR—The evidence we have is that the management level in the farming community is very low, and the need to be a manager and to manage people in these areas is a big thing that is lacking, especially with modern communications, modern ways of dealing with staff and a new generation coming on. Maybe that is an area that needs to be ramped up.

Mr McKay—We currently have an advanced diploma, which is the next level on. It is a level 6 qualification in rural business management. It is offered in a distance education mode and in an online mode. We are working towards more and more distance education material, so that those people who you described have the opportunity either to undertake that in a workplace and continue their education using one or other of the delivery methods for distance education or to come back on campus and do it in a full-time role on campus.

Mr SECKER—Can I just clarify: is it two years plus three months to get your diploma?

Mr McKay—No.

Mr SECKER—It is two years?

Mr McKay—Yes. Traditionally, the agricultural colleges ran a two-year program. Students came in at the end of year 10, did two years full time and graduated with a diploma. That was prior to the competency based training model. The competency based training model is a whole set of articulated qualifications. It starts at certificate II, which is a qualification discrete in itself, goes to certificate III, which is a discrete qualification, then to a certificate IV and then to a diploma. We offer on a full-time basis a progression through those four qualifications within a two-year time frame. Basically you get one each semester. So a student can enter, go right through and leave with a diploma, or they can exit at any one of those points along the way.

Mr SECKER—Do they miss certificate I or are they expected to have done that beforehand?

Mr McKay—No.

Mr SECKER—So you can leave with a certificate II. Once you have your diploma, does that give you some sort of entry points for the agricultural university course in Gatton?

Mr Murray—The previous agricultural colleges at the Emerald and Dalby campuses had formal articulation into the UQ diploma with advanced standing and also into the university undergraduate program with advanced standing but less of it. Over more recent years, the difficulty has been for those in university education based programs to come to grips with the vocational education outcomes. It is quite difficult for a university faculty to identify the underpinning knowledge that would enable the student to gain credit in what is an academic program. In more recent times, because of the changes in the colleges and their programs, that

articulation has not worked all that well, whereas it previously did when they had course based programs over the two years. That was a much easier thing to map. We recognise that needs to be done and we believe that it is important. We will be furthering those discussions.

In our restructuring, we need to improve our documentation of the underpinning knowledge that we deliver as part of those programs, from certificate I to the diploma, so that we can more easily articulate the standard of underpinning knowledge and the assessment of that—perhaps by adopting rated based competency assessment—to the universities, to ensure that we can get the level of articulation that we believe is necessary. At the other end of the scale, we already have processes whereby people with the diploma and advanced diploma in the VET sector qualification can gain direct entry into the university sector in some faculties. The normal procedure would be for those students to enrol in single subjects. Once they have demonstrated their capability to master those, they enrol in a postgraduate certificate or diploma program and can progress on to masters. That is, without having the base degree, they can go from the VET sector.

As to the number of universities that offer courses that are aligned and complement the sort of training that you mentioned before—at the higher-level business enterprise management level—we have to look at the universities or develop postgraduate and certificate programs within the VET sector to account for that higher level training need, particularly in management, whether it be financial management, resource management or animal or plant management.

Mr SECKER—It just seems to me that it is not as easy as it used to be to go to university. You can do a medical degree from studying subjects in high school that have nothing to do with medicine. If you actually have people here who are interested in agriculture and have shown some competency, you would think that, if the marks were good enough, they would be able to get into an agricultural based university.

Mr Murray—I think the difficulty we have here is that with the school based system they are graded and there is an assessment procedure that clearly identifies underpinning knowledge. We can take the syllabus and say, ‘This is what the student has done and this is the student’s academic achievement in those.’ The difficulty with the VET sector is that it is much more difficult to demonstrate the level of underpinning knowledge that then constitutes entry into the university. We believe there are ways around that. Our approach that we are currently looking at is to try and document better the underpinning knowledge part as well as the practical part so that we can demonstrate to universities and give them, if you like, a course profile that shows exactly the theory and content that they have covered and how that has been assessed through both the formal examination and the applied competency base, which is the basis of the vocational system.

Mr SECKER—I know what you are saying, but I think you have not taken account of the fact that you can get into a doctors course, as I said, without doing any subjects that are really related to medicine. In high school they do not teach many things, apart from biology, that are related to medicine. Surely there would be some sort of test. I got into university as a mature age student by sitting a test to see if I had enough intelligence, I suppose—I am not sure what was. But I passed anyway.

Mr Murray—The normal entry requirement for all of those postgraduate programs, of course—and that is essentially what medicine and vet science are as well as a range of others—is to have some other undergraduate degree. I guess your likelihood of gaining entry or being accepted would be to do a degree that is allied to one of those programs you wish to go into.

Mr SECKER—The mature age test I had at university had nothing to do with the course I was doing.

Mr McKay—I think the problem rests, if you like, with the university's view of what they want to see coming from the VET sector. As VET sector trainers, our responsibility or our response is to give it in a format that is actually acceptable to them to understand what we have actually trained our students in in that period of time. So we are responding to their demands, if you like.

Mr SECKER—But they are not responding to you.

Mr McKay—There is not a great deal of response, I think. There are a lot of issues that we need to talk through with some of those things. We are in the process of quite detailed discussions with various segments as to how we can actually get closer together to work from the ground up as partnerships, deliver training that might have vocational and higher education outcomes and share significant materials and resources et cetera along the way.

Mr SECKER—I am just responding to some of the evidence we have had that there are not enough pathways to tertiary education. I am trying to find ways that we might improve that. I suppose I am also concerned that we have had evidence given to us that numbers in agricultural courses are falling and they are not responsive to what farmers want. How would you reply to that?

Mr McKay—I think the evidence shows quite clearly that the numbers are falling. Our response to that is to do exactly the sorts of things you are talking about. One of the issues we think needs to be addressed is this very big emphasis on qualifications. Trying to sell a qualification to many rural producers is not exactly their immediate need. Their immediate need is a set of skills for themselves or for their employees. There is great emphasis on whole qualifications, because whole qualifications are easily measured and they go onto the OECD tables and all those sorts of things. They are all very good outcomes that people should try to obtain. But in the short term if you cannot actually get them started on a pathway you have actually had a negative effect, not a positive one.

We believe the way forward in the process should be to seek out with these regional industry type groups what are the skill sets that they need for their employees and to deliver those skill sets in terms of competencies which are actually part qualifications. Employers will support their employees to gain those competencies because they are immediately related to their enterprise needs at the time. A whole qualification contains a whole lot of competencies that they do not see the immediate need for in their enterprise, and therefore they do not have the same level of support for those activities.

We think we need a two-pronged approach. One is a set of skills that meets those industry needs and those enterprise needs which are focused on the employers. The RTOs like ourselves

should then take on the responsibility of targeting those individuals who are part qualified and making quite clear to them the pathways they could take to fill in those gaps and get the qualification. It is a catchy-catchy process to get on board employers who will support the employees getting to a certain way along the qualification and to then switch the emphasis to the individual getting the qualification. At the moment all the emphasis is on the full qualification and trying to promote that end of the spectrum. It is somewhat counterproductive in lots of cases.

Mr SECKER—But if you ask a farmer—and, as you would understand, farming is a very multiskilled industry—they will say they want someone who has got some skills in welding, mechanics, fencing, farm management, animal husbandry, sheep, wool, whatever. That is, of course, what I did 30 years ago. Are the farmers telling you something different? Do they want different things?

Mr McKay—No, they are telling us that is exactly what they want for an entry level worker. That is part of the process that we are refocusing on.

Mr SECKER—So you are refocusing on the practical side of things.

Mr McKay—We have taken a decision across our corporation—which has only existed since 1 July last year—and we have been leading pretty strongly a review process to try and understand what industry needs and how we can best refocus on that. The sort of process we are looking at will be a common program across the lower level courses—the certificate IIs and IIIs—with a high deal of commonality and a lot of skills in that broad range. Over the period of time they have tended to become a bit more specialised. If you end up with a certificate III in beef cattle, there is a large beef cattle component but not much in cropping and virtually no farm engineering type activities. The same thing might be said of one that is focused on crop production. So we are looking at coming back to more of a basic skills level, so that everybody comes out of the organisation with a range of basic skills—workplace health and safety, communications, on-farm engineering, cattle production, livestock production, crop production et cetera and how they integrate. Then at the higher levels we are looking at the specialisations—so they can move into, maybe, the beef industry or production.

Mr SECKER—So it would not be unfair for me to say that you are going back to basics, back to what used to happen?

Mr McKay—There is a certain component of that.

Mr Murray—But we are, I guess, trying to look at having courses which have competency outcomes to meet the vocational package requirements but give a more rounded, relevant and perhaps coherent educational training. I would like to make some further comments on that, but I will go back to some other issues, if I may, otherwise they will get lost. The entry level into our full-time programs is normally 15, but we have means by which we can—in conjunction with the school and a range of other avenues—allow people to come in, providing we do risk assessments at an earlier age if they are at risk or if they are for some reason unable to continue in school. The more recent development is one with ETRF where, in conjunction with the schools, we are delivering training for rural skills in ETRF programs at, say, grades 9 and 10 where appropriate. So I guess there are avenues by which we can interact as a corporation at the lower levels.

When we are talking about the adoption of traineeships or apprenticeships in rural areas as opposed to other recognised trades such as engineering or hairdressing or whatever, it is true to say that the rural community has a training culture, but it is not a formalised one. Farmers train most of our farming workers. When we talk to them about traineeships and people getting a full qualification, they by and large do not understand the meaning of that. They do not understand the meaning of the packages we are delivering, and therefore the uptake is not as great as it would be if we could initially focus on giving the skills or the competencies that they require to meet both the level at which the organisation wants to train individual workers and the level that meets their individual job requirements.

There are two issues here: the qualifications and individual competencies may not meet their organisational needs; and, if you try to deliver a full qualification to an employee, it may not meet his organisational roles. Very few workers in agriculture have the same job level expectations at all levels within one qualification in all areas. For instance, someone might be a financial manager and have nothing to do with the stock or whatever else, or they may be involved in the stock but not do the books or the farm management side. I believe we need to be able to supply the vocational outcomes initially to meet their direct and immediate needs and then use the other processes we are talking about by which we can take those individuals to, or encourage the employer to subsidise them in, the uptake of a full qualification.

Mr SECKER—Does that mean you would do full OH&S certificates?

Mr Murray—We can.

Mr SECKER—Is OH&S not part of the course?

Mr Murray—OH&S is a component or a competency at all levels within the packages of all qualification levels. We see that that needs to be more coordinated, and we have the ability to do that in our full-time programs, whereas we do not necessarily have the ability to do that when we are delivering the traineeships.

Mr SECKER—The only thing that we were ever taught was to wear a set of ear-muffs and bend our knees when we were lifting. That is the only OH&S we had.

Mr Murray—It has moved on a great deal since then.

Mr ADAMS—Certificates are needed to say that you are competent. We now use chemicals, and that has ramifications for our export trade and a whole range of things. So it has to be taken into account.

Mr Murray—A number of competencies make up, if you like, the sort of industry certification that you are talking about.

Mr ADAMS—Animal welfare is going in a similar direction.

Mr Murray—Yes.

Mr ADAMS—So those sorts of things will be in the system as well, and you will need to have qualifications to reach those levels.

Mr Murray—Yes.

Mr McKay—We have an animal ethics committee across the corporation. We are involved with animal procedures the whole time, so ethical behaviour and the implications of involvement with livestock et cetera are very much a part of the understanding of students from the very beginning.

Mr ADAMS—What do you think of the idea of having colleges that specialise in different areas of the rural industry?

Mr McKay—I am not sure that it would be a great outcome, but we are doing that to quite a significant extent because of the breadth of our campuses across Queensland. The geographic and climatic regions that they exist in automatically lend themselves to that sort of exercise. As I said before, we believe that it is appropriate to have a common basic skill set at the lower certificate II level. At the certificate III level, there is a little bit of specialisation that relates to either the farming systems in the areas or the particular specialisation, be it in crop production or livestock production. Beyond that, as you start to get into certificate IVs and Vs and the diploma and advanced diploma levels—and we are also very much looking at the introduction of graduate certificates and graduate diplomas to take people to the next level and beyond—they can become quite specific to the facilities.

An example of the sort of plan that we have in place at the moment is our campus at Longreach. That is very well situated and very well regarded in the area of arid zone livestock production. A component that goes with that is very much the horse industry that services that arid zone cattle activity, so there is a specialisation in that area.

If you look at our campus in Burdekin, it is right in the middle of the sugar cane. We grow 1,000 acres of sugar cane on our campus. While it has been difficult to engage the sugar cane industry, we believe we have a process in place now that will engage it and make that facility much more useful to the sugar cane industry in that area. The focus we are looking at developing for that campus is one of broad tropical horticultural production. A significant amount of new development will happen in the north in horticultural production.

We believe that we will get that specialisation within our corporation without having to have a specialist college. We think that the efficiencies that will be gained by the sort of organisation we have, with commonalities at all levels but specialisation campus by campus, will be the most effective way of getting that outcome.

Mr ADAMS—Thank you for that. We got some answers to Mr Secker's questions about universities. Mr Murray, do you think that the universities could solve some of the problems people who come through these colleges have in getting into a university degree? Is it the stuffiness, if that is a term I can use, of universities? Universities have to protect their own credibility; but is it about the stuffiness of universities or their inability to come into a new era and accept people who have come through agricultural colleges?

Mr Murray—We have some very good linkages already. If we took all the universities, I am sure that we could find many universities that have adopted that transition from the VET sector into the university sector. There are really good models where that has worked. What we are saying is that within our organisation we need to further those linkages. In agriculture generally, that has not been quite as easy, I guess, as in other areas. We believe that that is the way of the future. I do not know whether it is necessarily the reluctance of universities. There are two sides to the story. One is that the RTOs need to demonstrate the ability of their students to meet their requirements. The second is the relationship with the university—how both of those sectors can work together for mutual benefit.

Mr ADAMS—But is that occurring?

Mr Murray—There are already examples—although not necessarily with our organisation as yet—in other areas where that does occur and where there are those formal linkages between the VET sector and universities, and complementary teaching between both areas.

Mr McKay—We are very strongly working that way. Part of that comes from our personal backgrounds, I suppose. Both Mr Murray and I have come directly out of the university sector into these roles and so we have a very good understanding of the university system and lots of personal contacts as well that are all-important in developing those sorts of relationships. It is very much on our agenda and it is an outcome that we will achieve.

Mr ADAMS—What is your opinion of training? We have a training component and a knowledge component and we are welding these together. Do you want to give us a bit of your wisdom about that?

Mr McKay—I am not sure about wisdom, but I will give you my opinion. One of the difficulties that I have discovered with the Australian Qualifications Framework—and you are probably well aware of the AQF—is that it tries to put on a two-dimensional page the equivalence of the high school sector, the VET sector and the higher education sector. Because it is on a two-dimensional page, people automatically make the judgment that if it is on the same level it is the same sort of qualification.

Mr ADAMS—We read across the page.

Mr McKay—Yes, we read across the page—I think there is some intention to do that—and people read backwards across the page and infer from that as well. My view—I am an engineer, so I think in planes—is that in fact we are looking at three parallel planes that do not intersect. You have high school education here, you have the VET sector here and you have higher education here. What we have to do is build the bridges between those planes. They do not just go across.

Mr ADAMS—We call them silos. ‘Silos’, I think, is the buzz word.

Mr McKay—If we call them non-intersecting planes that we can build bridges across then it is our task to build those bridges.

Mr ADAMS—That is good engineering.

Mr McKay—A lot of the school based vocational education and training identifies just how difficult this might be. If you look at a high school certificate, it basically says that it ought to be the entry level to an undergraduate degree, a bachelor's degree. It is the entry level to a diploma degree in the higher education sector. It is the entry level to a diploma in the vocational education sector, and because a diploma in the educational sector sits above a certificate IV there is a reverse assumption that somehow or other a high school certificate should therefore be equivalent to a certificate IV. When you are looking at those very practical skill based levels of the certificate III, which is supposedly equivalent to an apprenticeship, you have a situation where you are saying that a high school person who has done no skills training in this area somehow has equivalent qualifications to an apprentice who has done four years of skills training in their particular area. You are not comparing apples with apples.

If you try to put VET sector training back into schools and then do this reverse assessment, you will come up with the wrong answer. We have this difficulty all the time within the agriculture sector, which is very much manual skills based. To get even a certificate III level being completed in high school is very difficult to achieve because they just cannot get the practical experience to give them the skills that are necessary for that certificate III qualification. So it really highlights the fact that it is not comparing apples with apples and that there is a need to identify what it is that we are achieving in each of those areas, what the skill sets are, what the knowledge bases are and then how you build that bridge across to this other system which is trying to create some other type of outcome. I think that unless you have had a foot in each camp you do not quite understand the difficulties.

Mr ADAMS—Do we have the academic strength to do that in Australia?

Mr McKay—Yes, I think so.

Mr Murray—That is what we are working towards in our organisation. We are trying to link those three sectors by interacting with the schools with ETRF programs and other deliveries. In our regions, where we have representation, we can then put in place programs that not only achieve the school outcomes but also achieve appropriate entry level into our programs in the vocational area. Then at the other end, if we do that properly, we can articulate them into the higher education sector and have exit points anywhere along that chain into the relevant industry areas of need and requirement.

So that is our plan, and I believe we are uniquely positioned to do that because of our geographical spread and because of the blend of IP we have within the organisation. I think it is true to say, though, that in the vocational education and training sector there has been over a number of years a real focus on the certificate II and III levels, and a lot of our staff have been appointed to address those issues. We obviously have to undertake staff development programs and recruitment programs to enable us to operate more effectively and develop a wider range of programs at the top end of the vocational education so we can get that integration.

Mr SECKER—We have had a lot of evidence from beekeepers concerned about their industry. Do you run any beekeeping courses? If not, why not, and would you consider it?

Mr Murray—There are two issues. A lot of industries, including the dairy industry, the bee industry, the emu industry and others, all say they need training packages—and we do not doubt

that. The difficulty is often in getting sufficient numbers to justify mounting those courses. Within the VET sector in particular, your payment is generally for a training outcome. The development cost to put in place and produce the resources for those programs is significant. There are two ways of doing it. You can do it properly and invest those resources. It might take, say, six to 12 months to put in place truly educationally sound resources to mount those courses. You then have to find the staff—or partner—to deliver it. We believe there are a lot of opportunities with the industry to do that.

There are examples. Take the Gatton model. Gatton has run beekeeping courses for years. But the industry goes up and down, even though the industry keeps claiming it has this need. When you put on those courses, the demand often is not there. It may be because of the location, the inability to offer them externally, flexibly. Only a couple of days ago we were talking about the bee industry, particularly up in the Burdekin area, and assisting with pollination of a lot of the crops that are now grown there. That is our assessment. We also have to make an economic judgment. We need offset funding to take that step and to develop it.

CHAIR—You were saying that an economic decision centres around the ability to attract sufficient numbers of people to make a course viable. To use the beekeeping industry as an example, directly and indirectly through pollination, it significantly contributes to about \$2 billion of the economy of this country. I find that reprehensible.

Mr Murray—That is a result of the way vocational education and training is funded. If your funding is based on training outcomes—and to get training outcomes you need to develop the resources—then to offset those costs you need economies of scale. I would have thought that the way of addressing the bee industry example would be more partnering with the industry experts. Going back a step, we have the means of delivering those qualifications. Do we have people with bee expertise across all our campuses or do we focus on one? Those sorts of issues are economic and are the sorts of real decisions that training organisations have to take.

CHAIR—The issue is that we used to have those staff and, because of that sort of thinking, we no longer have them. So it is a dog chasing its tail. There is an opening there for governments of all political persuasions at all levels to really reconsider that sort of thinking in the best interests of the commercial viability of the crops that bees pollinate in the future.

Mr Murray—I would support that notion. Having come through that system over the last 40 years, I agree that the system has changed and that we can do something better in terms of the way we fund and implement agricultural and related rural training.

Mr McKay—It goes to another extent. One of the issues is about research, an area which we are not directly involved in but are partially involved in. We do have a substantial resource around the countryside. In Queensland we have one of the last remaining large tracts, if you like, of publicly owned land that could be used for research activities. Part of the policies of the last decade or so has been a significant reduction in extension services within departments of agriculture and significant reduction in research stations and those activities. Therefore, the ability to mount large-scale research programs over long time frames which are going to be really beneficial to the industry in the future has been reduced quite considerably. We have an opportunity to integrate with the research and extension community to use our resources to augment those declining resources in other public sector areas. That then gives a tremendous

opportunity for researchers to interact with extension workers and our staff and students and for a whole of things to flow from that in terms of creating an environment where research and training are important to the future of agriculture in Australia. Without that sort of connectivity, it is very difficult to maintain that sort of level of interest and understanding of the importance of all those elements and how they interact with each other to the benefit of our future industry.

CHAIR—I am conscious of the time, but I need to ask a couple of quick questions; if you could keep your answers brief, it would be very much appreciated. We have heard evidence that Queensland no longer offers an agricultural training course through its network of agricultural colleges that sufficiently applies the theoretical and practical training required to effectively train young entrants for management level entry into agriculture. What management courses are offered at the agricultural colleges?

Mr SECKER—We went through that, Chair, when you were out of the room.

CHAIR—Did you? I am sorry. I have another question. We also received a submission to the committee from Victoria which stated that pastoral companies operating as RTOs have impacted on agricultural colleges and resulted in declining student enrolments. Has this been your experience?

Mr McKay—Yes, it has. Our response to that is to try and engage those organisations and to demonstrate that we can provide that facility for them more efficiently and effectively than they can internally. We have started on that road. A couple of the large pastoral companies have done their induction courses at our facilities. That is, if you like, the step along the road to convince them of our capacity to deliver in a way that is more efficient and more effective for their business. I think we can progressively bring them back to a point where they can see that we can do it more effectively for them than they can do it themselves.

CHAIR—What do you say to the comment, which I have heard today, that one agricultural college in Queensland has so few student numbers that there is a likelihood of a possible closure of that ag college? Is that related to the question I have just asked?

Mr McKay—I am not sure what they said. There is only one ag college, and that is the Australian Agricultural College Corporation. They may be referring to one campus of the corporation—I am not sure what the comment was. But the reality is that we do have some low numbers on some of the campuses. Part of the process we are working through is to create a demand for training that is appropriate for those campuses in terms of the specialisations we are offering for those campuses. I suspect I know which one the comment was about. We have a very strong future envisaged for that campus. We want to move into areas that are un-serviced at the moment in terms of production horticulture and activities like that. They are well set and well located to do the sorts of training which have not been done in the past. We believe there is a demand in that area and that we can create the opportunities for students to come on campus and deliver that training by traineeships and other ways to the industry.

Mr Murray—I have a final comment. I think the transition from the traditional ag colleges Australia wide, if we went back 15 or 20 years, to the VET-sector competency based training has not been an easy or smooth one. I believe that there are ways by which we can blend the two—in other words, we can use and embrace the competency based outcomes and put those back into a

more coherent educational program that will better meet and service the industry needs. That is certainly the plan we have at AACC. We are positioning the organisation to enable it to better accomplish those outcomes.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your evidence. It is appreciated. Once again, I thank you for coming in early at short notice. That is also appreciated by members of the committee.

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

That this committee authorises publication of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 1.23 pm