

COUNTRY WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF NEW SOUTH WALES



SUBMISSION ON THE INQUIRY INTO RURAL SKILLS TRAINING AND RESEARCH

TO: The Secretary,
House of Representatives Standing
Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and
Forestry

Email: aff.reps@aph.gov.au

FROM: Mr. Colin Coakley,
General Manager,
Country Women's Association of NSW,
P.O. Box 15,
POTTS POINT NSW 1335

18 May, 2005

INQUIRY INTO RURAL SKILLS TRAINING AND RESEARCH

Our research leads us to believe there is no shortage of infrastructure required to maintain or establish courses relevant to the rural sector. What is lacking is the labour force to take up the opportunities on offer. This dearth of manpower appears to be the product of a number of factors, some of which are inter-related.

Throughout New South Wales, the focus of our research, there is a range of educational and/or training institutions who, too often, cannot attract requisite numbers of students to run financially viable courses. In the New England area, there is the University of New England, which has on offer degrees right through to Masters and Doctorates in Rural Science, Science, Rural Law, Rural Business Research, as well as a plethora of courses in Education, Business, Economics, etc, that hopefully entice rural students, so that they in turn will practise their professions in the country sector. Extensive research in the agricultural field is a long-standing option through UNE.

Also, in the New England area, there is the Chyswick arm of the CSIRO, but its (Federal) Government funding has been cut dramatically and it is increasingly reliant on private funding. Perhaps the whole question of Government funding of the CSIRO could be revisited by this Standing Committee – after all, the CSIRO was once the flagship of Australian innovation and research. At Chyswick, research is being carried out into pastures, weeds and animal breeding (usually with funding from the breed societies).

As is the case throughout the state, local Colleges of Technical and Further Education have on offer a vast range of courses pertinent to this particular enquiry. If there is not enough uptake of a course, however, it does not run. Wool-classing, farm management, business, computer skills, mechanics, green keeping, horticulture, plumbing, building (and all aspects of that career) are only some of the options available, often as part of a school student's studies, through the Joint Secondary Schools TAFE Program. The TAFE programs are so effective because of the incorporation of both theory and practice in their make-up.

TAFE courses are designed to “fit” their local environment – so that along the seaboard there are courses offered in aspects of the fishing industry; aquaculture, including silver perch, hobby fish, crustaceans, eels and oyster farming; marine studies; maintenance of boats, etc. There are also courses in organic farming, landscaping, tourism, hospitality, etc., though these are not restricted to the coastal campuses. In the Riverina, there is a bent towards aspects of agriculture based on irrigation and rice growing, as well as aspects of the wine industry.

Local high schools, both public and private, offer courses in Agriculture. Depending on the size and location of the school, the students are encouraged to be involved in a number of aspects of rural skilling – animal husbandry, showing and judging animals, welding, crop rotation, etc are all part of the syllabus, with both theoretical and practical aspects being taught. A number of state schools operate as Agricultural High Schools and would-be students at these have to sit entrance examinations. While the “Agricultural” in its title is probably largely ignored in the public perception of James Ruse Agricultural High School, students had to include Agriculture in their studies right through to the Higher School Certificate, until a few years ago at least (and perhaps still do). Farrer, Hurlstone and Yanco all attract country students, many of whom come from the family farm and many of whom eventually want to work the property. Those who go on to University studies often choose an agricultural field to work in and become our agronomists, business managers, inter-generational counsellors, etc. Private schools such as St Paul's, Walla Walla, also attract students from farming backgrounds who wish to be part of the working farm family in the future.

In other parts of the State are a number of campuses of Charles Sturt University, with specific bents in rural studies on offer, as well as courses in Communication, Education, Pharmacy, Nursing, etc, etc, again targeting country students who will remain in the country to earn their living. Charles Sturt in Orange largely offers the course range that was on offer when the campus was Orange Agricultural College, with an emphasis on Management and Horse Husbandry among others, and is hoping a rural based Veterinary Science course will be successful. At the Wagga Wagga Campus, viticulture has long been a tradition.

Total College in the Hunter, “The Practical Edge” as it refers to itself, “provides a unique blend of agricultural training and practical experience for school leavers” and anyone else interested in a career in agriculture, with plenty of hands-on training. Like TAFE, many of its courses are accredited by universities, should students decide to progress to study at that level. The truly outstanding characteristic of students of rural courses at country campuses is their desirability as employees. Between 80 and 90% are snapped up, very

often before their courses are near completion. Like the country-based universities, such institutions offer full-time, part-time and external modes of study, with Distance Education through the Internet and interactive technology having become a normal aspect of every level of formal education, from school to doctorate. A sign of the times though, is that Tocal has been merged with the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture, after that Institution failed to attract enough full-time students to remain a viable, stand-alone institution.

In addition to this whole range of educational and training institutions, are the private providers, whether in-house, on-the-job (such as in abattoirs, or forestry - cutting, planting, milling) or tourism, or hospitality – almost all industries have some of their training in-house. Registered Training Organisations are another set of providers – their bottom line is to be profitable and so many of the courses they offer are shorter versions of those on the local TAFE register; hence, they are often more attractive, at least at the outset; but a course designed by one organisation to cover 400 hours is seldom better taught – and learned – in 250 hours. At the same time, because prospective students have bypassed the TAFE course in favour of that offered by the RTO, the TAFE course is lost, through lack of numbers.

According to land holders, some of the best training and learning they access is through Field Days and Seminars, held locally and skewed towards only one or two aspects of local agriculture. Crop rotation, direct drilling, conservation, silage storing, etc, etc, as well as aspects of animal husbandry. The “courses” are usually on a farm or property, conducted by the local land holder and/or the “experts” brought in for the day. They are mostly informal affairs, where the farmer has an opportunity to socialise, share his/her concerns, receive support, feedback and encouragement. There are also all the courses that have to be undertaken on chemicals, those courses needed for accreditation, etc. These all come at a financial cost and take time.

NSW then has more rural studies courses than can be filled, so why the lack of skills in the rural areas? Why are courses not being taken up? Firstly, we have found the cost of courses for many, many families is prohibitive. Most of this State has been experiencing 3 to 4 years of drought. Farming families cannot adequately feed and clothe their families in parts of NSW. Our Association, the Country Women's Association of NSW, has been receiving calls for help to pay electricity accounts, to meet the cost of fuel for family transport, and so on. How can any parent who is facing such crises find the funding for a child to undertake a study course? If the student lives out of town or in a small country town, there is usually no public transport to the educational institution, no money to buy books and instruments, no time to leave the daily grind of hand feeding, checking stock, no hope that there will even be a farm for him/her to use the newly acquired skills on.

There have to be jobs and/or careers at the end of study if people are going to be attracted to courses that cost time and money. In times of hardship, such as the present, the first expense the average farmer cuts is labour. Even in generally fair times, many land holders want to employ according to the seasons – when things are busy (harvesting, shearing, etc) they will take on casual labour; when things are quiet, they do not want or need the extra expense. Now, too, there are concerns about Occupational Health and Safety legislation, conditions of employment (compulsory employer contributions to superannuation, holiday loading, etc) that the smaller land holder sees as deterrents to taking on and training a work force outside the family.

The current situation in most of our State is not conducive to employing labour or meeting the expenses of training. The Drought Summit held at Parkes on 17th May attracted more than 2000 farmers from across the Central West and beyond. There were stories of absolute despair, seven suicides in the region in the past few weeks, five in the Riverina in a month; Jeff Kennet from Beyond Blue was there, but had little hope to offer. Rural Counsellors will have their numbers increased across the State by a whole TWO, yet the Service had to wait until its funding almost ran out before it was assured of its continuation for another short term.

People are having trouble just living each day – the drought has been ongoing for years, yet we are having an enquiry, fundamentally, into why student places are not being taken up at institutions that have had imposed on them, at both State and Federal levels, increased and increasing fees. Neither the NSW Government nor the Federal Minister for Education seems to have an inkling of what the reality is in the rural sectors of this State. No Minister at any level has paid real attention (that would result in action to ameliorate the situation) to the sheer decimation of rural communities which lose a farm, a teacher, a doctor, so lose a shop, lose a hospital. The whole rural fabric is being shredded and there is a perception that no one cares. Some measures, such as the withdrawal of the need for water payments 2003-4 for Lachlan water users are REAL measures that do help, but there are not enough such measures.

Really, until we have had a couple of successful harvests after widespread rains, there seems little cause for optimism on the land or an improvement in the take-up rate of agricultural courses on offer. The skills farmers have developed in maintaining their properties in the face of natural disasters, followed by government inaction or inadequate measures, are fortunately very good or many more properties would have been lost. Formal training though is costly, both in terms of time and money, and is outside the dreams of too many rural people at the moment. When there is that improvement in circumstances, one hopes there will still be in place the educational trainers and providers willing and able to offer the courses and skills so necessary to successful and viable rural industries.
