



MARCUS OLDHAM COLLEGE
"Developing Professionals In Agriculture"

**Submission to the House of Representatives Standing
Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry - Inquiry into
Rural Skills Training and Research**

Background

Marcus Oldham College is the only independent agricultural college operating in Australia. The institution was founded in 1962 in Geelong, Victoria and attracts enrolments from all states and territories of Australia. The College mission is to prepare motivated progressive professionals who will excel in the emerging national and global environment. Marcus Oldham College values individuality, innovation, excellence and encourages leadership, loyalty and service to the community.

All courses offered at Marcus Oldham focus on business management as the core discipline. The academic programs delivered include a Bachelor of Business (Agricultural Management), Advanced Diploma in Farm Business Management, Diploma of Agribusiness and Diploma of Horse Business Management. Students pay fees of \$27,000 per year to live and study on the campus and 2005 has seen the highest student enrolment in the 43 year history of the College.

Terms of Reference

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

There are many providers of agricultural education in Australia comprising TAFE colleges, agricultural colleges, private providers and universities. All institutions are different in the courses they offer, the level of service they provide, fees charged, the quality of the students entering their programs and in many cases the employment positions their students secure upon graduation. Typically, students can choose to study on-campus, off-campus, on line, part-time, or full-time from a number of institutions around Australia. This diversity in the

education marketplace is beneficial and essential, as it gives the customer (the student) choice.

The pathways from the vocational education and training (VET) sector through to higher education in Australia are clear and well documented. Students are provided with opportunities to move smoothly from certificate 1 courses to PhD if they are scholastically capable and motivated to achieve. Students wishing to study at Marcus Oldham College receive advanced standing or recognition of prior learning for previous academic achievement or industry experience.

Education is about giving students choice. We have seen colleges and universities amalgamate recently and in some situations, possible closures are imminent. At first glance this situation may appear detrimental to the agricultural sector, however the question needs to be asked, Are there too many providers of agriculture? Is there an expectation that students wishing to study agriculture need or should attend the closest college or university? Certainly in the area of higher education, it is often very beneficial for students to leave their local communities and study interstate. This decision can often broaden a learner's outlook and expand their thinking.

Since its founding in 1962, Marcus Oldham College has required students to work in industry for a minimum of 12 months prior to commencing their studies and to complete a second year of employment in the middle of their course. The structure of these programs ensures our graduates are closely linked to industry. The agriculture sector needs employees who have both practical skills and tertiary qualifications.

Managing farms requires the CEO to have a strong understanding of both business and systems management. Unfortunately, quite often young people entering agriculture are not encouraged to excel academically. Typically, for on-farm positions, employers seek staff who have practical experience, but they are not as stringent in their selection process regarding education levels. This philosophy needs to change if Australia is to secure and maintain an educated rural workforce for the future that can adapt to, and manage change.

The uptake of recognition of prior learning in the farming community has occurred providing farmers with qualifications acknowledging their skill level, but this process has not encouraged them to actually enrol and complete formal studies. The concept of lifelong learning needs to be promoted to, and adopted by those working in the rural sector.

We regularly hear stories of doom and gloom and often the perception of the wider community is that a career in the rural sector is not rewarding. This is not true. Marcus Oldham College, along with many other providers of agricultural education and training promote the very high employment rate of graduates upon

completion of their course. The total number of farmers in Australia may be decreasing however the agribusiness and service sector to agriculture is growing.

The Federal Government's introduction of FEEHELP loans is a very positive access and equity move that now allows students who wish to study a higher education qualification at an approved provider of their choice financial assistance. These types of incentives will encourage young people to complete formal studies and therefore improve the management skill levels of farmers for the future.

2. The skills needs of agricultural industries in Australia, including 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.

In recent times, 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. Administering and managing an RTO is complex due to stringent compliance requirements set by State Governments. The core business of agricultural colleges as an RTO is education and these institutions are equipped and capable of keeping abreast of changes in areas such as competency-based training, recognition of prior learning and assessment.

Since the development of training packages, vocational education has become somewhat prescriptive and restrictive. There is little room for institutions to differentiate their courses from other providers. The rural industry has always promoted a very hands-on approach to management where workers needed to be able to complete all manual tasks such as welding, mechanics and fencing. But who pays to teach students all of these important tasks? Rural employers expect agricultural graduates to have these skills when they graduate from college however training manual skills in small groups is a very expensive form of delivery.

On the issue of industry skill requirements, the rural sector needs to support the colleges that provide vocational training. Without colleges to train young entrants to the industry, a large void would be created. The training provided by colleges saves rural employers money, as the students are educated in occupational health and safety, handling livestock and so forth. College graduates are job ready in the practical sense when they commence employment on farms.

It is important that rural employees are encouraged and supported to move from certificate courses further up the ladder into diploma programs. Lifelong learning

and the development of cognitive skills in farmers is important to the rural sector of the future.

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

The role of extension in agriculture has changed considerably over the years with the private sector in the form of consultants taking on a much larger role in recent times.

With regard to research, a large proportion of the dollars are derived from subsidies on farmer's research levies. Research conducted by government departments can sometimes be viewed by farmers as irrelevant with no real on-farm application.

Over the years farmer driven and conducted research has come to the fore with the founding of groups such as Birchip Cropping and Southern Farming Systems in Victoria. It is apparent that farmers are keen to be involved and learn from applied research. It appears that often research money is used in the areas of technology and production gain, where dollars may be worthy allocated to business training to lift the management skills of farmers.

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

Australia's agricultural sector needs leaders who understand themselves, their industry and the global operating environments. Skills training and development in leadership will assist and secure our future rural ambassadors.

Marcus Oldham College recently delivered a five-day residential leadership course in Canberra for 40 young men and women currently working in agricultural industries. The program was organised and funded by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry with the objective to provide participants with the skills, knowledge and confidence to take a greater role in directing the future of their industries. Participants in the program came from all over Australia and it is training and skills development such as this, that need to be delivered to assist train and prepare our future leaders.

In addition, Marcus Oldham delivers a five-day rural leadership course at the College in June each year. This is a national program supported by many industry groups and individuals. Several youth leadership courses are also delivered by Marcus Oldham College in regional areas throughout rural Victoria

and are supported by the local shires and farming communities. Commonwealth Government financial support targeted towards developing future rural leaders would not only assist individuals, but also support the rural communities they serve.

The Commonwealth Government in the past has encouraged and supported farmers to upgrade their skill levels through schemes such as Farmbis. This training has been useful and mainly delivered in the form of short course training. Additional support may be considered from government in the future for young farmers in the form of formal education at the tertiary level.

Conclusion

The Principal of Marcus Oldham College is pleased to submit this paper to the Inquiry into Rural Skills Training and Research. He has put to the committee his views and acknowledges he is the sole author of the document.

Invitation to Visit Marcus Oldham College

The Chairman of Council, Mr W Robert R Beggs AM and the Principal invite the committee to visit our campus in Geelong, Victoria and meet our students. The College is located 90 minutes from Tullamarine airport in Melbourne and 30 minutes from Avalon near Geelong.

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