

**Submission to Agricultural Competitiveness Issues Paper, April 2014**  
**By John Ackland, CEO - Skillinvest Group and John Goldsmith, General  
Manager - Longerenong Agricultural College**

# Longerenong College

## **1. Introduction**

Longerenong College, established in 1889 and located 13km north-east of Horsham in the Wimmera region of Victoria has had a long and proud tradition as one of the state's leading agricultural education and training providers, specialising in broadacre dryland agriculture.

Longerenong College is a part of WORKCO Limited's private registered training organisation (RTO) which has not-for-profit status. The college is now one of the few training organisations in Victoria that provides training facilities, accommodation & catering and a commercial farm in the one setting.

The main theme of this submission is the importance of education and training to the national agricultural industries.

## **2. Agriculture as a career choice**

One of the main impacts in the future success of the agricultural industry in Australia will be its ability to attract young people to work in the industry. We have seen for more than the past decade a decreasing ability to attract people to agriculture and the related service industries. This trend is mirrored by the number of student enrolments in both Higher Education (HE) and Vocational Education & Training (VET) agriculture and related courses throughout the country. However, based on 2013/14 student enrolment figures, this trend may have bottomed out in both HE and VET.

The need for increased food production is well documented with world population expected to increase to more than 9 billion people by 2040. This will require major increases in productivity in a relatively short period of time and a key element to meeting the increased demand for food will be attracting quality young people to the various agricultural industries.

It is important to not only attract sufficient numbers to the industry, but also to attract high calibre people. Agricultural career opportunities abound and these need to be promoted appropriately. It is widely accepted that the number of agricultural graduates are not meeting the needs of industry, with some sources suggesting there are up to 6 jobs for every graduate nationally.

Anecdotally some suggest this figure is even higher as many employers in the industry do not bother advertising positions or have given up doing so.

Whilst there have been some recent developments in the promotion of ag careers with excellent work done by Rural Skills Australia and web based career information sites such as Career Harvest, SkillsOne and the Victorian Skills Gateway to name a few, there is still much scope for further work to be done.

There is still a perception amongst a large proportion of the community, particularly in urban areas, that Agriculture = Farming and that if you study ag you will become a farmer. Whilst this is certainly one career path and a valid one at that, there are so many more career pathways that need to be articulated, particularly in the agribusiness and agricultural service areas. Young people need to be informed that agriculture is financially rewarding, there is a long term career path with many opportunities, using world class technology and practices. Other industries are doing this and attracting the young people from the market place that the agricultural industry needs.

Role models or career champions could be used to promote ag careers. Whilst the development of career websites has been useful, there is still the issue of engaging young people and illustrating the many and varied opportunities. Careers teachers in secondary schools have an important role to play in this area.

There is an identified lack of career counseling in agriculture and a huge lack of knowledge of the agricultural and related industries. Young people and others are not exposed to the opportunities in agriculture or the experiences of country living. To encourage young people to look at careers in agriculture there needs to be:

Professional and Personal Development of Careers Teachers, including:

- Personal Development in agricultural careers using current deliverers of agricultural training, vocational and higher education.
- Teacher release to industry short programs for careers teachers, where careers teachers would go out into employers in the agricultural industry and gain first-hand knowledge of the opportunities that are available. This could be 4 to 6 weeks working with a number of industry experiences including agricultural service industries and the State Department of Primary Industries. This could be coordinated through organisations such as the Group Training Association of Australia, National Farmers Federation and the various state based associations or other organisations with a network of rural based members.
- Careers teachers generally have a lack of knowledge of the agricultural and trade related industries and have a strong focus on careers related to University study as often that is what they know. Professional development of careers teachers in schools will be a critical factor in being able to get the message out to young people about careers in agriculture. Along with careers teachers the message must get out to parents as they also have significant influence on the direction of their children.
- Career teacher development could occur in the November, December period when students are leaving school, an ideal time for professional development to occur.
- Existing providers of agricultural related training would also be excellent providers of training for careers teachers in the agricultural related areas. These could be a mix of HE and VET providers.

### **3. Attracting quality young people to agriculture**

There are a number of reasons that affect the agriculture sector in attracting and retaining young people. Many of these are due to the national skills shortage or we believe it is more of a people shortage, and other reasons are industry and region specific.

The agricultural industry often talks itself down and highlights any difficult times but never talks up the good or profitable times. This gives the community a poor view of the industry and discourages young people from choosing a career in agriculture or related industries when they perceive that other industries have more stable careers with career pathways.

Agriculture needs to have a positive marketing campaign on the benefits of a career in the industry using actual role models of varying ages that have made successful careers in agriculture and are passionate about what they do.

Generally the business and recruitment strategies need to be brought up to modern human resource practices. The agricultural industries need to develop recruitment and retention strategies as other industries are doing. Looking at the available labour including indigenous Australians, migrants and refugees must be a part of any employment and recruitment strategy. Once the people are in place, businesses then need to look at the training and up-skilling of their employees.

Anecdotal evidence indicates that farm businesses recruiting staff, offer realistic wage and condition packages that would match other industry in their geographic area.

Leadership varies greatly across rural Australia which not only affects the agricultural industry but other industries and the function of the towns. As land holdings increase in size particularly in the dryland agriculture areas, this has led to less people and has assisted the degeneration of small rural towns. As there are less people, services have diminished and this has taken many good leaders out of these communities which have also contributed to the downward trend.

Small communities that continue to lose services and at best are unable to attract new services will continue to have difficulty in competing to attract labour for all industries, including agriculture, to their regions. Lack of good education choices from primary school through to university is a large deterrent for families to live in rural Australia. Once young people complete secondary school it is cost prohibitive for a large cohort of these to attend tertiary education. The living and accommodation costs are more of a barrier than the education fees. This deters families from relocating to the country or staying unless they own property or a business.

Government policy over the past 20 to 30 years has generally speaking not been favorable to boosting the farming or any other sector in rural Australia.

It is time to look past the large regional centres as these are not typical of rural Australia and the issues that are faced. We should be considering positive discrimination and decentralization to boost the rural areas of Australia. We can all say it is too hard or decentralization is a thing of the past but if we don't attempt this type of assistance to the communities, nothing will change and agriculture will continue to decline along with many rural towns and communities.

We need to reshape local government, water authorities and other government and semi government authorities and actually get rid of the impediments to development. There are many examples where industry and agriculture is being held back by these organisations. Action needs to be taken and not just have more talk fests.

Also recreational amenities are extremely important in attracting/keeping young people in rural Australia. The importance of recreational water for example for boating activities including skiing, fishing and camping should not be underestimated. Notwithstanding the environmental value of maintaining lakes and river systems throughout rural Australia, the contribution to adding to the quality of life of rural people is immense. Government policy needs to acknowledge this. Sport is also an integral part of country life and therefore sporting facilities

need to be maintained to involve young people in the wide range of sports that foster social interaction and builds communities.

#### **4. Strategies to attract and maintain young people in rural areas**

##### **4.1 Attraction for City people to careers in agriculture;**

- Many young people from metropolitan areas are not attracted to agriculture due to a total lack of knowledge of the agricultural sector and what it does, and potential careers that are available. There are probably many reasons for this, as the farm sector declines many city people do not have contact with the country and don't visit as would have occurred say 30-40 years ago. Twenty years ago Longerenong Agricultural College based at Horsham for example had significant student numbers from the metropolitan area, today we may get one or two enrolments from this area and this probably demonstrates a significant drop from a valuable market.
- School trips to current providers of agricultural education and training could be provided which would include hands on experience of agriculture and how the industry actually works. Mentone Grammar from Melbourne for example sends its year 9 students to Longerenong Agricultural College for one week each year. The students participate in hands on experiences as well as experiencing a taste of country life. This is a model that could be developed across the country at other sites. Secondary colleges could be encouraged to 'host' a city school for a week to gain knowledge and as a part of this would be experiences in agriculture.

##### **4.2 Competition by the Agricultural industry for labour from other industries;**

- The agricultural sector has to compete on the open market with other industries for the available labour. Other industries and associations put resources into promotion of their industry and demonstrated career paths. This is not evident coming from the agriculture sector. Mining, manufacturing, hospitality and the professional sectors are aggressive with their promotion in the market for particularly our young people. Mining has been an increasing problem with young people completing a trade or other qualification and leaving for the money they may earn in the mining sector. Some of these may return but many will not, and stay in their new adopted states. The agricultural industry with assistance from government must be more proactive in promoting the opportunities in agriculture and related industries in rural Australia.
- Migration is another area that has not been used in many locations. Both skilled migration and refugees are a pool of labour that is available but not used to the full potential. There is obviously assistance needed to educate the employers about any cultural requirements and training would be required for the immigrant but it is happening successfully in other industries and has been done in agriculture in the past, this is another area to develop.

##### **4.3 Increased choice in education for families;**

- To attract and retain people in rural communities the lack of good education is one of the big sticking points for families. Little or no choice in secondary education sees many students having to attend boarding schools, if the families are not in a position to afford this they are not attracted to a rural setting or leave as their children approach secondary school age. The lack of tertiary education in many regions is also a deterrent for families to work in rural areas. The cost of sending young people to University is enormous, particularly rent and accommodation which leads to people leaving to educate their children. We feel all that can be done here is work

with the Universities to offer a lot more courses from their rural campuses and the federal government should relax HECs charges and assist with scholarships to allow these young people to stay. Once the young people are educated in a rural setting there is a greater chance of them staying in that area.

- If the lack of education and good facilities is not addressed things are unlikely to change.

#### **4.4 Travel incentives and good quality public transport;**

- The cost of travel and the lack of public transport is a huge disincentive to live in rural areas. Although this problem has been around for some time the loss of many services from country towns is making the problem even greater. Access to local health care, often banking, shopping, government services and many other services is a problem to be addressed, particularly in attracting new residents to a local community. We need better mobile or visiting services to assist small communities. Without transport including public transport rural Australia will continue to suffer. As the price of fuel increases the problem will continue to increase.

#### **4.5 Reasonable quality and cost accommodation;**

- Attracting a workforce to rural communities has difficulties with availability of accommodation. A plan needs to be developed to attract investors to build reasonable priced and quality housing in rural locations. Government may have to develop this with incentives or a rent buyback plan from the occupant or even housing that is modern design that could be relocated if the rural business faltered for some reason. Government could set up a program to investigate this and come up with two or three solutions to give local communities some way of attracting housing development.

#### **4.6 Improved Telecommunications;**

- The use of technology in agriculture has increased exponentially in recent years and this is likely to continue into the foreseeable future. Infrastructure must be provided to ensure all industry participants are not hindered by lack of unreliable telecommunication infrastructure.

## **5. Supporting HE & VET providers**

If the agriculture industry is serious about the need to attract young people and serious about attracting quality trained staff, there must be a commitment to support the providers of that training. Prolonged periods of declining student numbers in agricultural courses, has resulted in a decrease of agricultural training providers throughout the country. This has also impacted on how that education and training is provided in the various states. A positive outcome of this is that many providers have had to adapt and become more business savvy, evaluating all aspects of education and training programs and ultimately responding the needs of industry.

However, industry and government alike must acknowledge that agricultural education and training is offered in relatively thin markets. This provides very limited, if any, scope for those providers to invest significant sums of money in capital expenditure, much of which is required to ensure the continued resourcing of quality modern training programs.

If industry and government agree that key providers are needed, they must be supported in the future, as unfortunately at the moment that is not the case. Australian agriculture has an important role to play in help feeding the ever increasing world population and collectively we must work together to attract quality people to this exciting industry.