

Agricultural Competitiveness Taskforce

Submission by W Keith Graham – 16 April 2014

I make this submission to the Agricultural Competitiveness Taskforce as an individual with 48 years' experience as a rural consultant, valuer and primary producer in Victoria and South Australia.

Having been born and educated in New Zealand, I have maintained a close interest in the agricultural industries of both countries and I am convinced that compared with New Zealand, Australia is simply not competitive.

Australian agriculturalists who undertake any study tour of New Zealand generally find a stark contrast between the two countries. New Zealand's agriculture is a long way ahead of Australia's largely because over many years, they have attracted the brighter students into the business. In Australia, agriculture is a last resort for many would-be students.

In my opinion New Zealand's agriculture compares very favourably with Australia's for the following reasons:

- Agriculture enjoys a higher status in the NZ community.
- Agricultural education is more highly regarded in NZ.
- Agriculture has more political clout in NZ.

Generally speaking:

- NZ farmers are more confident.
- They are younger and better educated.
- They are more optimistic and motivated.
- They find their industries more satisfying and enjoyable.
- New entrants see more opportunities to create wealth and to become farm owners themselves.
- Farmers enjoy more streamlined and better supporting services.

The Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper is an opportunity to recognise that the most critical resource that our industries lack are people with the capacity to achieve the goals the White Paper has laid out. There is no doubt that some good ideas will be submitted to the Task Force, but under existing conditions they will be insufficient to realise anywhere near the potential of our rural industries.

In Victoria there are two agricultural courses, at Melbourne and Latrobe Universities. These are small, under-resourced facilities, in major city based universities where they are largely overlooked in favour of law, commerce, engineering and others. Melbourne University is currently merging its Melbourne School of Land and Environment with its Veterinary Science facility in a move seen by many as a downgrade of agriculture's role.

By contrast, New Zealand has the specialist land-based Lincoln University, founded in 1878 and having an international profile, highly respected staff and a range of courses that encompasses land-based disciplines across the whole value chain. Over the years Lincoln University has produced many high quality alumni who have played prominent roles in commerce and government as well as those who continue to drive New Zealand's rural industries forward.

In New Zealand and the United States 25% of farmers have tertiary training compared with 5% in Australia. What is required is a cultural change in Australia's agricultural education so that over the longer term, brighter, better educated and more motivated people can enter every aspect of our rural industries and drive them forward.

What is needed in Australia is a land-based university similar to New Zealand's Lincoln University. However, a brand new institution with the quality staff and the respected profile of Lincoln would be almost impossible to achieve.

One solution would be to encourage Lincoln University to open a campus in a large rural centre such as Geelong where it could develop a decent profile away from major competition. Such a move would enable existing Australian courses to relocate, while additional new students would be attracted by the higher profile and good reputation of Lincoln. In the shorter term, a good option would be to immediately start a scholarship program that encourages significant numbers of young Australians to complete courses at Lincoln University in New Zealand. This approach would ensure that appropriately educated and motivated people could return to our rural industries as soon as possible.

Personal Profile – W Keith Graham

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