

ENTICING, TRAINING AND RETAINING YOUNG PEOPLE IN AGRICULTURE

Agricultural Competitiveness Issues Paper Response

Submitted by



Barossa Young People In Ag (Barossa YiAg) was established in 2013 after a series of workshops which identified the lack of young people in agriculture as a major concern. The group is made up of eight individuals who come from a variety of backgrounds and careers based in agriculture including agribusiness, fertiliser, soils, fodder, grain and sheep farming, agriculture education and regional development. The aim of the group is to provide opportunities for networking, information sharing and knowledge transfer between 15-40 year olds involved within the local agriculture industries including grazing, cropping, horticulture and vineyards. The group also aims to link with other similar organisations both state wide and nationally to provide networking opportunities.

It is a known fact that the average age of the Australian farmer is 53 years old, compared to 40, in most other occupations. At present, this is not an immediate problem, but the lack of youth coming through to take over from this generation in the next decade or two is concerning. More needs to be done to promote agriculture as a career choice to young people to fill the void as the 'baby boomer generation' begin to retire.

Enticing

According to the Agricultural Competitiveness Issues Paper, the Liberal National Party (LNP) "is progressing its election commitments and other measures to promote a strong, vibrant agriculture sector including: Committing \$2 million for a new program to help teachers better understand the products and processes of food and fibre production" (Agricultural Competitiveness Issues Paper, Australian Government, 2014). To put this in perspective, there are 9,393 schools in Australia. This equates to \$212.92 per school to educate teachers about a topic many know little to nothing about and lack adequate resources to teach this topic. Agriculture is included in the science curriculum, but is often skipped over due to the limitations of teachers and schools.

Schools, especially in urban areas need to break certain stereotypes about agriculture that have been portrayed in the media and show it is an industry on the cutting edge of science and technology. Excursions to field days, research and development sites and exposure to industries such as horticulture, viticulture, fish and timber farms – not just the traditional broad acre and sheep and cattle farms, will help with this.

Students from rural areas cannot keep being relied upon to fill higher education places and farm labour positions. Agriculture as a year 11 and 12 subject needs to be made more available to students and incorporated into vocational educating training (VET) programs for students who do not wish to follow a path to university.

Industry bodies such as National Farmers Federation and Future Farmers Network need to work with governments and schools to promote agriculture as a career to senior students through talks, information sessions, practical delivery and a presence at career days to name a few options. Universities and higher education providers need to promote their courses with the end results that agriculture can provide a huge variety of career options, job security, excellent wages, a constantly growing and changing industry and living in family friendly places.

Training

During the 1970's and 1980's, Agricultural colleges in Australia were thriving. Now many are struggling to survive or have closed altogether. What has happened in the last 20 years that has caused universities to 'drop the ball'? What perceptions have changed?

A large part of the agricultural industry is made up of men and women that trained during this time and will soon be on the cusp of retirement. They lament the position that agriculture education is now in and worry for the future.

Furthermore, there are now suspensions of courses, re-location and closure of campuses. A prime example of this is the transfer of all agricultural courses/departments (other than veterinary science) to the University of Adelaide Waite Campus (south of Adelaide). Previously these subjects were taught at the Roseworthy campus, a rural campus with an associated farm located north of Adelaide. This campus is easily accessible to regional students who enjoy the rural life style. Now future students have to decide between living and working on the farm, or moving to the city for University where previously they could work on both.

Another example is Glenormiston College, located near Terang in Victoria's South West. Once considered one of the best ag colleges in Australia, with excellent facilities and situated on a site featuring heritage listed buildings and gardens, it now lies empty, and overgrown after TAFE funding was slashed and more and more courses taken off campus to be completed online instead. This year, Melbourne University have only 47 students completing their final year of its agriculture course and in 2012 Hawkesbury Agricultural College had to suspend its first year intake, after less than 10 students enrolled.

The closure of campuses like Glenormiston and reduction of courses offered at Roseworthy have a definite flow on effect for the local communities – a reduction in regional community populations, reduced access to facilities and limited flow on business opportunities for other small businesses in the region.

Agriculture does not seem to be a high economic priority for state and federal governments demonstrated by the lack of investment in infrastructure and cutting of regional courses (including courses that teach basic skills such as chainsaw use, motorbike safety and

chemical use accreditation). These reductions in regional training opportunities keep putting people that want to work in agriculture further and further behind. Training needs to be available for those who want to follow an academic path as well as those that prefer hands-on skills training.

Another issue for agricultural students coming from High School or University is training and support in the work place. As an example, in South Australia, with the withdrawal of state government funding in the regional RD&E delivery, there has also been the removal of a department which mentored and trained new graduates in the agricultural sector. The current state government has the opportunity to partner with the new groups/organisations delivering agricultural RD&E and on the job training to graduates in regional areas. Providing support to young people in the agricultural sector will also assist retaining people in the industry which is the next issue discussed.

Retaining

“The agriculture sector employs only a small proportion of the national workforce, but is an important source of jobs in rural and regional communities. In 2011, agriculture accounted for 2.2 per cent of total employment across Australia. In very remote, remote and outer regional areas, agriculture accounted for around five to seven times this (11.6 per cent, 14.7 per cent and 10.4 per cent respectively).” (Agricultural Competitiveness Issues Paper, Australian Government, 2014)

Many small towns and communities rely upon agriculture to for their survival and will be the first to feel the effects of good or bad seasons. Some rural communities are however, beginning to slowly fade away as farming land is slowly swallowed up by investment firms and international owners when smaller properties are sold. Farms get larger and regional populations decrease.

Rural communities need assistance to attract families, singles and couples to live and work in their towns through improved services such as access to quality health care, schools, kindergartens and child care centres with excellent teachers. Good infrastructure such as good all weather condition roads for domestic and heavy machinery use that are properly maintained and facilities for the community like libraries, learning hubs, sports centres and public transport. The assistance required for sustainable rural communities needs to come in the form of good quality agricultural education and training opportunities.

Another integral service for rural and remote communities is the ability to be able to connect to high speed internet and have reliable phone coverage. Unfortunately, the bush is often neglected in these aspects and it takes immense people power to promote change for better services that residents in larger towns and cities take for granted every day. One South Australian Mallee town, with a regional population of around 600 people, is unable to provide residents with any further connections to ADSL internet as the exchange is full. This issue has been brought to the attention of Telstra, local and state governments and the media, but as yet, nothing has been resolved. Poor mobile phone reception means that farmers can often miss out on locking in grain contracts or even putting themselves at risk,

often having to climb to a high point (such as a field bin) in order to make a call or send an email.

There is no need for regional areas to be the 'poor country cousins', and until this perception changes it will be hard to attract and retain people in small communities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, having the opportunity to voice concerns through this process is the first step. If, as identified, agriculture is going to be the fundamental industry for feeding and fuelling our country, it is time to ensure the future generations are widely exposed to the exciting and achievable opportunities within.

We would like to see more money provided to schools and education facilities to appropriately train teachers to educate the next generation.

We would like to see training and mentoring opportunities for young agricultural service providers to build their skills and capacity, as previously offered by state agricultural departments.

We would like more emphasis placed on the employment opportunities within agriculture (branding/marketing, travel, technology, adventure etc)

We would like regional areas to have the same technology connection opportunities as urban areas.

We would like to see agriculture at the forefront of every decision made in all tiers of government.

Thank you for allowing us this opportunity, we look forward to learning about the next steps from this Competitiveness White Paper, and we would be happy to continue this discussion.

Barossa Young People in Ag



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