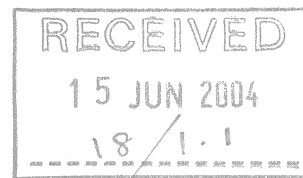


# **INQUIRY INTO THE MURRUMBIDGEE COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE**

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## **Background**

The NSW Farmer's Association (the Association) is Australia's largest State farmer organisation representing the interests of over 13,000 farmers – ranging from broad acre, meat, wool and grain producers, to more specialised producers in the horticulture, egg, pork, oyster and goat industries.

## Executive Summary

The NSW Farmers' Association strongly opposes the closure of the residential courses at Murrumbidgee College of Agricultural (MCA) and believes that education opportunities must be available to address the needs in the southern and western parts of the state.

The process by which the decision was made was flawed. Incorrect data, failure to recognise the impacts of some underlying issues such as teaching vacancies; lack of course promotion and the drought; and no consultation with the community, college or students prior to the decision to close, has resulted in great frustration and angst in the local community and agricultural stakeholders in general.

- The enrolment trend at MCA showed increasing numbers, with a 14% increase in student enrolments between 2000 and 2003.
- No Regional Impact Study was conducted prior to the decision, despite being a Government requirement.
- Dollar per contact hour of \$12.49 compared favourably with NSW TAFE (\$8-18).
- Only one student transferred to Tocal, and some previous MCA students withdrew completely from continuing with their education programs.
- The 44 job losses had an immediate impact with the loss of \$2.5 million in wages, and a flow on effect of ~\$10 million on the small businesses in the area.
- Many of the facilities are less than five years old, and are unique in their quality and location. There must be a strategy to ensure these facilities are productively used to benefit agriculture and the region.

## INTRODUCTION

The NSW Farmers' Association is strongly opposed to the State Government's decision to close full and part time residential agricultural course delivery at MCA.

The Association believes that the decision was short sighted, based on flawed information, and done with neither adequate consultation nor full consideration of the impacts for the local area.

The Association has received strong representations from members in the local MCA community. In addition, there is broader concern about the future direction and deployment of agricultural education programs in NSW. Such educational opportunities are essential for agriculture in the State in order to attract younger generations to the sector.

### **a. The process by which the decision was made**

The Association is particularly concerned by the way in which the decision to close Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture (MCA) was made. In addition to the lack of community, college and student consultation (see next section), the Association believes there were flawed assumptions and incorrect data used to justify this action. Underlying issues in relation to student numbers, such as inadequate course promotion and extended staff vacancies, were also not taken into account.

The specific concerns about the process and assumptions are outlined below.

Despite a Government commitment in 1997 that a Regional Impact Study (RIS) would be conducted **prior** to any large movement of staff from one area to another, no impact assessment was taken until after the MCA decision was made. This meant that the decision was made with incomplete information, and the value of undertaking an RIS after the fact is dubious.

The public justification<sup>1</sup> for closing the residential courses at MCA were

- decline in demand for full time classes
- full time enrolments dropped from 65 in 2000 to 39 in 2003
- net cost by Government to support each full time student is \$24,800 – three times the comparable costs at Tocal
- that the same courses would be available, just at a “central” location.

### **Student numbers and trends**

The information cited<sup>2</sup> in relation to the “drastic decline in full time enrolments” was not accurate. The Minister quoted 65 students enrolled full time in 2000 and used this to compare with 2003 numbers. This was not correct as the 65

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<sup>1</sup> Press release dated 3 September 2003

<sup>2</sup> Press release dated 3 September 2003

students included both full and part time students. In 2003, there were in fact 39 fulltime students and an additional 35 part time students, so when comparing like with like, student numbers had increased by 14%. This was despite severe drought conditions that affected much of the State, and were particularly severe in the southern and western parts of NSW. Tocal, by contrast, has a greater proportion of students from metropolitan areas, who were not subjected to the same financial constraints imposed by the drought.

The upward trend in student numbers occurred even though there was no recent promotion of the MCA courses, and classes could not be run due to extended periods where teaching staff positions were unfilled. For example, where the sheep course did not have a teacher, there was a 50% drop in students. Since June 1995, other periods of vacancy included:

Manager – Continuing Education: 23 months then 46 months  
 Deputy Principal: 23 months  
 Education Officer – Sheep/Rangelands: 15 months then 6 months. (Still vacant)  
 Education Officer – Agronomy: 7 months then 19 months  
 Education Officer – Irrigation: Not replaced since 1999 – 54 months

This was further compounded by the loss of the VET program into regional High Schools, which established early linkages between school students and MCA.

Members of the Association feel that participation in the full-time Certificate courses reflects the inability of many of the students to pay increasing tuition fees. This tuition fee is payable on top of the residential fee, and the resulting financial burden is unmanageable, especially for self supporting students. This has been exacerbated by the pressures of the drought. The Association began raising its concerns about staffing and fees as far back as June 2002.

### **Net costs**

Net costs per student comparisons were used to justify the decision, with a figure of \$24,800 per student at MCA. However the nationally recognised comparison for costs of training is “dollars per annual student contact hours”. These are the measures used by the NSW Board of Vocational Education and Training and NSW TAFE.

It is understood that the NSW TAFE costs for accredited training range from \$8 to \$18 per annual student contact hour. NSW Agriculture’s contribution from CR revenue for accredited training by MCA was \$12.79. Therefore, despite the inherently higher costs for practical agricultural skills based training compared to other classroom based courses, the actual cost for these courses was between \$11,766.80 and \$17,445.56.

Certificate 111 in Agriculture	970 course hours @\$12.79	\$12,406.30
Certificate IV in Agriculture	920 course hours @\$12.79	\$11,766.80
Certificate IV in Pastoral Property Management	1364 course hours @\$12.79	\$17,445.56

These figures provide a more realistic basis for comparison.

### ***Continued course availability***

While most of the courses have been offered through Tocal this year, there are factors that inhibit the same learning as was previously available at MCA. The differences in geographic conditions mean that practical learning is done in an environment that is substantially different from the farming conditions faced in the south and west of the State. While some practical work in these areas is possible, this is not a substitute for daily exposure to particular geographic conditions. It is alarming, although not surprising, to note that only one student in fact transferred from MCA to Tocal this year. This is despite the assumptions made by NSW Agriculture in its initial decision, and the fact that 10 travel scholarships were available to encourage continuing students to transfer to Tocal. Again this brings into question the process by which the decision was made and the possible poor timeliness of communication to students about the assistance available to them to continue their education at Tocal.

The assumption that the specialisation in relation to irrigation / rangeland environments could be adequately addressed outside MCA also appears flawed. Indeed the Association understands that Wagga TAFE would not have the expertise in this area, let alone a college in central NSW. As discussed later, the Association strongly supports the re-opening of MCA, with taking advantage of its unique position to focus on irrigation and rangelands issues.

### **b. Preceding community and industry consultation**

The major complaint raised by members was that there was no consultation with the College's neither Advisory Council, nor the local community stakeholders and extended community, before the decision was made. This was an appalling situation given the importance of the facility in the area, including as an employer of 44 people.

It is evident from the community outcry that there was strong local support for this facility. Had there been some discussions with the community by the department, it may have been possible for some of the department's concerns to have been addressed. In particular, had there been consultation with the Minister's own Advisory Committee, discussions about future strategies and course needs may have addressed many of the issues cited by the Minister and the Department in relation to MCA.

It is disappointing that the Government breached its own policy that requires a full Regional Impact Study to be conducted. This process would have required

full notification and consultation with rural communities in relation to the possible transfer of residential courses from MCA to Tocal. It is understood that the Mayor of Leeton sought to delay the final decision until full community consultation had occurred. However this was not granted.

Additional concerns exist relating to student accommodation at Tocal, given it is near capacity. Had community consultation occurred, including with the Isolated Children's Parents Association (ICPA), proper consideration could have been given to concerns about the availability of accommodation at Tocal and the impacts on families where children are separated because of limited access to educational opportunities.

### **c. The impact on Leeton and MCA communities**

The Association is concerned about the short and long term impacts on these local communities.

The immediate impact of 44 job losses is significant, with the \$2.5m loss in direct wages to the community and a ripple effect of \$10m overall losses. With only one staff member transferring to Orange, finding employment for 43 people in a small regional area is a significant issue. It was not adequately considered before the decision was made.

A number of the staff has now left the town, and in many cases the agricultural education sector as well, diminishing the viability of the town and the level of skill and experience of community members. For example, the former Deputy Principal was a driving force in setting up the Indigenous Training Program which was and still is highly regarded at both a state and national level. After the closure of the college, this person had to leave both the area and the agricultural industry in order to secure employment. The loss of such skills in small regional areas has serious ramifications.

Students in the area now have additional financial and other costs (travel time, separation from family etc) as a result of having to go much greater distances to undertake further education.

Given the drought, agricultural industries will require a skilled labour force during the recovery period. The loss of students from the MCA will reduce the number of trained people available to do this.

In the longer term, there are concerns that people trained outside the district, may not return, which will negatively impact on agriculture in this area. In addition, future students may see little relevance in being trained in conditions that do not reflect their own families' proprieties, and not participate in further education at all. Indeed given what has happened with the previous MCA students, we may already be seeing this happen.

Many of the facilities at MCA are less than 5 years old, and are unique in terms of their quality and location. This indicates the very recent strong commitment

to education in agricultural areas. This region cannot afford to waste or mothball these facilities for an extended period. Strategies to ensure they are used productively are essential **now**. It is also understood that less than a third of all short courses offered through MCA are held on campus, with the rest being held off-site. The damaging flow-on effects of the changes at MCA will only continue until there is a concerted effort to productively utilise these facilities for the benefit of the community, future generations of agricultural people, and the broader community.

**d. Reasons for no transfer of Colleges to TAFE**

The Association's policy supports agricultural education courses conducted by NSW Agriculture. The Association is not fully aware of options and discussions in relation to TAFE, and therefore is only making a few general observations in relation to this term of reference.

The Association has seen no evidence that NSW TAFE could in fact provide the MCA courses in a satisfactory way, particularly without additional budget allocation. It is unlikely that TAFE would have the teaching skill sets required to conduct residential courses currently offered by MCA. For example, experience in irrigation and rangeland management is unlikely to be available at Wagga TAFE.

The unique value of courses offered at MCA lies in their provision of a 'middle option' between TAFE and university. It is essential that this accredited training is not lost from the agricultural sector, and brings into question whether TAFE could adequately service this niche of the market.

It is understood that TAFE was not interested in continuing the residential aspect of MCA courses, yet this is an important tenet of providing education to students living on the land in isolated parts of the state.

## CONCLUSION

The Association is very concerned about the process by which this decision was made and the lack of community consultation. This decision has ramifications, both now and in the future, for education courses in agriculture. It is incumbent upon the Government to work with the local community to find appropriate solutions.

Recent discussions with Charles Sturt University represent a very positive step, and the Association believes that further opportunities for the MCA facilities must be explored.

The Association believes that the residential courses should again be offered at MCA. At the very least, the Association advocates that

- MCA be the south-western campus for Tocal
- The Advisory Council remain so that there is direct input into courses relevant to the south and west of the state
- The pasture and property management course be brought back to MCA
- MCA be considered as a potential centre of excellence for education in irrigation and rangeland agriculture.

The Association believes that a concerted promotional effort is required in general for agricultural courses in NSW. With many of the former MCA students going to Dalby Agricultural College in Queensland or withdrawing from further education, there are long term ramifications for agriculture in NSW. The Association would be willing to work closely with NSW Agriculture to assist in this awareness and promotion campaign.

With the southern and western regions of NSW still to recover from the worst drought on record, agricultural training at the MCA should be expanded and not reduced to provide training for young people in agriculture, and jobs and services for rural people in remote locations.