

INQUIRY INTO SKILLS SHORTAGES IN RURAL AND REGIONAL NSW

Organisation: CB Alexander Agricultural College Advisory Council
Name: Ms Margo Duncan
Position: Chair
Telephone:
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Theme: Also on behalf of the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture Advisory Council

Summary

*CB Alexander Agricultural College Advisory Council
PO Box 146, RAYMOND TERRACE NSW 2324*

29 August 2005

The Hon Tony Catanzariti
Chair
Inquiry into Skills Shortages in Rural and Regional NSW
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Mr Catanzariti

Please find enclosed submission from the Advisory Councils of Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture and the CB Alexander Agricultural College to this Inquiry.

This submission has been prepared jointly by the Councils and we hope that it will assist the Inquiry in its deliberations.

If further details are required, please contact Margo Duncan, Chair, Total Advisory Council.

Yours sincerely

MARGO DUNCAN
Chair, CB Alexander Agricultural College
Advisory Council

J GELTCH AM
Chair, Murrumbidgee College
of Agriculture
Advisory Council

Encl.

Inquiry into Skills Shortages in Rural and Regional NSW
Submission by Advisory Councils of
Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture
And
CB Alexander Agricultural College, Tocal

This submission has been jointly prepared by these Advisory Councils. The Councils were appointed by the Minister for Agriculture (now Primary Industries) to advise and support the College's in their operations. The Council's work closely together to this purpose and have agreed to prepare a joint submission for this Inquiry.

The items raised in the Inquiry are particularly relevant to the Councils' operation and as a result these issues have been debated for many years. Council members are well aware of how the vocational education and training system operates in NSW and have observed recent changes which have occurred.

In December 2003 full-time courses ceased at Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture and the facility is now largely used for short course training. The CB Alexander Agricultural College Tocal, Paterson continues to provide full-time training in agriculture and related industries as well as traineeship programs for young people wishing to work on the land and undertake part-time training. In addition a wide range of short courses are run throughout the state by NSW DPI supported by infrastructure afforded by the two Colleges. A major external studies program is also run through Tocal College.

Terms of Reference

Members have analysed the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry and the issues of most relevance are associated with Items 1a and 1h. This submission therefore primarily deals with these matters.

1a *The current and future demand for labour*

The current demand for labour on farms across NSW is strong despite the serious drought conditions which have affected most primary producing sectors. The drought has seen a decrease in the number of people on the land and it is expected that these families will not return to their former locations. This will and has also created a major shortage of people to work on the state's farms.

The continuing rationalisation of agriculture is causing major changes in the state's rural labour force. This has been brought about particularly through the impact of technology. An example of these changes is manifested in the Australian processing tomato industry located in the Murray Valley. In 1988, there were 175 growers, in 2005 there are now 28 growers producing three times as much product as was produced in 1988. This is a major change for the industry and impacts on labour and the demand for skills.

As a result, there has been a requirement for highly skilled management and labour resources. The high level of technology employed on farms eg tractors which are guided by satellite technology necessitate operators with a high level of training in computer applications.

Some industries are addressing this through the industry associations and organisations and working collectively with the DPI Colleges to identify ways of improving the situation. Industries that have worked recently with the Colleges include NSW dairy industry and the cotton industry. Other industries have not been as actively involved.

The demand for graduates from CB Alexander Agricultural College, Tocal has been strong and the coordinator of employment regularly receives requests from companies particularly larger ones, seeking to recruit staff. This demand has increased significantly in recent years.

I receive regular (weekly) inquiries from companies and individuals involved in beef, cropping, horse and mixed farming industries looking for employees. Some require trained and keen young people while others are looking for more experienced graduates to employ as overseers and managers. These positions exist throughout NSW and interstate. In most cases, employers are offering above award wages and good working conditions for the right people. This strong demand for employees has been a real issue in recent years and has increased considerably over the last year or two.

W Kinsey, Deputy Principal, CB Alexander Agricultural College, Tocal Paterson

Members have noted the influence that the expanding mining industry has had on farm labour. There are now large mines in the central west of NSW and mining looks like increasing in the North West. Farm businesses have been unable to compete with mines for labour in the past and this is likely to be a problem into the future. This phenomenon has already had a major impact on the rural economy of the Hunter Valley.

The future demand for labour will increase because of the impact of a strong economy and low unemployment. Future farm staff will be required to have many more skills particularly for record keeping and the use of computer technology on farms. Members believe that we have only seen the beginning of this and it will increase in the future.

The issue of training seasonal workers has been discussed extensively by members and at present a submission has been put to the Commonwealth for such training through Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture. This is seeking to establish a skills passport system modelled on a successful initiative undertaken in the Lochyer Valley in south east QLD.

The importance of seasonal workers to the viability and sustainability of rural industries cannot be over estimated. These workers are used in a variety of production systems and all means should be put in place to ensure good availability of these personnel in the future.

1c Local government strategies

The problems faced by some local government areas in attracting skilled personnel should be understood by this Inquiry. For example, members of the Murrumbidgee Council are aware that some food processing businesses in Griffith have had to relocate their operations because of their inability to recruit the necessary skilled labour in the local area.

As a result, jobs that could otherwise be in rural areas have relocated to more urban locations. It is therefore necessary to ensure that appropriate training programs are available in rural areas to respond to demands of the industries. This is a key issue for the continued growth and viability of regions.

1f *Regional migration programs*

The residential facilities of Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture, Yanco are currently only partly used. It is the intention to fully recommission these facilities for further use. There may be opportunities to use these facilities as part of regional skills programs.

At present the facilities are used for short course training and this will continue into the future. It is also proposed that the facilities be used to accommodate groups visiting the MIA.

1h *Training response to identified needs*

NSW DPI Colleges have been very active in promoting their courses and products to the market. Unfortunately the market in many areas is thin and difficult to access.

This increases the total cost of provision and at times causes the educational system to dismiss the farm sector because of the very small markets which are also dispersed across the countryside.

Despite this, the CB Alexander Agricultural College, Tocal Paterson has been over enrolled for 2005. This was a result of strong and positive promotional activity to the rural community. In addition, it is believed that because it is a specialist institution, working solely for an important sector it is able to mobilise industry networks and other personnel to promote its courses. The importance is therefore based around having a specialised college for these purposes and not have this education diluted in comprehensive educational provision.

The importance to NSW of having a specialised agricultural college training system should not be underestimated. The outcomes of the Upper House Inquiry into the closure of full-time training at Murrumbidgee College are relevant to this Inquiry. This former Inquiry recommended that:

Recommendation 5 (page 47)

That the Government recognises the uniqueness and importance of agricultural education in NSW and continue to provide adequate financial, human and capital resources to the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture, Yanco and the CB Alexander Agricultural College, Tocal.

Recommendation 6 (page 47)

That the Minister, in conjunction with the advisory councils of the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture and Tocal College, continue to seek improvement of courses offered at the Colleges and effectively market these courses, to ensure both colleges remain centres of excellence in agricultural education.

NSW DPI Colleges are working closely with the rural sector to ensure that the future needs of the industry are met. For example Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture has worked with the Irrigation Association of Australia to identify the needs for training within the irrigation industry.

As a result a program has been developed specifically for the irrigation industry based on national competencies tailored to the identified industry needs. Partnerships between educational providers and industries and a key for future skills development. Funding is therefore necessary to facilitate these partnerships and to sustain them into the future.

Members of the Advisory Councils have been disappointed that the NSW government did not proceed with the FarmBi\$ program for rural training. This training has been effective in upgrading the skills of the farmers and farm management. It had a shortcoming in that it did not apply to employees on farms which, it was felt to be important in any future program.

The need for promotion of a positive perception of agriculture and work in rural areas is extremely important. Members believe that steps should be taken to support efforts to promote careers in rural and regional NSW through the school system. Opportunities should be found for enhancing the knowledge of careers advisors regarding careers in agriculture and related disciplines. The vocational education and training programs in schools go some way to supporting this however more is necessary if rural and regional NSW are to have a skilled workforce into the future.

Members of the Advisory Councils would be pleased to have the opportunity to address the Inquiry.

MARGO DUNCAN
Chair, CB Alexander Agricultural College
Advisory Council

J GELTCH AM
Chair, Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture
Advisory Council