

# **SUBMISSION to the GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE NO.5**

**By the MURRUMBIDGEE COLLEGE of AGRICULTURE ADVISORY  
COUNCIL**

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

Members of the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture (MCA) Advisory Council (MCAAC) have collated this submission. The members are:

Jim Geltch AM Chairman  
Beryl Ingold AO, MBE  
Duncan Fraser  
Grant Delves  
Phillip Kingsley-Miller  
Helen Withers AM (recently retired from the Council)

The members represent a wide cross section of the rural community in southern and western NSW and collectively have had a long association with MCA.

We have endeavoured to address the four key issues, noted in the Terms of Reference of GPSC No.5, surrounding the closure of the residential courses and traineeship program at MCA. In addition, we have attempted to suggest a way forward that can address the immediate concerns of agricultural youth education in south and western NSW.

### **The Terms of Reference**

#### **a) “The process by which the decision was made to close the residential training”.**

It should be noted that not only residential training was closed, but the very active rural traineeship program and the VET in schools program were also terminated.

The MCAAC knowledge of the “process” was a phone call to some of the members of the Council advising them of the closure of the particular College programs and residential facilities. This phone call occurred on the morning of September 3<sup>rd</sup> at the very time of the public announcement by the Minister and was delivered by Ms Helen Scott-Orr, Executive Director (Research, Advisory and Education).

It has been argued that one of the key parameters in the decision making process was the declining numbers at MCA. We believe that the numbers used in the justification were highly questionable.

**b) “The community and industry consultation that preceded the announcement of the proposal”**

As can be deduced from the above comment, there was little consultation. In fact it could be argued that there was a deliberate attempt not to consult or reveal details of the much-touted review of the Colleges.

We are very much aware that the Minister has used the “Review of the Agricultural Colleges within NSW Agriculture – March 2001” (the “Review”) report as the basis of the consultation process.

There was also a belated attempt after the announcement (mid September) of conforming to a Rural Community Impact Statement (closing the door.....). This Statement is a statutory requirement for government departments, when making decisions that may impact on social and economic aspects of rural communities. This was a reaction to concerns raised by members of the community and Leeton Shire Council

However, we do want to register our concerns over the manner in which the “Review” was used to justify the decision. First some background:

In a lead up to the “Review”, the MCAAC had been making representations to the Director General of Agriculture through the process of Council meetings (which were minuted and copies sent to head office in Orange) and letters from the Chairman of the MCAAC directly to the Director General. These representations were requests for vacant staff positions, caused by the retirement of staff or personnel moving onto more secure jobs, to be filled.

The Council was concerned that staff shortages were impacting on the delivery of courses and the effectiveness of the overall education process. This was despite the MCA receiving the 1998 NSW Training Provider of the Year and the 1998 Inaugural National Indigenous People’s Training Award. These awards set MCA as the national benchmark in terms of VET for rural youth. The Council recognised that the constant reluctance of “head office” to support and nurture the human resource base of the College’s activities was likely to have long term detrimental effects.

The MCAAC was becoming aware of a sense of insecurity, lack of morale and an overall sense the resources were being deliberately run down by “head office”.

It should be noted that the Director General, Dr Kevin Sheridan, had publicly stated that MCA was “the jewel in the crown of the Department of Agriculture”. The MCAAC agreed with this sentiment and were determined that this status must be maintained.

In October 2000 the Director General released the terms of reference for the “Review”. They were:

1. Identify the opportunities and the means by which NSW Agriculture’s Agriculture Colleges can strengthen the delivery of flexible, relevant and innovative training and educational activities to clients.
2. Review the potential of the physical, human and technological resources required to meet these opportunities.
3. Evaluate opportunities to further enhance links between the Colleges, Departmental Programs, Centres of Excellence and external bodies.

The Chairman of the review team, Ms Ellen Howard, Program Manager, Education and Training, met with the MCAAC shortly after the announcement. She outlined the process of the review and promised to consult with the Council during the compilation of the report. We were led to believe that we would have the opportunity to have a serious input into the review process before it was released. The MCAAC view of the “Review” process was one of positive support, provided we were kept in the loop and allowed to have meaningful input.

Unfortunately, little of the consultation process occurred. As was noted in the MCAAC minutes of the 12<sup>th</sup> December 2003, the Council did not see the Review Report. It did not become available until the unions (PSA) obtained copies of it, in October 2003 (after the closure announcement), from the Department under Freedom of Information and then the union made it available to the Council.

Ms Howard did meet the Council on the 13<sup>th</sup> June 2001 to discuss the “Review”, without the document being released (we believe deliberately, so that Council was not made aware of the full implications, particularly recommendation H). After this briefing meeting the MCAAC responded directly to the Director General, Dr Kevin Sheridan on the 30<sup>th</sup> June 2001. In a reply dated 8<sup>th</sup> August 2001, to the MCAAC Chairman, Dr Sheridan reassured the Council that “...recent action resulting from the College Review demonstrates the Department’s commitment to maintaining the quality of service provided by MCA ... and every effort will be made to appoint suitably qualified and experienced staff to the positions identified...and please assure them (MCAAC) that significant resources are being directed to address the staffing issues at MCA.”

Based on the foregoing statement it is clear the Council were not aware of the recommendations in the report and were never given the opportunity to question any of its content.

Further, Council have grave concern about the validity of the report from the apparent lack of consultation with us and other stakeholders.

In addition to writing to the Director General, representations were made to the Minister (then Honourable Richard Amery) in person by members of the Council.

Again he reaffirmed the Department of Agriculture's commitment to youth education at MCA in the strongest possible terms. In fact, he appeared to be almost insulted that we were voicing concern over a non-issue.

***Consequently, both the Minister and the Director General's comments, that the future of the College was secure in its current form, reassured the MCAAC that there would be no significant change to the operation of MCA.***

**c) "The impact on the Leeton and Yanco communities and district"**

The local community will adequately address the direct impact on the immediate communities. However, the MCAAC feel it is incumbent upon them to report on the devastating effect it has had on the future of agricultural education in south and western NSW.

Anyone who thinks the closure of the MCA residential courses, traineeships and VET in school programs would and could be picked up by our sister college at Tocal is sadly mistaken. The Councils of both Colleges met recently, at Tocal, to discuss the future of youth education in NSW. It was the unanimous view of both Advisory Councils that Tocal did not have the physical or human resources necessary to give students in the south and west of NSW an **equitable** access to educational opportunities. This did not mean we will not try to achieve a reasonable outcome, however, the reality is that agricultural youth will not have the **access** to agricultural education afforded those in other parts of NSW and other states of the Commonwealth.

We have identified there are four key areas where access and equity to agricultural education are a priority:

- Pastoral Property Management for a broad section of southern, central and western NSW.
- Irrigation education in the Murray Darling Basin.
- Broadacre cropping in the south and west of NSW
- VET in schools in the south and west of NSW

It is recognised that in the area of Aboriginal Rural Training and Continuing Education, that MCA is still playing a significant role. We are concerned however, that these important parts of the program will be significantly disadvantaged because of the lack of critical mass afforded by a much larger program. Aboriginal students will not have access to mainstream education and training previously available through the fulltime courses at the College. Additionally, industry feedback indicates grave concern to the closure of the residential facilities and its effect on future ITP courses. It is early days, however it is our belief that the continuing education program is being emasculated by a shortage of resources, while trying to achieve the expansion promised by the Minister.

One of the reasons that were given for the closure of the residential component of the College was one of declining numbers. This fact cannot be ignored and was of great concern to the MCAAC as well. However, there is a fundamental difference between the Departments and our view of why this was occurring. The Departments reason, presumably, was there is not a demand for residential training of agricultural youth in south and western NSW. While we do not argue that there is less demand than say 10-20 years ago, the reasons for this change must be fleshed out. It is the belief of the MCAAC that:

- While there was a decline in residential numbers to 2002, despite chronic drought conditions, numbers in 2003 showed an increase of over 20%.
- The decline in residential numbers was being more than made up for in traineeship programs (that are no longer being provided at MCA).
- The decline and subsequent correction was a function of the status of rural income.
- *But most importantly, and the issue that had most impact, was the insidious affect of the emasculation of the human resource base at the College. Not only lecturers, but also technical assistants and other support staff were not replaced over time. The MCAAC started to become aware of the added burden this was putting on remaining staff and the subsequent effect on morale within the College. Although staff continued to give their best, they were wondering why, when their masters seem to have no commitment to agricultural education.*

*For example, the lecturer in Pastoral Property Management was not replaced after he retired in 1999. This meant that, although the course was run the following year, it was by a part time lecturer with no experience in teaching. The clientele, this course served, was very much aware of the shortcomings and consequently this led to a loss of credibility and subsequently numbers. This was despite continual efforts to have the lecturer's position filled . All the exhorting fell on deaf ears in Orange. We feel particularly incensed, after that response, that lack of numbers is being used as the excuse for closing the residential courses.*

*This situation also applied to the irrigation course in 1999, when the lecturer was not replaced. In addition, the shortage of support staff meant that the face to face contact with year 10 students prior to leaving school (the most important pool of prospective students) could not occur at the level necessary to maintain numbers.*

**d) "The reasons why Murrumbidgee and Tocal Colleges have not been transferred to the Department of Education and Training".**

The reasons are very simple. The Department of Education and Training (DET) is not prepared to take over the operation of the Colleges because of the additional cost and a belief that they (DET) can cover all the courses offered at MCA. We

argue then: why did a large number of Certificate III students decide to go to Qld for their further education or drop out of education altogether?

During the period after the “Review” and prior to the major changes at the College in late 2003, the MCAAC made direct representation to Minister Amery. In the course of this meeting, when the continued problems of staff shortages were outlined, it was suggested that an approach to the Department of Education and Training (DET) should be canvassed. The Councils view was that, if the Department of Agriculture were not interested in youth education, then the College would be next best served under DET and the TAFE system.

This is not seen as the best possible outcome from our perspective, but at this stage the Council was exceedingly frustrated with the apparent (and deliberate as the outcome has shown) lack of commitment to youth education at MCA by the Department of Agriculture’s head office.

Our responsibility to agricultural education is paramount and the Council is looking for the best possible outcome for youth in south and western NSW. If the NSW Department of Agriculture is not prepared to commit the human, physical and financial resources to agricultural youth education, then we believe that there should be a transfer of this responsibility because: -

1. Provision of VET is the core business of the Department of Education and Training – this is not the core business of NSW Agriculture, NSW Fisheries, Department of Mineral Resources or NSW Forests.
2. DET should be responsible for all government provision of education and training. This will ensure:
  - a) More efficient use of limited public resources (human, physical and financial).
  - b) Consistency of:
    - Policy implementation, including reporting and accounting to NSWBVET and ANTA.
    - Quality of VET provisions and outcomes.
    - Meeting the needs of equity groups.
  - c) That rural VET provision across NSW will address environmental issues including water management, salinity and maintaining the well being of rural resources and assets.

## **The Future for MCA**

The MCAAC see our role in the immediate future to:

1. Make every attempt to ensure the physical resources at the College are not dismantled in any way. We want to enable any Government Department or organisation, which may see fit to take up the mantle of fulfilling the need of agricultural youth education, that they will have infrastructure to carry out that task.
2. To ensure every effort is made, to immediately put in place, an education process that will address the shortcomings brought about by the closure of the residential courses, traineeships and VET in schools at MCA.

To this end, the MCAAC would like to point out that there is attempts by the management of the College to recover the diabolical situation agricultural youth find themselves in at the moment. Currently a survey is being carried out to determine the specific needs of Pastoral Property Management. The hope is that the existing MCA course can be made available to meet the needs of this section of the agricultural community, within the current framework of NSW Agriculture VET.

We can only hope that the executive of the Department will support management's attempts in these endeavours.

In conclusion, the MCAAC would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to make this submission and we will be pleased to meet with your committee to discuss the issues we have raised. We trust there will be a positive outcome for the youth of south and western NSW.

JA Geltch

On Behalf Of

The Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture Advisory Council

10<sup>th</sup> June 2004