

## **MCA Submission**

### **INTRODUCTION**

**Established in 1963, the MCA is run by NSW Agriculture. In this time it has prided itself on specialising in vocational training for people requiring practical skills.**

**The first course was known as the Farm Certificate Course and was a one year course aimed at training the sons of farmers who wished to return to the family farm.**

**In 1965 the College was named the Yanco Agricultural College, a name that was retained until 1981, when it was renamed the MCA.**

**The MCA has been recognised and acclaimed nationally and internationally for its achievements and contributions to agricultural excellence and research.**

The following points need to be considered in relation to the shock and ill-advised decision to close this facility.

(These have been taken from letters written from constituents, Councils etc. Many are repeated here word for word)

### **CONSULTATION / EDUCATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS**

- “Undertakings were given by Premier Carr in 1998 that consultation and socio-economic impact studies would be carried out where State services were to be relocated from regional areas of NSW. This has not occurred.” - Griffith City Council

Further, the decision seems to be totally contrary to the Government’s Five Point Plan for the Riverina and the Premier’s 1999 Working Together for Stronger Rural Communities Statement.

- The Community Impact Statement was cursory and rushed. It was not submitted to the Leeton Shire Council until 2 weeks after the decision to close was made. Ergo, the community consultation process was non-existent. The MCA was given no opportunity to provide a submission defending its operations.
- It is unfortunate that Agriculture Minister, Mr Macdonald never even bothered to visit the College. If he had met with the committed teachers, spoken to the students and seen the fantastic facilities he might have seen how wrong this decision was
- How can the Minister justify closing residential courses and then just a few months later set up a working group to look at the future of the College?

- The Minister has said:

“NSW Agriculture and Charles Sturt University had joined forces to search for new opportunities for the future of the MCA.....the two bodies this week signed a memorandum of understanding which would unlock new research and education opportunities for the College.....the MCA has a 40 year history of providing life-long learning for the farming community and we want to continue to improve that service.”

It is utter hypocrisy to claim that he is concerned with the College's future. If there was doubt about the College it would have been much more constructive to keep the College going while at the same time establish the working group so there would be some continuity in the use of the College.

- “The proposal to establish short courses at MCA is a token gesture which will do almost nothing to redress the damage caused by the virtual closure of the College.” - Leeton Shire Council.

The closure of full time residential courses will affect the offering of short courses as the relevant material is sourced from the full and part time courses.

- If it is the Government's wish that all education services are provided by the Department of Education, why wasn't the functions and future of MCA and Tocal examined under the “Lifelong Learning - The Future of Education in NSW” Process? This would have ensured that there was considered and extensive public consultation.

The Minister for Education promotes Lifelong Learning at every opportunity. Lifelong Learning suggests that we access educational opportunities throughout our lives. Closing the MCA is hardly conducive to those who seek further education throughout their lives, particularly their working lives.

- The MCA assisted local High Schools by way of the provision of extension programs, enrichment programs, vocational programs and remediation programs. The College had facilities and resources that schools could tap into. Local schools can identify many cases where the opportunities and encouragement provided by the teachers and other staff of MCA have kept students at risk at school and in formal education. The indigenous programs offered by the College have had a similar beneficial impact on indigenous students.
- “Many students who have completed their education at Leeton High School seized the opportunities that were offered by the MCA for further education and enrol seamlessly into short and long courses provided by College staff. If the College was not so accessible, I have no doubt that this further education would not have been undertaken, with the working community being poorer for this loss.” -  
Mr P J Edwards, Principal Leeton High School
- It is shocking that rural education means nothing less than a bottom line to this Government. Education is a vital, public good and it is increasingly

necessary to offer rural kids a variety of regionally specific education options.

### **FLAWED REASONING, STUDENT NUMBERS AND FINANCIALS**

- The Agriculture Minister has said that closing the MCA will generate yearly savings of around \$1 million. But what of the long term cost to the local economy and farming profession? The Government should have considered that 95% of MCA graduates have historically found employment in the region's rural sector.
- The effect of the closure on nearby towns has been estimated to see losses of \$2.5 million in direct wages and \$10 million overall in ripple effect.
- The closure of the MCA has been justified by the Government because of the cost per student at the College, yet \$500,000 worth of renovation work had recently been completed at the MCA.
- The Government says that it costs more to educate students at MCA than Tocal. The formula used to calculate the cost per student is questionable. The average cost for Tocal was calculated including a considerable number of teaching hours for home study - of course residential students will cost more than off-site distance students.
- Full time enrolments at the MCA in 2002 were 28. Full time enrolments in 2003 numbered 39. It seems that the long term trend has been reversed and that a phase of strong recovery is underway. Could it be that decision makers have rushed this decision through to avoid further recovery?
- Student numbers have been misrepresented by the Minister to try and reinforce the fact that student numbers are in decline. Student numbers in 2002 have been quoted as 65), which included part time trainees. 2003 numbers only quoted 39 full time students - there are also 35 part time trainees, bringing the total number to 74.
- "Over recent years the Department has failed to fill critical positions at the MCA, thus undermining the attractiveness of courses at MCA and discouraging students from enrolling." - Leeton Shire Council

According to an internal college memo, the failure to fill a full-time permanent position of Sheep and Rangelands Lecturer for a period of 2 years reduced the number of students attending the College by 50% over the following 2 years.

### **DIRECT AFFECT ON THE RURAL SECTOR**

- Closure of the MCA will result in a loss of irrigation knowledge and the education of the next generation of irrigators with irrigation practices in other areas being inconsistent with local practices
- Rural traineeships will be dramatically affected, as this group will be unable to attend Tocal as they will continue to reside in the local area. They will not be able to travel as many are not old enough to hold licences. There is very little or no public transport available.
- If NSW Agriculture is going to keep progress and keep pace with rapidly changing technologies and times, then we must keep our focus on vocational agricultural education that is relevant and need specific.
- The courses offered at MCA were relevant to agriculture found in western NSW as they include subjects such as irrigation, grazing, broadacre agriculture and horticulture. Courses at Tocal cannot possibly offer the experience and hands on training that is available at Yanco and the relevance is therefore minimal. The next generation of farmers must be educated and educated well to carry on into the future. This cannot be achieved at an institution that cannot adequately provide the courses required by those farmers who will live and work in western NSW.
- One student from last year's first year has enrolled at Tocal College, making a mockery of the Minister's assertions that all students would be accommodated at Tocal. Five other students have gone to Dalby in Queensland when I am advised accommodation is substandard.
- Young people who leave this area to get an education are not coming back. That is a proven fact in all other professions. This is causing a shortage in future leaders and we are losing young, skilled and enthusiastic people who have the potential to make a huge contribution to community life and community leadership.
- "The Isolated Children's Parents Association plead for the retention of the College. Their 16 year old boys and girls need the training with safe accommodation in a good district. If we want to keep the harsh inland area of our continent populated in the future, then we must provide these families with education and employment to allow them to lead reasonable lives." - Marjory McCormack ICPA
- The locality of Tocal by distance from home prohibits students travelling home on weekends to help out and work their family farms
- Having seen both Colleges, MCA has a lot more farming equipment, tractors and machinery for hands on application and training in safety and servicing.
- Removing tertiary education from rural NSW is closing another door and taking our children away from the area. Too many of our young people are already forced to travel away to gain tertiary qualifications or on the job experience. The majority of these people do not return to rural NSW.

- The Minister for Agriculture has concerns that the MCA was taking business away from existing venues in Leeton. Nothing could be further from the truth. Prior to the closure the College was to host a Top Deck Reunion for 200 people, 250 for an Agfest, school groups of 200 children and also Statewide participants in Leeton's Little Athletics Carnival. All these are paying clients, who were staying at the College and were also using facilities in the town of Leeton. These visitors eat and shop in Leeton, bringing economic benefits to all concerned. The College complimented existing venues and was unique in that it was able to offer a large scale accommodation facility that people were happy to pay for and brought people to the town. The facility was then in turn able to provide associated employment.

## **CONCLUSION**

"The MCA is located on a Department of Agriculture research farm - it has so many resources to draw upon, experienced staff, awards in 1998 for NSW Training Provider of the Year and National Indigenous Peoples' Training Provider as well as an excellent 40 year history of teaching. It has top class facilities - accommodation, stables, library, lecture room all of which will be wasted.

The closure of the MCA is yet another blow to a rural community - the loss of an affordable agricultural tertiary institution, a waste of resources, a huge monetary loss to the local community, and an announcement made on seemingly very few facts. With the increased requirement of formal training in many aspects of agriculture today, this kind of institution is needed more than ever"

K Fretwell  
Past student MCA

It is a facility that should have been expanded and developed further and had enormous potential.



Adrian Piccoli, MP  
Member for Murrumbidgee