

Australian Agriculture and Food Sector Stocktake Comments by The AgAware Group and LandLearn, July 2005

The AgAware Group and LandLearn are two of a national network of organisations and programs that aim to raise the profile of agriculture in the education sector – school, tertiary and / or community. The informal alliance formed in 2004 to identify and work collaboratively towards common goals. Attachment 1 provides a brief outline of the national initiative. These comments are provided on behalf of the national network.

The AgAware Group seeks to educate the community to make informed decisions with respect to activities that effect the future and welfare of the Australian primary industries sectors. Surveys of ten year old Australian school students indicate that there is an widening gap between urban and rural Australians in terms of experience and understanding of farming issues (Kondinin Group 2004). The wider community has little understanding of the sectors economic, environmental or social role in the Australian picture today.

LandLearn is a DPI Victoria program promoting education about sustainable agriculture, natural resource management and food production in the formal school sector. The program aims to have essential learnings about agriculture embedded in curricula so school communities are more actively engaged with their connections to farming through an informed understanding and valuing of the agriculture sector as the source of their food and fibre. LandLearn also contributes to community education through landcare education and collaborative partnerships with environment education providers to ensure a balanced perspective is taken to production and conservation.

The DAFF Stocktake of the Australian Agriculture and Food Sector addresses this issue only superficially in respect to educating and informing the community about the importance of the sector, and takes a reactive approach to existing criticisms and concerns rather than being proactive by educating and informing about the sector.

There are several areas in which education could impact dramatically on future generations of Australian consumers. These apply across all industries and can be addressed through generic solutions. An improvement of communication between the communities would also help foster a more positive image of farming futures for business and career opportunities.

Geographic Diversity

Most Australians do not experience or understand this diversity.

Economic Contribution and Employment

The contribution of the total industry, including value added and process chain, is not understood even by those employed in the sector in urban settings. In regional areas the community depends on this employment.

Natural Resources

The majority of the Australian environment is under the care of farmers, who bear the brunt of environmental management but are more often criticised than praised. Education of the general population about the use and management of natural resources for agriculture and the role of farmers in land management will contribute to a more informed community supportive of change and adoption of new technologies and management practices.

Consumers and Marketing

Affluent, sophisticated and discerning consumers are more likely to pay slightly higher prices for quality Australian produce, but they must be given the information and the skills to apply the information to all aspects of their consumption.

Biosecurity

The support of all Australians is required to maintain the health and exclusion of disease from Australia's primary produce. Unambiguous education is essential for all Australians, both young and old to protect our unique status, and to create an environment in which biosecurity is understood and valued.

Management skills and Labour supply

Australian education does not present an accurate or informative view of the farming industry as a career path. Modern farming is a technological business equal to any other small enterprise that requires a range of skills that are not currently being focused in this direction in the education systems.

Innovation, Research and Development

Careers in science and technology can contribute to the continuation of research into all aspects of agriculture. Greater experience and direction in the education system is needed to channel the innovators in this field. Funding for this education and research must continue and expand for future development.

Community perceptions

Although community scrutiny of any industry is healthy, criticism and comment from uninformed and misled sources can only harm the industry and dependent community. Whereas all steps should be taken to ensure that the sector meets the expectations of environmental and social responsibility, it is also important that the general community is provided with accurate and meaningful information on which to base its decisions.

As in any area of improvement, education is more effective than regulation.

Sustainability

Australia has a growing aging and increasingly urban population. Feeding and clothing the population is a basic expectation of every citizen. With increasing environmental pressures, sustainable production is becoming more difficult despite the efforts being made by farmers. Farmers must accept a significant share of the responsibility for sustainability, but unless the burden is shared equitably urban dwellers will never adjust or realise the full significance of the measures required. Learning about the realities of farming must assist students to apply some of this knowledge to their own lifestyles.

Moving Forward

To achieve a viable and sustainable agriculture sector that has widespread acceptance and support within the Australian community, future policies should recognise and include the role of education. Participation in the formal and community education sectors with well-designed and targeted programs can contribute to addressing many of the issues identified in the stocktake.

To develop a coherent society with a greater understanding between elements it is useful to encourage students of all ages to study societies other than their own. For example, in many Australian schools much time and effort is expended to develop a meaningful understanding of indigenous and other cultures. This process is to be applauded and supported. However, far less resources are applied to develop an understanding of modern farming and agribusiness in a modern Australian context. It cannot be expected that teachers who do not have the knowledge and experience themselves will generate all the required resources. Partnerships between farming organisations and educators need to be supported as a responsibility of both education and primary industry branches of government at State and Federal level.
