EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into agricultural education and training in Victoria

Warragul — 14 February 2012

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Mr I. Campbell, Acting Manager, Economic Development; and
Ms A. Allen,
Robert, and
Ms P. Glover, Youth Councillors, Wellington Shire Council.
Firstly, thank you for coming along and appearing before the inquiry today. As you are aware, we are looking specifically into the issue of how we can attract more young people into the areas of agricultural education and ultimately careers in agriculture. We are very interested to hear your ideas, experiences and so on. Hansard reporters will be recording today’s proceedings, and that is why these lovely little microphones are there. They are not for us to do karaoke; they are to record for purposes of the transcript. We will give you the opportunity to review a draft of the transcript, and if there are any typographical errors at the end down the track, you will have the opportunity to amend these.

I need to point out that the evidence you give today is covered by parliamentary privilege, which is the same privilege that members of Parliament have so they can scream and shout at one another in Parliament, so do not do that to us today. Parliamentary privilege only applies to the committee hearing itself, so you cannot call a press conference after today and say how horrible it was.

We are really interested to hear from you. In terms of kicking it off, I thought we might get a little bit of background from each of you, and then we will go into some questions and finish with anything we have not picked up. Ian, do you mind if I go straight into the youth council?

Mr CAMPBELL — That is fine.

The CHAIR — And maybe how you got to be involved with the youth council and what you are currently involved in — just a quick snapshot.

Ms GLOVER — My name is Pauline Glover. I am 24 years old. Previously I have been working in the youth development field since I left high school. I gained employment through the Wellington Shire Council as the youth services trainee, so I got a lot of experience through local government. I have also been employed as a youth services development officer for Yarram and District Health Service. That is a bit of my background in youth development. I am currently employed in more rates and finance with Wellington Shire Council. I have always been interested in giving young people a voice or being the conduit as such for that — going out and speaking to young people in our community, finding out what their needs are and what they like and then bringing it to a forum where we are able to act upon that somehow. I became involved with the youth council because it was a forum where I could do that.

ROBERT — I am Robert, 16 years old. I go to Sale College senior campus. I am in year 10. I got into the youth council after a presentation was given at my school. This is my first year on the council. I have participated in a few of the events that have been organised this year. I have always had an interest in politics, local and otherwise, and I have wanted to represent the voice of youth in political matters for a while.

Ms ALLEN — My name is Aleisha Allen. I am currently the 2012 Youth Mayor. I am 19 years old, and I got into the youth council through my Workways. The person who was helping me to get a job and stuff like that got me into this. I wanted to learn more about the community and what we can do to fix it.

Mr CAMPBELL — Ian Campbell. I am the Acting Manager of Economic Development in Wellington Shire. I do not pretend to know all things agricultural, but I talk to a lot of people — employers, schools, RTOs and so forth — hence the submission that I have put forward is based on anecdotal evidence generally of the people I have talked to. Having said that, I do have a couple of small farms — 25 and 9 acres — where I run a few cattle and have experienced the lack of assistance, as it were, from DPI compared to, for example, in New South Wales. It is quite a different system down here.

The CHAIR — Having made that comment, I might ask you to elaborate.

Mr CAMPBELL — I arrived down here some 12 or 13 years ago, having come from New South Wales and, again, having come from a property. In New South Wales and in some other states you have a department of primary industries or department of agriculture where they have people who will come and visit you on your farm and who will provide you with advice, whereas down here it seems to be far more project based. In fact when I arrived, which was during the Kennett years, many of the experts within DPI had been shall we say moved on — let go, made redundant — and were then working for organisations like Elders and the various farm supplies companies. To go to them for advice, invariably they were looking to sell you something, or you felt guilty because you had taken their time and you had not bought something. Under the New South Wales
scheme when you had a problem and asked for advice they would come out and go, ‘Yes, that is blackleg’, or whatever, and information was far more freely available.

**The CHAIR** — I might kick off the questions, firstly around skills shortages. Is the agricultural sector in the region experiencing any difficulty in recruiting skilled labour; if so, what industries and occupations are most affected?

**Mr CAMPBELL** — I will start with that, if I could. Having talked to a number of businesses, certainly in the dairy sector there is always work for those who are prepared to be milkers or work in that sector. In vegetables it is far more varied than that in that they are looking for people with a logistics background, people who can get more into the processing. Having said that, we are also in a situation where pickers, for example, can be a skill shortage. We have got one company that actually brings its own team down from Queensland, and they do a cyclical thing of six months here, six months there. Others rely or relied on backpackers; that is becoming less and less of an option for us. I guess that is part of it.

Similarly with Murray Goulburn, for example, which is a major dairy producer in our area, what happens is that they will have someone — say an electrician who works on the factory — pretty much poached by oil and gas companies, and then they have to go and find another one. There is this flow through of people with skills that they are constantly having to recruit because they have gone somewhere else that pays better money. Certainly in terms of recruitment — and I am sure the youth council members will back this up — agriculture is just not sexy. It really is not something that appeals to a lot of young people. This is also reflected when you think about the advertising that is done by tertiary institutions, particularly the TAFE sector. Currently GippsTAFE are running ads where they are promoting ‘I know! I can be an interior designer’ or ‘I could do sports massage’. Nobody pushes for, ‘Let’s go and work with animals; let’s work in agriculture; let’s work in horticulture’. They go for the things that are perhaps more saleable, and this is one of the issues with the current model of education — that is, they are selling what is easiest to sell and what will make the most profit rather than what is needed necessarily in the marketplace.

**The CHAIR** — We might start asking a host of questions of you to begin with, Ian, and then we will direct our questions to the youth council.

**Mr CAMPBELL** — Fine.

**Mr ELASMAR** — Ian, your submission suggests that the new higher education campus in Sale offers an opportunity for Advance TAFE to partner with a university to provide a degree program in agriculture. What demand is there likely to be for an agriculture degree course in the region, and what would be the benefits to the agriculture sector of offering agriculture degrees?

**Mr CAMPBELL** — In terms of demand working in local government and working in many fields, I do not have those figures to be able to give to you, because it would take a fair bit of time and money to do that. Having said that, council, along with Latrobe city and Baw Baw shire, is currently conducting a survey on behalf of the Department of Planning and Community Development, with part of that department being Skills Victoria. For that survey we have quite deliberately worked in conjunction with the dairy industry in Wellington, and 450 of those surveys will go to dairy farmers. They will essentially say, ‘What skills do you need and at what level?’ and so forth. We would hope in the coming weeks and months to have better information on that.

One of the challenges within the various agriculture industries, horticulture being one of them, is again this model that places education as being a business rather than necessarily servicing the needs of industries. I was at the national vegetable field days down at Werribee talking to the education committee there. Their biggest challenge is that when they talk about horticulture from a vegetable-growing point of view they do not have the numbers to make a class, so therefore they are mixing those students in with those who are going to work in parks and gardens. The subjects they need to cover are not necessarily the same; the objectives of what you are trying to grow are not the same when you are growing a tree as opposed to a carrot. In terms of demand I think there is certainly a need; it is a question of whether there will be enough numbers.

In relation to having a university campus/TAFE campus in Sale, Advance TAFE, as they are now called — I think it is referred to as the East Gippsland Institute of TAFE in the submission — already has a campus that is dedicated towards farm-type studies in Sale, but if you want to go to the university level, one of the issues is that
east of Melbourne there are no universities that really offer agricultural education and training; they are all in Melbourne or in the west. When you are looking at an area where students are below the state average in terms of university entry anyway, to then say to them ‘You will have to leave home if you want to study agriculture’ makes it even more of a challenge.

Within the Macalister irrigation district there is certainly a very strong dairy sector. We are currently in a position where some fairly major vegetable growers are established within the area, and I would foresee that in the not-too-distant future, as residential pressure starts to move on places like Werribee, we will get more, because you do not get people suddenly moving into horticulture; they will generally grow or translocate, basically because of the millions of dollars it takes to set up well. Because some of those enterprises are so large, I make the point that they are businesses. They need not just agricultural science training; they also need business training in order to work in that area, and unfortunately some of the degrees that I listed in my submission are fairly much science based rather than business based.

Mr ELASMAR — In your submission I am advised that the current training system can result in too many registered training organisations competing for too few students. Is this a concern in the Gippsland region, and if so, what strategies can you suggest to address this?

Mr CAMPBELL — Yes, it is a concern, and not only in the Gippsland region. That was a quote from a number of farmers who found that critical mass in terms of having the numbers to form a class. When you have different RTOs all competing for the same cohort it really makes it a challenge. I guess if you were looking at a different education model where an organisation was funded to run the training in that area rather than putting it out as a competitive situation, it would be far more controlled and you would be able to concentrate the demand with one trainer or two trainers.

Interestingly one of the points that was made — and I did a little bit of follow-up on this — is that in terms of the farmers themselves who are employing people who are trained or training in agriculture, one of their concerns is that with RTOs you will often get someone who may not necessarily be the best farmer or able to demonstrate best practice in that they were a farmer once and their college or RTO has said, ‘Yes, you can now go and teach this course. You can also do other things for us. There you are’. Farmers would prefer that there perhaps be people who are full-time farmers given a bit of training in educating so that they are then able to educate the new farmers coming through a little bit more about what is best practice and those sorts of things. To be fair, to an extent DPI does a bit of that when it calls in consultants and runs on-farm workshops and those sorts of things, but when you are looking at an accredited course or even a university, there needs to be that quality control.

Mr CRISP — I want to explore your comments in your submission about business and human resource training. You identified that farmers would like more training on business and human resource skills. What would be the most effective way of delivering this type of training to the agriculture sector in your region?

Mr CAMPBELL — I would think probably workshops that are run in the region so you do not have to send people away to do that, even if there were some site visits where there were demonstrations of ‘This is how I do it in this business. This works here’, particularly for horticulture, for example, where you tend to have larger numbers of workers coming in and who need to be looked after. That particular comment actually came from the dairy industry. It was a reflection of the number of farmers who either had sharefarmers or employees who came in and did not stay. The comment was, ‘We need to become better employers so that we manage staff better and are therefore able to keep them in the industry and develop them accordingly’. I would think what is needed is short, sharp bites and to be even more customer focused in this point. If you look at a dairy farm, there is milking in the morning and there is milking in the afternoon. If you are going to run something short and sharp, it should go between the two time frames, not taking someone away for three days or something along those lines, if that makes sense.

The CHAIR — I now want to direct some attention to the youth council. My first question is: the submission identifies that young people are often not aware of the opportunities available for training or careers in the agriculture sector, so what strategies can you suggest to make more young people aware of the opportunities within the agriculture sector?
ROBERT — I think if there were more of an effort by the TAFEs to get knowledge about agriculture courses — the benefits and what farming entails — to students in high school and during late primary school, there would be a lot more interest in going into agriculture in the later years of high school and in taking TAFE courses and pursuing a career path in farming.

The CHAIR — Another comment?

Ms GLOVER — Just maybe even the high school careers coordinators or the careers teachers being able to help, because a lot of emphasis is put on saying, ‘You need to go to uni. You need to do this’. It is generally not even thought of to go into the agricultural side of things with those careers teachers. It is normally, ‘Go to uni; do a job where you are in an office rather than actually out on the farm’.

The CHAIR — Aleisha?

Ms ALLEN — In saying that, when the young people were asked if they knew, they mostly said that the career advisers need to be more aware and need to be told about agricultural training and stuff like that. None of the career advisers really knew anything about the training that was out there for the students.

The CHAIR — Just extending on from that, I have two points. Firstly, how important is the guidance, advice and direction of the parents and career advisers in making the decision? Do you think the emphasis should be more around educating the parents and the careers teachers to ensure that we get more people coming through? I will let you answer that one first, and then I will ask you the second part.

Ms GLOVER — I think mainly with young people they tend not to necessarily go to parents for advice, especially career advice. They go on either what they are good at at school or what their friends are going for. If they are to go to someone, they will either be talking to their friends or they will see, if they can, their careers coordinator or adviser.

The CHAIR — Do you agree with that?

Ms ALLEN — Yes.

The CHAIR — Following on the comment that Ian made earlier about the industry not being sexy, and extending on to your comments about friends and what they are doing and all that sort of thing, how do you think we can provide the sort of promotion or even package the industry in a different way so that people can see real career opportunities — that it is exciting to do — so that you get that intake of people who actually want to do it from an early age, not as almost a career of last resort?

Ms GLOVER — I think, especially coming from my point of view and from speaking to the young people I know, they go into the agriculture industry and they are getting money straight away. It is that instant gratification — they are getting the money and they are working. They are not thinking long term; they might just want to do agriculture for the next five years. Maybe you could package it to say, ‘Let us skill these young people up’, but those are actually transferable skills, because a young person now has seven or eight careers during their life. They are not just sticking to one and continuing in it. Maybe it could be marketed a little bit more to people that maybe they should think a little bit long term if they want to be skilled up rather than that instant gratification of having that money in the hand.

ROBERT — I think it would help if the Landcare side was presented more. There is a general perception that it is just about milking cows or harvesting fruit and vegetables. If it was more in-depth about everything that the career entails — a more of a life-on-the-land type of description or presentation like that to students — I think more interest would be created by that.

Ms ALLEN — From personal experience, I went straight from school into dairy farming — milking — and I know I was not really thinking of anything, whereas my partner got the whole lot of qualifications. I did not know anything about any courses that I could do. There was not much information out there. I think more information needs to be provided.

The CHAIR — It was interesting to hear Pauline’s comments about young people’s focus on financial reward. Do you think that is something that almost needs to be marketed in a way so that people can immediately see the instant job that will come at the end of it? I know some might move onto something else at
the end, but do we need something like that so that at least you are attracting them into the industry in the first place? Do you think that is something that needs to be put up front more, to say, ‘Look, here are the great jobs. Here are the things that you can do almost immediately in this area’?

Ms GLOVER — I guess that probably would be really good. It would be almost like how the army markets really: they say you get the money, you do the job. So yes, as long as you are also skilling them up in that and it is not just saying ‘Go onto a farm and do your general farming’ — as long as you are skilling them up at the same time.

Mr CRISP — I would like to explore agriculture education in schools with you. Did your schools have an agriculture education program? If so, what was offered, and did any of you study it? Also mixed in with that, how important do you think it is for agriculture education to be provided in schools?

Ms GLOVER — I personally did not go through any courses that were offered, and I was not aware at the time that there were any offered through our high school.

ROBERT — My school does not have an agricultural education program. For the TAFE days there are quite a few students at my school who are going off to TAFE now. There is an agricultural course offered there at GippsTAFE. The students seem to be really enjoying that and learning a lot from it.

Ms ALLEN — I personally did not have that. Our high school did not have any agricultural education or training — not that I knew of anyway.

Mr CAMPBELL — If I could just add to that, I have had some discussions with Catholic College Sale. It actually has an agricultural program. It has a school farm. You start at about year 9. But one of the reasons that a lot of schools do not have that is that it is very staff intensive in terms of being able to provide that resource, and certainly when it comes to VCAL and organising farm visits and students to get out to farms, that is a real challenge for them.

Mr ELASMAR — Your submission identifies a lack of public transport options as a barrier to attending further education and training. How big an issue is this within the Gippsland region, and what strategies can you suggest to address this issue?

Ms GLOVER — Transport is such a massive issue, especially in our area. We have one or a handful of public transport options that we can provide, and they are not out to a farming community. They are actually from town to town; they are not from out in the middle of nowhere. We are not expecting that there will be a bus run all over the place to be able to access that. We realise that is just unrealistic. Some of the strategies that I think could play a part and are vitally important include, with people being on their P-plates, maybe getting a car pool, or maybe having some sort of system where it is attractive for young people, especially a group of young people who are studying in the agriculture area, to be able to go and do farm visits and be able to car-pool. Maybe something around there could be worked upon.

Mr CAMPBELL — If I could just add to that one, a lot has been done, certainly in our region, with regard to access to school buses for students who may have left school or who may not be attending school. One of the challenges, though, is that if a school student then wants that seat on the bus, or at least at the end of the term the farming student does not have that is that it is very staff intensive in terms of being able to provide that resource, and certainly when it comes to VCAL and organising farm visits and students to get out to farms, that is a real challenge for them.

The CHAIR — We have concluded our questions. Is there anything else you would like to say at this point that we have not covered; any ideas that you would like to put on the record so that they are at least noted.

Mr CAMPBELL — Just to reiterate that agriculture as a career option needs to be instilled at a younger age. GippsDairy has actually trialled a program at Rosedale Primary School, where they are doing a Cows Create Careers option for the young students. But the biggest challenge from a school and employer point of view is that people fall in love with it: going out onto a farm, the smell, the touch, the experience. If they cannot actually get onto the farm because the school or the TAFE cannot provide much of an opportunity — but mainly it is at school level that we are talking about — it is very hard for it to win hearts and minds if they do not get to try that.
From an employer point of view we had some very good engagement with the timber industry, which is another primary production area.

They made a very valid point, that instead of them going straight into work experience they would like to see students come out, visit the site, get a feel for what this job in primary production is — and then think about, ‘Do we now do it as work experience?’ The employer is trying out the student, and the student is trying out the employment situation, saying, ‘Do we like this?’ Before you commit a week of your life — and potentially waste that for both of you — with that one-day experience of seeing what it is and seeing the breadth of what it is, there is that opportunity to know what this farm experience is and what it is like and get a bit of a feeling from the employer’s point of view of the breadth of careers that could be open to you.

The CHAIR — Youth councillors, is there anything else you would like to add?

Ms GLOVER — I am pretty good at the moment.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for coming along today to present to the committee. Good luck with all your endeavours; we wish you well.

Witnesses withdrew.