

Sustainability of the Agricultural Workforce

Monica Gill
June 30, 2011



Young Professionals' Perspectives on the Agricultural Industry



Click here to view video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4usQnCtiFag>

Executive Summary

It is estimated that a labour shortfall of 96,000 full-time workers exists in agriculture. This shortage is occurring at a time of increasing demand for Australian goods, as well as a time of challenges in food security and climate change affecting agricultural production. Bright, well educated, innovative people are needed at this time.

People aren't going into the industry because they see it as a dirty, tough, 'old world' industry. Most people are disconnected from the supply chain and are not aware of the career opportunities.

Key Issues

- An ageing population of farmers
- A decline in agriculture graduates
- Poor image of the agriculture industry
- Competition from other industries, particularly mining

Recommendations

- Improve data collection of the skills shortage trend
- Train business leaders to help retain staff
- Develop a united, positive image of the industry
- Promote agri career opportunities

Introduction

There has been an increasing focus on food in Australia, from concerns about obesity to the high popularity of Masterchef, and increased interest in organic, locally sourced, and free range foods. Paradoxically, many young people are disinterested in a career in the food industry. There is a perception that there are limited career opportunities in agriculture, it is a 'dirty' and tough industry, with poor professional development. Agriculture also competes with other industries for skilled labour.

It is estimated that a labour shortfall of 96,000 full-time workers exists in agriculture. There is a general decline in the number of young people entering the food industry, but particularly for farmers and agriscientists. This shortage of personnel is occurring at a time of great opportunity

with growth in global demand for agricultural products exceeding supply, as well as a time of major challenges in food security and climate change affecting agriculture production (AFI 2008). The agrifood industry in Australia requires the best minds and a highly trained workforce if these challenges are to be met and the opportunities grasped. (Pratley 2009)

LANDMARK

look to us

"We're worried about it.

We have many people

who are on the brink of retirement age.

That's a concern for us. We also have

turnover that's higher than we would like as

well which means we're always looking to

find new people in various roles."

Ruth Trench-Thiedeman, Landmark (ABC 2010)

Introduction

As those who arrived in Australia in 1788 quickly discovered and as farmers have been learning ever since, Australia is not always an easy place to grow food (Davison 2011). Despite these difficulties, however, Australians enjoy an abundance of locally-produced, safe, cheap and high quality food. Much of this is attributed to farm level innovations in technology. The Green Revolution during the 1960s and 70s resulted in significantly higher yields, illustrating the benefits of research and development, such as improved plant genetics, development of pesticides, enhanced fertiliser technology, and irrigation technologies.

Some commentators are now calling for a second 'green revolution' to address the current challenges in supply, rising input prices, environmental degradation, and climate change. Without adequate skills in agriculture, this will be difficult to achieve (Wollenweber et al 2005).

As Australian farms have become increasingly reliant on technology and innovation for their productivity gains, the need for skilled employees has become increasingly critical, however, this education level isn't currently being met (Davison 2011).

"When you look at the technology of the future, you're going to need really specialised people."

Ruth Trench-Thiedeman, Landmark
(Andersen 2010)

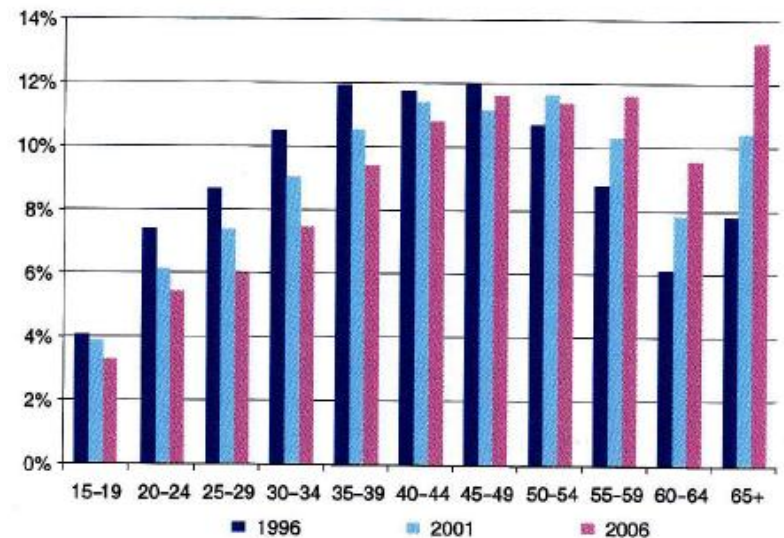
Ageing Population

The Australian agriculture labour force is generally 'older' and its average age is increasing faster than that of the rest of the Australian working population. According to the 2006 census data, 34.5% of the agricultural labour force is aged over 55 years of age. By 2018, this figure is projected to increase to 56.2%. (Keogh 2010)

This is mainly due to a significant decline in the number of young people entering the agriculture industry. As a result, the agricultural research fraternity is ageing and the supply of new scientists to the agricultural industry with postgraduate training is inadequate. (ACDA 2008)

Figure 1: The 2006 census was used to project the ageing profile forward between 2006 and 2018. This includes existing persons in the agriculture sector, and does not incorporate the age profile of entrants to the sector past 2008.

Agriculture Sector Age Profile



Decline in Agriculture Graduates

The agricultural research fraternity is ageing and the supply of new scientists to the agricultural industry with postgraduate training is inadequate. There is an estimated demand of 2,200 jobs per year for new agriculture and agriscience graduates, but graduate completions are below 800 and continue to decline (ACDA 2008).

Decline in Agri Graduates

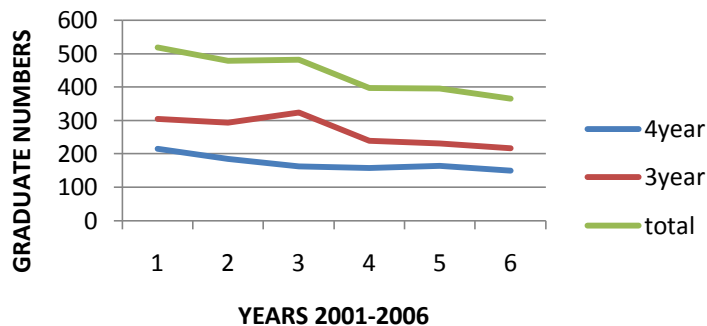


Figure 2: Total graduate completions in agriculture from Australian universities for the period 2001-2006. Includes third and fourth year graduates in agriculture but does not include graduates in forestry, food science and environmental science. (ACDA 2008).

While the number of agriculture graduates has declined, the education requirements of workers have increased. Agriculture once revolved around manual farming, but has now diversified into a range of roles both on and off the farm. Career opportunities include jobs in agronomy, livestock production, plant and animal protection, weed science and soil science, agribusiness, finance, natural resource management, horticulture, wine science, government agencies, and agricultural research. As the level of required knowledge continues to increase, the range of technologies an employee will need to be conversant will grow. (Pratley 2009)

Poor Industry Image



“Young people don’t understand the progression and the professionalism of the industry. They see it as a dirty, tough industry. It has changed so much and young people don’t understand the opportunities.”

Summer Antico, Antico (2011)

School leavers have little understanding of agriculture, in part because the majority of people live in the city and are disconnected from food production and farming, and also because agriculture is not a major part of the school curricula.

For the majority of people, their contact with agriculture is generally through the media. Adverse seasonal and market conditions in recent years have led to generally negative media reports about floods and droughts, but also environmental degradation, perceived animal cruelty, anti-GM messages, and ‘over-use’ of water for irrigation (Vidler 2011).

This, combined with the minimal contact most people have with agriculture, has fostered a perception in the wider community that agriculture is a ‘tough’, ‘old world’ industry (Pratley 2009).

Since the 1970s, the population has moved toward major cities and regional centres, as a result, smaller regional towns have shrunk. Shrinking along with them are educational facilities, health services, infrastructure and social capital in general. This has generally made some small towns less attractive as places to live and work. (Brett 2011)

Competition From Other Industries

"People who are trained in agriculture can almost do anything. They've got very strong levels of multi-skilling and so people who do an agricultural degree are actually very employable even outside the industry."

Jim Pratley (ABC 2010)

The resources sector, with a similar skills profile and a regional presence, competes directly with the agricultural sector. Over the past few years, skills shortages in agriculture have been exacerbated by the strength of labour demand from the mining industry and its larger salaries. The agriculture skills shortage has been negatively impacted further by low levels of unemployment, competition from other higher paying job opportunities in urban areas, and enhanced lifestyle attractions of the major cities, drawing young people away from country areas. (Keogh 2010)

"We've found that with the mining industry. They were offering huge salaries for apparently quite minor sorts of jobs. We had a number of people moving over to various mining companies on salaries that we couldn't possibly compete with. You have to be awfully careful though because each time you increase the salary you're actually making it more unaffordable for everybody in the rural space."

Ruth Trench-Thiedeman, Landmark (Andersen 2010)

“

Our examination of the industry shows that while there are a lot of activities aimed at promoting the industry and the career opportunities within it, the industry still struggles to meet demands for workers, to attract young people to study agriculture and take up careers in the industry and to encourage industry members to participate in further training. It appears the well-intentioned efforts of government and industry are not effectively targeted and information is not delivered clearly or with consistent positive messages.

”

(DAFF 2009)

Recommendations

Improve Data Collection

Demand by employers in the agriculture sector has been variously estimated. However there has been no systematic, comprehensive analysis of the job market based on job advertisements. (ACDA 2005)

Objective information about the current and future human resources requirements in agriculture is required to understand, plan for and address the sectors labour needs. There is little available objective research detailing the training and skills profile of the Australian agricultural sector and its key support sectors, or their future labour and skill requirements. Without accurate information, planning to deliver appropriate training provision will remain a difficult task and may result in misalignment of education and training priorities and actual industry needs. (Keogh 2010)

Recommendations

Train Business Leaders and Retain Staff

The agriculture industry is lacking in its human resource management and workforce planning skills. Farmers and agricultural services need to consider how they attract and retain staff. Providing opportunities for professional development, such as training in leadership, communication skills, and conflict management, will help better equip agriculture businesses to respond to changes and sustain performance and productivity growth. (DAFF 2009)

Smith et al (2006) observes that in the past, employers have looked to the government to help solve skills shortages in the form of funding the training of apprentices or increase skilled immigration; yet while these government supports are important, the agriculture industry needs to develop its own skills in attracting and retaining employees more effectively.

“89% of employers believe staff that have left, did so primarily because of money. However, 75% of ex-employees said they left primarily because of poor supervision. While salary does come into employees decision to stay or leave, the top four reasons for leaving are limited career growth or opportunity, lack of respect or support from the supervisor, higher compensation, and unchallenging duties from their role.” Tim Vidler, Agricultural Appointments (2011)

“I find the lack of formal structure hard to deal with – no regular meetings, no 5 year career plan. Forward thinking and strategic planning is not typically part of the industry’s tradition. I think this needs to be improved.”

Summer Antico,
Antico (2011)

Recommendations

United Positive Image of the Industry

There is a need to promote the positive stories of the agricultural industry. As previously mentioned, recent adverse seasonal and market conditions, as well as environmental and health issues surrounding food products and the agricultural industry, have fostered negative media reports of the industry and fostered a perception that the agriculture is a 'tough' industry.

DAFF (2009) identifies a need for consistent promotion of the agriculture industry. Accurately promoting the industry as a successful, sustainable and responsible industry, with a diversity of challenging and rewarding careers is needed to attract more skilled labour in the industry,

are necessary stories that need to be communicated to the wider community.

“There is a lack of a unified image in the media. The big supermarkets are just about the only ones with a positive public profile about the food industry. There’s a lot of negative media out there. I think National Food Week is a great opportunity to correct this.”

Lukasz Gorajek, Avanti (2011)



Recommendations

Promote Agricultural Opportunities

Agriculture desperately needs to attract people with the appropriate skills and passion so that the challenges ahead can be addressed. The increasingly sophisticated nature of the agriculture industry provides a great opportunity for young people looking for a challenging career, and this needs to be highlighted in order to attract new industry entrants to the industry.

While there are a range of different organisations and sectors within the agricultural industry promoting and communicating career opportunities, there is a need for a more coordinated approach (DAFF 2009). A united effort to communicate career opportunities to school children, young professionals and university students, with a consistent image and information, is recommended.

"There's been a perception for quite a while that perhaps there are no jobs in agriculture, that the jobs aren't that exciting, that the pay rates aren't good enough and you perhaps don't need educated people in the industry. But when we got the data together on this, the picture is actually quite different. It's almost a reverse. There are a huge number of jobs out there and the industry desperately needs people with qualifications who take up what's a really demanding and exciting profession." Jim Pratley (ABC 2010)

References

ACDA (2008). Graduate Completions in Agriculture and Related Degrees from Australian Universities, *Farm Policy Journal*.

ACDA (2008). Inquiry into research training and research workforce issues in Australian universities, *Australian Council of Deans of Agriculture*.

ACDA (2005), The Job Market in Agriculture in Australia, *Australian Council of Deans of Agriculture*.

AFI (2008). Make it rain people: tackling the rural skills drought, *Australian Farm Institute*.

Andersen, B. (2010). Scientists predict agricultural brain drain, *ABC*.

Brett, J. (2011), Fair Share: Country and City in Australia, *Quarterly Essay*.

DAFF (2009), Workforce, Training and Skills Issues in Agriculture, *Industries Development*.

Committee Workforce, Training and Skills Working Group.

References

Davison, S. (2011). A career in agriculture –what does the future hold?, *Australian Farm Institute*

Keogh, M. (2010). *Towards a Better Understanding of Current and Future Human Resource Needs of Australian Agriculture*, Australian Farm Institute.

Lukasz Gorjek (2011), “Attracting and Retaining New Talent”, *Fresh Connections*.

Pratley, J. (2009). Attracting university graduates to agribusiness, *Agribusiness Australia*.

Smith, A., Oczkowski, E., Selby-Smith, C., (2006), Older employees could hold key to skills shortage: CSU researcher, *Charles Sturt University*.

Summer Antico (2011), “Attracting and Retaining New Talent”, *Fresh Connections*.

Tim Vidler (2011), “Where to from here in the quest to find new talent?”, *Fresh Connections*.

References

Wollenweber, B., Porter J. R., Lübberstedt T. (2005). Need for multidisciplinary research towards a second green revolution, *Physiology and Metabolism* 8, 337-341 .