



## **National Farmers' Federation**

### **Submission to the Independent review into regional, rural and remote education**

4 September 2017

NFF Member Organisations



CANEGROWERS



CORPORATE AGRICULTURAL GROUP



NEW SOUTH WALES IRRIGATORS' COUNCIL

The Pastoralists' Association of West Darling



WOOLPRODUCERS AUSTRALIA



The National Farmers' Federation (NFF) is the voice of Australian farmers.

The NFF was established in 1979 as the national peak body representing farmers and more broadly, agriculture across Australia. The NFF's membership comprises all of Australia's major agricultural commodities across the breadth and the length of the supply chain.

Operating under a federated structure, individual farmers join their respective state farm organisation and/or national commodity council. These organisations form the NFF.

The NFF represents Australian agriculture on national and foreign policy issues including workplace relations, trade and natural resource management. Our members complement this work through the delivery of direct 'grass roots' member services as well as state-based policy and commodity-specific interests.

# Statistics on Australian Agriculture

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Australian agriculture makes an important contribution to Australia's social, economic and environmental fabric.

## **Social >**

There are approximately 132,000 farm businesses in Australia, 99 per cent of which are Australian family owned and operated.

Each Australian farmer produces enough food to feed 600 people, 150 at home and 450 overseas. Australian farms produce around 93 per cent of the total volume of food consumed in Australia.

## **Economic >**

The agricultural sector, at farm-gate, contributes 2.4 per cent to Australia's total Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The gross value of Australian farm production in 2016-17 is forecast at 58.5 billion – a 12 per cent increase from the previous financial year.

Together with vital value-adding processes for food and fibre after it leaves the farm, along with the value of farm input activities, agriculture's contribution to GDP averages out at around 12 per cent (over \$155 billion).

## **Workplace >**

The agriculture, forestry and fishing sector employs approximately 323,000 employees, including owner managers (174,800) and non-managerial employees (148,300).

Seasonal conditions affect the sector's capacity to employ. Permanent employment is the main form of employment in the sector, but more than 40 per cent of the employed workforce is casual.

Approximately 60 per cent of farm businesses are small businesses. More than 50 per cent of farm businesses have no employees at all.

## **Environmental >**

Australian farmers are environmental stewards, owning, managing and caring for 52 per cent of Australia's land mass. Farmers are at the frontline of delivering environmental outcomes on behalf of the Australian community, with 94 per cent of Australian farmers actively undertaking natural resource management.

The NFF was a founding partner of the Landcare movement, which recently celebrated its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

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# Executive Summary

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Our vision for Australian agriculture is to become a \$100 billion industry by 2030. The agricultural sector is a source of strength in the Australian economy, positioned to capitalise on growing global demand for safe, high quality food and fibre over coming decades. To achieve our vision, the sector needs regulatory and public policy settings that foster growth and productivity; innovation and ambition.

The NFF welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the independent review into regional, rural and remote education. We believe that the three key areas that need to be focused on, if Australia is to improve the educational outcomes of non-metropolitan Australians includes:

- ) Addressing the inequality between metropolitan and non-metropolitan students - if rural, regional and remote Australians are to have equal educational opportunities as those of their metropolitan counterparts, then it is critical that the government commits to providing essential infrastructure (such as adequate broadband speeds, that are both reliable and cost effective, and well-resourced regional educational centres) for non-metropolitan communities.
- ) Agricultural Skills of the future - as farms become more business orientated, they are recognising the importance of training and an educated workforce. Farming has needed to reduce its cost of inputs every year in order to remain internationally competitive. This has resulted in new technology that is increasingly mechanising farming methods, replacing previously manual labour. With the increased skill requirements to work in farming, the importance of appropriate education and training and pathways to enter employment that can meet the demands of the industry and also prospective employees, cannot be reinforced enough.
- ) Agriculture in the National Curriculum - it is well recognised that early investment in education is important for long term education outcomes. A national education system that fosters an understanding of where and how food and fibre is produced, will empower future decision makers. The NFF recognises and supports the work of not for profit (NFP) organisations as well as government funded organisations that develop and assist in resourcing rural, remote and regional education.

The NFF is dedicated to driving innovative and forward-looking solutions to the issues affecting agriculture, striving to meet current and emerging challenges, and advancing Australia's vital agricultural production base. A major factor to farming's innovation success story has been the skills, knowledge and expertise of people either working the land or involved in an associated capacity.

The NFF asserts that all Australians should have equitable access to appropriate education and training services, regardless of their geographical location. As such, funding models for rural education and training provision should ensure equity of access to education and training and recognise the higher costs of operating in regional, rural and remote areas. This will be a significant determinant of Australia's future prosperity and sustainability as a nation due to food and fibre production being 'products' of rural Australia. Well educated and trained people are needed in non-metropolitan Australia to ensure these products continue to be available.

## **Addressing the inequality between metropolitan and non-metropolitan students**

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Studies show that rural and regional school students have lower literacy and numeracy outcomes than city students. There are also smaller numbers who go on to commence university. The biggest impact on achieving progress on social inclusion is at the base level of language, literacy and numeracy skills. Without these, students fail to complete compulsory education and reduce opportunities at all stages of life to engage in higher learning. A serious coordinated effort is required to lift the educational standards of non-metropolitan Australia.

### Addressing the data drought

The NFF believes that connectivity represents the next frontier for agricultural productivity in Australia. Telecommunication services have evolved to the extent that it is now reasonable for baseline broadband (with a reasonable amount of data at a reasonable cost) to be considered a right for all Australians. Inequity issues affecting education outcomes for non-metropolitan students, and teachers, and school community are three fold, firstly the ability to interact with ICT after school hours, off campus, is limited by access, and cost affecting digital inclusion. Secondly, smaller, rural and remote schools are not able to have on site ICT specialist teachers to support student learning and optimal engagement in digital learning, leading also too thirdly, not having ICT support and troubleshooting accessible in timely and proximal manner.

Addressing the connectivity divide between metropolitan and non-metropolitan Australians will have a significant impact on learning outcomes for rural, regional and remote Australians. More efficient, cost effective delivery of professional development opportunities for educators, as well as increased access to online learning for students can radically alter the educational landscape for non-metropolitan Australians.

### Early Investment

As outlined in the discussion paper, early investment is needed for appropriate education outcomes. The role of both parents and the community in educational outcomes is amplified in rural, remote and regional communities as they are the primary source of early learning and as such, parents and the community need to have a role in determining the educational requirements for their community. The cost and time of travel to access preschool, or early intervention programs is recognised as a barrier which requires solutions to enhance engagement of non-metropolitan children in early childhood learning.

A focus on providing equal access to education for non-metropolitan Australians will also have many flow-on benefits to disadvantaged Australians. In addition to social inclusion gains, it will also assist in alleviating health (including dental and other specialists), and other government services problems that are typically below average in rural Australia.

### Teacher Support/Training

Attracting and retaining the best teachers for non-metropolitan schools is a persistent challenge and needs an 'in depth' focus by itself. It is critical that there are incentives, flexibility, and progression opportunities for educators in non-metropolitan areas.

The NFF supports the concept of a Rural Education Major, and recommends that education providers who implement teacher education courses should also offer a major in Rural and Remote Education. The course could potentially address the spread of distinctive challenges

relevant to rural, remote and regional areas, and provide educators with experience working in these arduous conditions (through remote or rural practicums). Developing a specialised education major for rural and remote education would ensure that the specialised knowledge, understanding and relevant skills required for working in such a challenging environment can be developed and applied.

It needs to be recognised that rural, regional and remote educators are a specialist group, and they need to be provided opportunities to excel if learning outcomes in these areas are to improve. Currently excursions and professional development are metropolitan centric. For rural, regional and remote educators accessing training often requires hours of driving, staying away from home and then often there is the guilt of knowing your school cannot get casual teachers to cover your classes when you are away.

Specialty agricultural teachers have all the work load, busy scheduling and crowded curriculum issues as other teachers but also often have responsibility for animals and plants at the school as well as organising excursions and events, connecting with producers and processors and keeping up to date with developments. Support is needed to promote agricultural teaching as a career and assist agricultural teachers to succeed.

Locating and accessing available services for children with learning or physical disabilities, presents ongoing challenges for non-metropolitan schools. In relation to resourcing individual learning needs, the NFF would suggest the Government look at ways to better support and potentially remunerate parents and careers of students involved in education and/or training in non-metropolitan Australia.

## **Agricultural Skills of the future**

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The agricultural sector is in the midst of pervasive changes in terms of the approach and method in which farming is conducted. Technological and scientific developments have been increasingly pertinent to an industry facing harsher climatic conditions and striving to remain internationally competitive on global markets. Traditionally, the skills necessary to working in the industry have been hands-on, developed through on-the-job training.

For a significant majority of occupations on farms, this continues to be how employees are trained. It should, however, be noted that the nature of farming has and continues to significantly change. Mechanisation, automation, and technological advancements have made farming a much more highly skilled industry than ever before. There is a critical need to ensure that all those involved in agriculture have high level skills and capacity to undertake work in the sector to enable the agricultural industry to remain competitive and productive in an international market place both now and into the future.

## **Agriculture in the National Curriculum**

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Developing the skills of the current and future Australian agricultural workforce, and ensuring that the right skills are in the right place at the right time, is the critical challenge. Governments need to view the education and training system holistically, not just in four discrete silos of early education, schools, vocational education and training (VET), and higher education. Although an increasing number of young people are undertaking vocational training and skills, there needs to be a much stronger focus on improving quality and maximising the credit for vocational training at schools into the rest of the training system, so



that their expectations are met. The issue of an ‘overcrowded’ curriculum and ‘relevance to employment’ must also be addressed.

The NFF recognises that there are a number of relevant programs that currently have expertise in assessing, delivering and supporting rural and regional educational programs. We strongly support the work of both NFP and Government funded organisations such as: Primary Industries Education Foundation Australia (PIEFA), Primary Industry Centre for Science Education (PICSE), Rural Skills Australia, Agrifood Skills, and the Council of Deans of Agriculture, as well as non-Government entities such as the Isolated Children and Parents’ Association (ICAP), which promote and assist in resourcing rural education.

It is critical that the Federal Government continues to support and promote these organisations that have expertise in the area of non-metropolitan based education programs, and will be the entities that will potentially deliver improved learning outcomes and bridge the divide between metropolitan and non-metropolitan education.

### Resource requirements

It is important that quality teaching resources are available to teachers to encourage them to teach issues related to agriculture, and that teachers are appropriately supported. The NFF notes that the choice to use particular subject material still rests with the teacher, and like many members of the public, teachers are often unfamiliar and even uncomfortable talking about agriculture and food and fibre production.

Connecting school students to the sources of their food and fibre is vital to assist their development as future decision-making consumers of agricultural products. The AgForce Queensland SIPP (School Industry Partnership Program) has achieved excellent results promoting both food and fibre education to primary students and the ever-growing range of careers available in modern agriculture to secondary students. The SIPP program also organises one of Australia’s best agricultural science teachers’ professional development events. Programs like the low-cost SIPP program need more financial support and could be expanded nationally.

NFF notes the inclusion within the National Curriculum of 168 content descriptions for food and fibre. A strong and reliable resource base must be available to all teachers in order for them to easily access food and fibre teaching material. At a national level, the PIEFA have launched Primezone, [www.primezone.edu.au](http://www.primezone.edu.au). Primezone provides teachers with single point access to a range of primary industries education resources. These initiatives must be retained and expanded. Teachers and educators across the country ought to have ready access to such resources. Supporting the availability of sustainable food and fibre messages within the curriculum is the first step to teaching future generations about the importance of sustainable food and fibre production and enable them to participate in debate and make informed choices on issues related to sustainability and the use of natural resources.

### **The role of Government in bridging the divide**

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There is a significant opportunity for a much wider, broader and more encompassing approach to education and training. Such a focus would reflect regional and rural needs with:

- ) A drive to online learning
- ) Funding of education/training that reflects the higher costs and time for regional delivery
- ) An improved recognition of prior learning system

- J Support funding of skill sets and encourage greater flexibility in delivery
- J Promotion of farming and its attractiveness as an industry and career path;
- J Programs to encourage metropolitan students to study in regional locations:
  - o Studies<sup>1</sup> have shown that over 40% of metropolitan students who study at an inland university stay in country areas for employment. This is significantly higher return on investment in rural communities need for health, education, and social service professionals than other similarly targeted programs.
- J Whole-of-government acknowledgements of the role education providers play in regional sustainability, including their role in workforce development, economic development, educational development, and social development.
- J Appropriate initiatives to allow non-metropolitan students to acquire their degrees in local areas, either through locally situated institutions or via telecommunications, or both.
- J Development of a strategy with specific funding commitments to create a world-class Agricultural University in Australia. (At present Australia does not have a single university that is internationally ranked in the primary field of Agriculture, despite agriculture R&D funding exceeding \$800million a year).
- J Strategically integrated telecommunication and transport policies and decisions to assist rural students overcome access issues related to inadequate access to learning opportunities or public transport and poorly maintained infrastructure.

## **Conclusion**

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To grow and maintain a flexible and skilled workforce in rural, regional and remote communities, and to bridge the divide between metropolitan and regional schools, the NFF recommends that the Government continue to provide support for programs that encourage the uptake of vocational education and training in rural areas and ensure that training package development accurately reflects the needs of industry. It will also be critical for Government to continue to provide support for initiatives that improve connectivity between Australian farmers and the broader population.

For Australian farming to deal with the challenges it faces, a highly educated and skilled workforce will be of vital importance to its continued survival. There are a number of opportunities available to drive greater engagement by rural Australia and farming in education and meet some of the core goals being sought by the Australian Government. Action is required now to make education more accessible and equitable for rural Australians of all ages.

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<sup>1</sup> Western Research institute on Charles Sturt University graduate placements, 2006