



# AG STUDENTS ON THE RISE

AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES ARE SUCCESSFULLY ATTRACTING STUDENTS BACK TO AGRICULTURAL STUDIES, WITH INTEREST ALMOST DOUBLING IN SOME AREAS.

STORY **JANENE CAREY**

AFTER MORE THAN a decade in the doldrums, applications to study agricultural courses at Australian universities are up 15–20 percent for the second year in a row. Some institutions, such as the University of Western Australia (UWA) and Melbourne University, are reporting that student interest in the subject has almost doubled.

It's a desperately needed turnaround, because demand for skilled graduates has been massively outstripping supply for some time. Five agribusiness jobs are waiting for every person walking out of a university with a relevant qualification, according

to the Australian Council of Deans of Agriculture (ACDA), the peak body for tertiary education and research. In 2008, its analysis revealed universities were producing only 800 graduates annually to fill more than 4000 jobs, a finding that overturned the prevailing view among policy makers that employment prospects in agriculture were bleak.

"The government saw it as a sunset industry," ACDA president Professor Iain Young says. "But the data showed that's not the case. So we've been changing the story."

The \$200 billion agribusiness sector comprises not only those

working directly in food and fibre production, but also the whole farm-dependent chain of goods and services, including advisory, technical, scientific, financial and managerial roles, as well as jobs that are removed from the farm gate, in areas such as economics, policy, research and education. One in six jobs in Australia is in agribusiness, half of which are in metropolitan areas, and starting salaries are around \$60,000.

There's been a concerted effort to revamp the subject's public profile, particularly how students, teachers, careers advisors and parents perceive it. Iain Young says that when he came to Australia five years ago to teach at the University of New England (UNE), he was shocked by the preponderance of bad news stories about agriculture. Media reports focused on drought, financial hardship, bank foreclosures, land degradation and suicide rates among farmers.

"So there was no surprise that parents didn't want their kids to go and do agriculture," he says. "And careers advisors – what career advisor would ever say agriculture is a great industry? One of our big problems is to actually get over to them that it's not only a great industry, your starting salary is higher than almost anyone, job satisfaction is through the roof, and the humanitarian aspect is huge. We need the best and brightest boys and girls to come into agriculture, but we're fighting against, 'You go and be a lawyer'."

UNE has seen steady growth in agriculture-related enrolment numbers for the past five years, and the School of Environmental and Rural Science credits outreach programs targeting senior school students and their teachers. One of these, a competitive-entry residential program called Generation 2050: Project Feed the World brought 100 hand-picked students from around Australia to UNE in December.

Hannah Yager, who boards at Saint Scholastica's College in the Sydney suburb of Glebe, doesn't have a background in farming but after attending Generation 2050 she has her sights set on a career in agricultural-science research. "There are so many opportunities in the sector that people aren't aware of," she says. "I had an interest in veterinary science but now I'm thinking along the lines of sustainable, efficient agriculture, conservation, selective breeding and GM crops, and the research into this."

The University of Queensland (UQ) runs a similar residential program called Future Experiences in Agriculture, Science and

Technology (FEAST). Michael Wellington, a first-year Bachelor of Agricultural Science student, is a former FEAST attendee and the winner of a UQ scholarship. Although he grew up in Brisbane, he traces his interest in becoming an agronomist to family connections, with dairying on his mother's side and a grandfather who was a stock and station agent.

"Growing up, there was always talk around the table about what was happening in agriculture, so it was always at the back of my mind," he says. "There's a massive need for university graduates to come into agronomy and other



**First year ag student at the University of Queensland, Michael Wellington. OPPOSITE: Student Ainsley James-Ross in a University of Western Australia glasshouse with wheat, canola and lupins.**

## EDUCATION



**CLOCKWISE: Professor Iain Young, ACDA president; high school student Hannah Yager listens to a Biology in Agriculture session at the University of New England.**

disciplines. The job opportunities are massive – you can work anywhere in the world, in the city or in the bush. And in terms of employment, I reckon I've got a 10 times better chance of being employed than people going into engineering at the moment, with the resource boom going downhill."

At UWA, where a flexible course structure encourages students to delay choosing their major, Professor Tony O'Donnell credits rising enrolments in agricultural subjects to a different strategy. Rather than targeting high school students, UWA decided to expose most of their science students to the excitement of studying agriculture.

"We introduce them to the importance of food security, issues like feeding the world, global food challenges, and see if we can convert some of them across," Tony says.

Ainsley James-Ross was one of the 400 science students who took 'Science, Society and Communication' at UWA last year, a unit designed to spark students' interest in agricultural science. Initially, she intended to focus on environmental science and

botany, but was open to the idea that she might change her mind. "The module on food security started me thinking about changing to an agricultural-science major, which I eventually did," she says. "What also swayed me was that I discovered there were good job opportunities in agriculture."

Many of those job opportunities are in cities says Associate Professor Vic Galea, from UQ. "Twenty or 30 years ago, the concept of agriculture was someone sitting on a tractor ploughing a field," he says. "But agricultural science isn't about training people to farm – it's about producing people who can conduct research, develop new technologies, and make a difference to the industry. They're working at that cutting edge."

However, at the industry's vital, beating heart are the workers on the land, and their wellbeing is crucial to the success of the whole industry. "I think we have to make sure job satisfaction goes right down the line to the farmers," Iain says. "Without the primary producers, we're nothing. We have to understand how important they are to the nation, and take care of them." 🦋