

Who will be the innovators?



**COMMENT by
PETER SMITH**

PLENTY has been written on the need to increase participation in agricultural education.

We've seen university enrolments decline and faculties and schools of agriculture close; and we've seen a Senate report and a Victorian parliamentary report advocating greater participation.

The need for greater participation has been well and truly established.

What hasn't been at all well established is how we are to do it.

The debate has focused on the quantitative issues of increasing the labour supply, and the skills and knowledge base as a consequence of increasing participation.

There is another issue that needs focus, and that is of the quality of those skills and knowledge and their impact on future leadership and innovation in agriculture.

Recent research with dairy farmers, completed by the Centre for the Study of Rural Australia at Marcus Oldham, indicates a sophisticated set of understandings and practices on the part of highly educated dairy operators.

The research focused only on 30 to 40-year-old tertiary-educated dairy operators in the western district of Victoria.

These operators were mindful of technology and how it could assist

their business, but also how social media could be leveraged for professional development purposes and to keep them connected rather than professionally isolated. Their sense of innovation in technology use was important to them business-wise, but also as an important part of rural lifestyle.

Probably the most significant characteristic of these participants was they saw themselves as business people at least as much as they saw themselves as farmers. That meant they brought innovative and sophisticated business thinking and strategic planning to their operations, and pursued professional development and networking about business as a primary goal.

“If we are to build an agricultural workforce for the future, we need to be developing the innovators and the entrepreneurs for the sector.”

I've argued before, if we are to build an agricultural workforce for the future, we need to be developing the innovators and the entrepreneurs as vigorously as we build technical skills for the sector.

It will be the leaders in our industry who will deliver the innovative practices and marketing that adapt to the markets of the future.

As the world's demand for food and food security continue to increase, and to become important matters of international politics, Australia

needs to ensure it has the leadership and imaginativeness necessary to ensure our part in that future opportunity.

So how can we achieve that? First, we need to increase participation in the education and training of agriculturalists and agribusiness experts.

Much has been written about the image of agriculture among young people and how that image is not cool enough.

The sort of data we were able to generate from our small study with high end dairy farmers can assist with an evidence-based approach to changing current images of our industry towards much more sophisticated and demanding images of career.

Second, we need to more carefully distinguish among the various forms of agricultural education to differentiate between the science-based knowledge and the business-based knowledge that are both necessary for successful professional work and, more importantly, innovation and leadership in agriculture.

Science skills are crucial – so are business skills, and their combination again provides for the development of a sophisticated and exciting image of the work to be done.

Our group of high-end and young dairy farmers provided strong insights into what innovation can look like in one sector of our industry.

My suggestion is the sort of work we did with these dairy operators would prove valuable if conducted in other sectors and locations.

If we are to build innovation and leadership for the future, there's nothing like evidence to work from.

■ **Dr Peter Smith is from the Centre for the Study of Rural Australia, Marcus Oldham College, Geelong.**