



Boosting university participation may come at a cost to agriculture, writes **SIMON LIVINGSTONE**

THE Federal Government has set a goal to lift participation levels at universities.

It wants 40 per cent of the population aged 25 to 34 to attain at least a bachelor-level qualification by 2025.

To achieve this, places in university courses will become uncapped from next year.

The Government previously restricted the number of students universities were allowed to enrol.

It promised to invest \$491 million across four years to assist the uncapping and fund the number of public university places — an estimated 50,000 additional students by 2013.

At first glance, this demand-driven reform appears to be a noble and sensible one — more Australians accessing and completing tertiary studies.

But it makes some stakeholders nervous.

Regional universities fear many prospective students may bypass their institution in pursuit of a qualification from a more prestigious one in the city.

There's also emerging disquiet within some universities.

Staff have been concerned about the prospect of increased competition from within.

Agriculture, for example, was likely to be negatively affected by this demand-driven agenda.

Faculties already have been compared regarding their ability to generate income.

Low enrolments in agriculture compared unfavourably as contributors to a university's financial health with, for example, business and law, which were cheaper to run and command healthy enrolments.

There have been newspaper reports in every state highlighting low enrolments and predicting the fate of agricultural faculties within universities.

There has been an ad-hoc



Uncapped: The agricultural sector will be affected by the Federal Government's bid to increase the number of people enrolling at public universities.

Ag faces class struggle at uni

rationalisation of agricultural education providers across Australia over the past two decades, at a time when farmers and graziers need to be highly qualified to effectively manage complex businesses and environments.

Universities are the largest provider of agricultural education across the nation.

Australia has 39 universities, with 12 offering agricultural-related degrees.

It's possible — and highly probable — in the new system that universities would enrol large numbers of students in high-demand courses, which would then work as a "cash cow" for the institution's funding stream.

History has shown, and continues to show, agriculture has not been a contributor to the financial health of any uni.

An uncapped system would not result in increasing numbers of new entrants enrolling to

study agriculture, even though there were plenty of graduate employment opportunities.

Research by Professor Jim Pratley in 2008 found more than 2000 jobs a year for new university agricultural graduates, but graduate numbers had fallen to fewer than 800.

The decision on whether universities continue to offer agriculture courses after next year will be left to their vice-chancellors. There's likely to be a contraction of providers within the 12 universities now offering agriculture.

But this scenario may be beneficial for our sector.

There's an economic argument where less might be best in the future with the provision of agricultural education.

The current situation of having 12 universities struggling to attract sufficient numbers of students has damaged the image of agriculture.

Though market forces would most likely dictate the sustainable number of providers required to prepare our future agricultural leaders, as a community, we have some concerns.

For example, what would be the safeguards that ensure the nation was served by the universities and courses that did not just seek maximum advantage for the provider?

How would agriculture find its place, so we could continue to develop the skills and the knowledge to serve the industry that feeds us all?

What processes would be developed to reduce the supply-demand gap shown in the Pratley research?

As an industry, we need to be aware of these issues and we need to be anything, but silent.

● **Dr Simon Livingstone** is principal of Marcus Oldham College at Geelong