

# Restocking human resources in ag is a matter of urgency



**COMMENT by  
Dr SIMON LIVINGSTONE**

**T**HE pressures on food production and security are also pressures on agriculture. We currently have a spike in food prices – the second one in several years and probably indicating regular spikes will be part of life in the future – unless we act.

The November 2010 Reflections on the Global Food Crisis report of the International Food Policy Research Institute also observes that price surges are likely to reoccur unless we move to address the underlying issues facing food production, security, and distribution. We also have a drought coming to an end in eastern and south eastern Australia. With that, the opportunity to increase food production and rebuild the nation's flocks and herds.

But there are challenges everywhere in agriculture.

Recent attention has been drawn to the decline in the agriculture work force, due to people leaving the industry during the drought, as well as being attracted to other occupations in the booming mining industries, or in more urban environments.

The increasing age of farmers in Australia adds to the workforce decline, resulting in a disastrous loss of skills and knowledge already, with further to come. Urgent attention to agricultural

education and training is needed if we are to sensibly address issues of food production and food security going forward.

The development of skills and knowledge across the nation's agricultural regions is a complex matter that requires a great deal more planning than so far seems to have been provided.

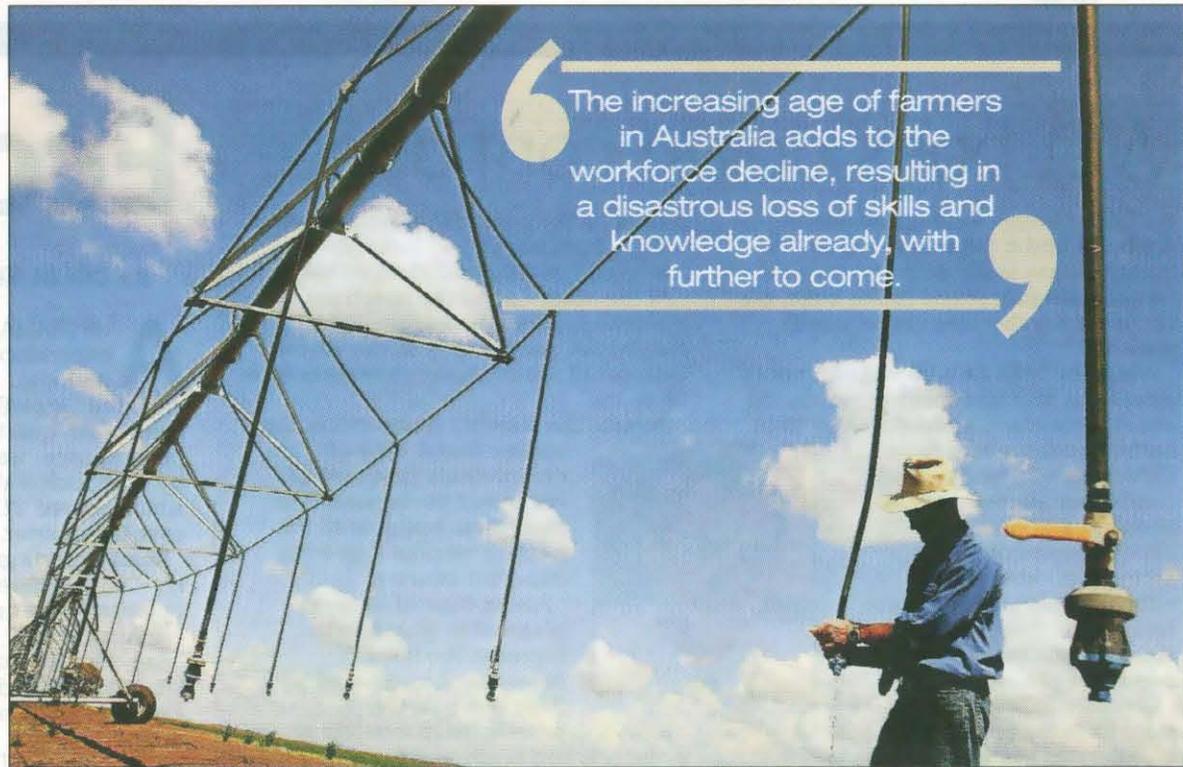
A decline in education providers at the university level has resulted in the need for tertiary institutions to be financially responsible and viable. But this is tinged with a certain amount of short-sightedness as institutional managements have elected to discontinue agriculture degree courses in response to drought-driven downturns in numbers in favour of cheaper to run courses that service more urban based professions and populations.

Dr Peter Smith, a Principal Research Associate at Marcus Oldham's Centre for the Study of Rural Australia, has been interested in the skill mix that makes up agriculture and believes this is not readily understood by politicians or by education policymakers.

In June 2010, The Australian Farm Institute released its major report into human resource needs for Australian agriculture. Dr Smith believes it is a story of enormous opportunity, of risks if we don't understand this, and something of a story of neglect.

"Besides tracking the decline in the agricultural workforce, the report has wonderful data on the different skill level requirements of the different sub-sectors," Dr Smith said.

"For example, broad acre cropping, intensive livestock, and grain, sheep and beef cattle farming are sub-sectors that all com-



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mand large numbers of very highly skilled people (bachelor's degree at least) and smaller numbers of lower skilled people, while in horticulture and other livestock farming the skills levels were just that bit lower."

Dr Smith argues that if we are going to provide the right sort of response to the mosaic of needs that make up our nation's agricultural workforce, we need to be very mindful of these sorts of sophisticated and diverse needs.

And yet, the decline in the number of providers at the university level, and the move towards national training packages in vocational education have tended to reduce the diversity of skills

and knowledge development. As I have argued before on many occasions, the need for a much more planned and national approach to agricultural education.

University providers, VET sector and schools sector need to plan together to achieve an effective response to skills requirements at all levels.

The are enormous challenges ahead to attract young people to agriculture. We need to ensure that we don't just replace the skills and knowledge lost as current workers retire, but that we increase those skills and knowledge and rejuvenate the vibrancy of agriculture with young people.

We need to clearly show young

people that agriculture provides enormous professional and business opportunity, and that a vibrant and productive agricultural industry is the only way we are going to feed a growing population in a reliable way.

Selling essential produce that people need to eat and to live is the basis for about as good a business plan as can be imagined – and it will become even better.

But to maximise these business opportunities and secure the food of our populations, skills, knowledge, and well-planned, effective, education and training is required.

■ **Dr Simon Livingstone is Principal of Marcus Oldham College, Geelong**