Food production may be off the radar — but we still need to eat, writes SIMON LIVINGSTONE

AT last year's Marcus Oldham College graduation, former National Farmers' Federation president David Crombie spoke of his trip to South America where the President of Uruguay commented "there is no more noble undertaking for mankind than to be engaged in the production of food".

How true this is.

However, if we look at agriculture in Australia, it is evident state and federal governments do not hold the same view, or at least they don't show it.

The production of food in this country does not register on the national radar of importance.

What is on the radar of politicians and increasingly city dwellers are issues around land degradation, water management, environmental sustainability, and yet little focus on who will produce the food required to support and sustain growing populations.

It is as if governments believe the production of quality food will just happen without any considered planning.

What is missing is a debate on who will produce the food required to sustain growing populations, and how an increasing output will be achieved and maintained in a reliable way.

There appears to be a lack of understanding by governments and the wider population in general about what it takes to develop professional food producers — our farmers.

Most people seem to understand it can be a lengthy process for our sector to benefit from the application of agricultural research.

There is a significant time lapse between a research concept beginning as an embryonic idea, through to its practical application in the paddock.

This process can take decades to achieve tangible economic returns.

But I don't believe it is widely understood that it takes a similar protracted amount of time to educate and train a professional farmer.

Consider the time it takes to transform an inexperienced 17-year-old embarking on a career in agriculture into a competent farm business manager.

It may take many years for the youngster to learn the ropes, to acquire the necessary practical skills to complete the many physical aspects required and expected of the job.

And then there is the value-adding process of educating and training that person in the vast array of sophisticated knowledge as well as advanced cognitive capabilities necessary for them to handle the complexities of changing business and technological environments.

These higher-order thinking skills are best learnt in a tertiary education environment, and that takes time. The process of practical and theoretical skills acquisition can take 15–20 years.

Without careful planning, Australia may find itself without the number of farmers required to meet our nation's growing food demands.

The 2010 Australian Farm Institute report on human resource requirements for agriculture identified that 30 per cent of the existing labour supply was likely to exit the industry by 2018.

And we know the number of youngsters embarking on a career in farming is low compared to other occupations.

If governments do not begin to recognise this and start to address the looming shortage of farmers and farm managers, the task will be left to the private sector.

To secure top-quality graduate managers for their farms, pastoral companies will need to demonstrate further commitment than they have.

Agricultural companies will have to take a leading role in supporting farm management education through philanthropic donations and forming close relationships with a higher education provider of their choice.

The crucial task of ensuring farmers are well educated, efficient and capable of feeding the growing world population should not be left to only one stakeholder.

Both government and the private sector should invest in ways to attract young people into agriculture, to develop strategies and incentives for them to then move into formal education and training, and to remain in our industry.

The Federal Government could take a lead role by developing a national strategy to address what is needed in the agricultural school sector, vocational and tertiary sectors with regard to the provision of agricultural education.

We need to understand many levels of skills are required in our industry, and if we are to thrive and meet needs, we need to plan carefully how each of the education sectors can contribute best to the mix of skills needed.

This strategy may then inform the sector of the appropriate public and private investment required to ensure our industry has sufficient numbers of suitably trained farmers.

Dr Simon Livingstone is principal of Marcus Oldham College, Geelong