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REGIONAL SKILL PRESSURES NEED TO BE ADDRESSED

The widening gap between agricultural labour supply and demand will require a national response, according to the Regional Universities Network.

The Network also believes that Regional Development Australia Committees, agricultural enterprises, regional universities and other stakeholders should work in close partnership to develop integrated regional strategies for the development of the agriculture sector.

These claims form part of the Network’s submission to the Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee’s ‘Inquiry into higher education and skills training to support future demand in agriculture and agribusiness in Australia’.

“In our submission, we have highlighted a number of barriers that inhibit our members from achieving their full potential contribution,” Professor David Battersby, Inaugural Chairman and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ballarat, said.

“We have also identified a number of opportunities for strengthening agriculture higher education provision.”

Professor Battersby said the Regional Universities Network was committed to working in close partnership with Regional Development Australia, all levels of government and the agricultural sector to close the serious gaps in agricultural education, skills training and research.

“We also support the formation of a Higher Education Agriculture Innovation Fund.”

This Fund could be designed to facilitate:
- The establishment of new undergraduate and postgraduate coursework programs in agriculture, agribusiness and related fields aligned with regional strategies for sector development
- Collaboration between regional universities and regional vocational education and training providers to jointly design educational programs and pathways
- Flexible delivery options
- Collaboration between universities to design and deliver agriculture and agribusiness programs, building on their individual disciplinary specialisations
- The embedding of agricultural applications into educational programs in related fields of study (e.g. genetics, statistics, environmental systems, business).

“The Network is very concerned about the worrying state of agricultural education and skills training across the nation,” Professor Battersby said.

“The need for practical, accessible and targeted agricultural education programs has never been more urgent.
“There is also a case to be made for national research collaboration, bringing together basic and applied research capabilities. It makes good sense to build applied agricultural research capacity where it is most needed – that is, in regional Australia,” Professor Battersby said.

The Regional Universities Network was established in October. The foundation members are CQUniversity, Southern Cross University, University of Ballarat, University of New England, University of Southern Queensland and University of the Sunshine Coast.

The Network’s full submission can be accessed at: www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/eet_ctte/agribuisness/submissions.htm

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