

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

George Bernard Shaw wrote "*there is no love sincerer than the love of food*" (Man and Superman (1903) Act 1) and in a busy world we sometimes forget that with no food we have no life.

According to the United Nations (General Assembly GA/EF/3242), world food production will face extraordinary challenges with an expected demand of current food consumption to be doubled by 2050. Australia currently produces enough food for our own domestic consumption and exports food to feed a further 40 million people. If we want to be part of the solution to the forecast 2050 world food shortage we will need highly educated people trained in vocations that focus on 'Healthy Foods in Healthy Environments' to meet the demands of the future.

As a society, we are becoming more conscious of improving our health and the health of our environment. To this end, we acknowledge the importance of healthy food and have a greater expectation that this food should be produced sustainably with minimal impact on the environment – 'Healthy Foods in Healthy Environments'.

Hurlstone Agricultural High School was established over 100 years ago to assist in the development of the agricultural resources in New South Wales. The original objective of the institution was to "*enable more people to fit themselves for the agricultural life*" (John D Spencer, Principals and Principles in Agricultural Education– 2000). In 2009, this original intent appears to have been somewhat lost. The school now appears to focus more on high academic achievement from its selective student cohort than on delivering broadly based agricultural education. An academically selective cohort and a commitment to agricultural education are, however, not necessarily mutually exclusive. In the current climate it is more important than ever that we attract the best and brightest students to the agricultural sector to address the global issues of food security, climate change and their impact on environmental health.

In particular, there are four powerful issues that reinforce the need for an institution in the Sydney basin that increases student engagement and participation in agricultural pursuits:

- The need for world food production to double as per the United Nations prediction by 2050 when the world population is estimated to reach 9 billion. Australia has a major role to play, not only in domestic production and export, but in assisting other countries to optimise their own production.
- The annual shortfall of 800 undergraduate students entering agriculture related courses in the tertiary education sector as recognised by the Australian Council of Deans of Agriculture. This will impact on the very professions which develop the science, technology and management strategies to fulfil world food needs.
- The rapid onset of climate change which requires our brightest and best to find ways of increasing food production while protecting our environment.
- A fundamental rethink on how the industry encourages young Australians to choose agriculture as a vocation, ensuring the farm dependent economy remains one of Australia's fundamental economic drivers. The three components of the farm dependent economy, namely farm supply, farm production and post farm gate activity contribute about \$80 billion per annum to the Australian economy, approximately \$20 billion more than the mining industry.

Australia needs to support a vibrant sustainable farm sector so we can continue to be self-sufficient, and discover new and innovative practices in our food and fibre production while maintaining rural centres.

Hurlstone has a very strong history and has been one of the finest institutions with a number of its former students reaching prominent positions in agriculture related fields. Unfortunately, the school cannot rest on its past achievements and must go through a process of renewal to ensure it maintains its relevance into the 21st century.

In undertaking this Inquiry, the Chair found himself having to consider and report on matters beyond the Terms of Reference, in order to provide a more complete picture of the current situation.

The Chair sought opinions from all major stakeholders. He was struck by the level of interest and difference of opinion expressed in meetings, discussions and submissions. Central to these deliberations was a commitment by all to achieving a positive outcome for the school. Opinion on how this could be achieved was, however, diverse.

The site on which Hurlstone sits is complex. Apart from Hurlstone Agricultural High School with its associated farm and boarding facilities, the site also houses three Schools for Specific Purposes, and administration offices for the NSW Department of Education and Training.

The current farm and hostel facilities at Hurlstone are tired and outdated. The school presents a picture of best practice 1940's agriculture and clearly would inspire few to enter the industry. Hurlstone students are academically gifted and require exposure to the excitement of using world's best high tech facilities if we are to engage them in the future of food production and associated industries.

The past few years have seen changes in the student catchment of Hurlstone Agricultural High School. The number of rural students seeking admission has been declining for a variety reasons. There has also been a decline in the number of students electing to study Agriculture for their HSC. Academic achievement remains high with the majority of students progressing to tertiary studies. University offers indicate a diverse range of post secondary interests amongst the student body with only a limited number choosing to pursue agriculture. Objective and reliable data that provides further insight on the educational and career outcomes of former Hurlstone students appears unavailable. As a consequence, it is difficult to quantify the extent to which the facilities alone equip Hurlstone's students for their chosen educational and career paths.

Agriculture as an industry is undergoing rapid and constant change. Within this context, it is difficult to predict the exact future skills and knowledge demands that will be required by industry. Advances in technology are currently driving significant change and are an essential element in finding solutions for the future. The current Agriculture syllabus appears sufficiently broad, allowing it to address current and emerging issues.

The Inquiry was firmly of the view that industry must become a major player in agricultural education. Changes, in particular the adoption of new technologies within the sector, could prove difficult for schools to keep pace with, and in the absence of guidance from those in the field, educators may be left behind industry best practice.

The following indicators have been identified as being at the core of best practice in agricultural education:

- The agriculture program meets the needs of students, community and industry
- Resources/equipment are up to date and meet syllabus requirements
- Strong local, community and industry support
- Incorporation of industry based sustainability practices within the program
- Flexibility of the program to adapt to changing circumstances
- Student access to facilities and resources beyond the school gate
- Opportunities for working "hands on" with animals, plants and equipment
- Program relates to local industry contexts and work opportunities
- Students are able to clearly see a viable pathway from school to university and/or industry.

Hurlstone's future places great significance on its history and heritage. The local community places great significance on the green space that the school currently provides. While elements of history and heritage are important, and community access to green space should be enhanced, these factors alone must not inhibit the changes that need to be made for the successful renewal of Hurlstone.

Apart from being a selective high school, Hurlstone is also a specialist high school in the delivery of agricultural education. However, the current process of selecting students to enrol in Year 7 does not appear to place sufficient emphasis on any demonstrated interest or ability on the part of the individual student in terms of agriculture.

A greater number of country students must also be encouraged to apply for enrolment at Hurlstone, utilising a more suitable entrance criteria than the current selective high school test results. Boarding students must be provided with upgraded accommodation and facilities that are more in line with community and parental expectations.

If Hurlstone is truly committed to making a valuable contribution to the future of agriculture in NSW, it should give serious consideration to mandating agriculture or primary industries to the Higher School Certificate for all students.

Best practice in the delivery of agricultural education at Hurlstone in the 21st Century requires access to state of the art technology and purpose built facilities for its farm enterprises.

The Inquiry recommends a number of new facilities be built to support a range of enterprises allowing for the production, manufacture and sale of some products on site.

Best practice also requires that Hurlstone establish formal partnerships with industry and the tertiary sector to ensure student involvement in research and adoption of current industry standards.

To move into the future, a different governance model needs to be implemented to develop and manage the Hurlstone farm and boarding facility so that it provides a resource for use by other students and community members.

The Inquiry recommends the appointment of a Commercial Manager to focus on refurbishing the boarding facilities, instigating new enterprises on the Hurlstone farm and establishing greater opportunities for access by the community and other Sydney students

to the available resources. This position should report to the Regional Director, South Western Sydney Region.

The Inquiry also recommends the establishment of a high level advisory board, supported by the Commercial Manager. An important strategic role of the advisory board will be to identify opportunities for additional revenue raising, and for other students in the Sydney basin to enjoy the facilities at Hurlstone. Another important task will be to promote pathways for students entering Year 7 so that they can see a clear way to enter a vocation related to 'Healthy Foods in Healthy Environments'. This will require strong networks with tertiary institutions and industry.

The advisory board must have representation from the university sector, tertiary training bodies, Department of Education and Training, Department of Industry and Infrastructure, and, importantly, industry. The advisory board must also identify opportunities for bolstering the knowledge base of networks for careers advisors, ensuring they are aware of vocational opportunities in relation to the delivery of 'Healthy Foods in Healthy Environments'. The advisory board should provide industry spokespeople to address students highlighting career prospects.

One of the biggest challenges faced by Hurlstone is overcoming the negative perceptions regarding agriculture itself. As stated earlier, the current perception of agricultural production is poor in the eyes of the wider community. The taking of water to grow food and fibre and the use of fertilisers, herbicides and pesticides is seen as impacting negatively on the production of healthy food while sustaining a healthy environment. The farming community seems unable to change this perception, and has failed to convince the community that sustainable food production is possible while protecting the environment. This is becoming an increasingly important issue nationally and internationally and institutions such as Hurlstone Agricultural High School are integral to securing a more positive future.

Rather than thinking of "agriculture" we need people thinking in terms of 'Healthy Foods in Healthy Environments' as a positive way of looking at food and fibre production in the 21st century. Educational delivery in the context of 'Healthy Foods in Healthy Environments' is a way of overcoming this challenge and provides an opportunity for the school to refocus on its core business of enabling more of our people to "fit themselves for the agricultural life". The amount of public capital invested in land at Hurlstone should require an expectation that at least 50% of students will enter professions related to 'Healthy Foods in Healthy Environments'.

To achieve the funds required for investment in the future of Hurlstone, the Chair recommends the sale of a small parcel of land from the current holding which should raise an estimated \$15million of the capital that is required for reinvestment. This will reconfigure Hurlstone Agricultural High School as Sydney's 'Healthy Foods in Healthy Environments' Education and Training Centre.

The Inquiry Chair is confident that with a capital injection and consequent changes, Hurlstone will deliver on the Government's strategies as spelled out in the State Plan, and meet the important challenges of food production into the 21st century.