Muresk under new management

Melissa Williams

Management of Muresk Institute of Agriculture in Northam has been handed over to the Department of Training and Workforce Development (DTWD), which aims to continue using the facility for training, education and research.

The department took over the campus on July 1 and it will now come under the responsibility of Minister Murray Cowper, who replaced Peter Collier in the Training and Workforce Development Portfolio in last month’s State Cabinet reshuffle.

Mr Cowper will be under pressure from WA lobby group Primary Advocates to ensure the Muresk facility continues to be used for agricultural education and skills building.

Group managing director Roy Duncanson said the State Government could not afford to ignore an historically high shortage of tertiary graduates and workers entering WA’s agricultural sector.

“Agriculture and mining in this State are experiencing the biggest shortfalls in skills of any other industry and these wealth-creating sectors are hamstrung by a lack of graduates,” he said.

“For example, there are an estimated 10 vacancies for every one person who applies for an agronomy job in WA.

“Overall there are about 400 jobs in this State’s agricultural sector for about 60 tertiary graduates each year.

“And there is anecdotal evidence that the vocational education sector is under just as much pressure to attract people into agriculturally related skills training as the tertiary sector, but it is hard to gather data.”

Mr Duncanson said Primary Advocates was pushing the State Government for a response to the recent Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations references committee report into Higher Education and Skills Training to Support Agriculture and Agribusiness in Australia.

“This report outlined the dire shortage of skills to meet future demand in agriculture and agribusiness and made a series of recommendations to address the problem.

Mr Duncanson said the report highlighted the need for Federal and State governments to support training and education in agriculture, but the treatment of the Muresk campus meant governments were failing the industry in future workforce planning.

“Governments can no longer ignore this issue, which is being reflected worldwide in agriculture and has been a trend for more than 40 years,” he said.

Mr Duncanson said if Curtin University had found it difficult to fund agricultural courses based at the Muresk campus, it was likely other education and training providers would also find cost a major prohibitive factor.

A DTWD spokesman said the new Muresk Institute would promote and market training, education and skills development to a range of industries and have a practical, skills-oriented approach.

He said key areas of delivery would include agribusiness, agriculture and mining.

The spokesman said Muresk Institute would not deliver training courses, but would broker and facilitate vocational training and tertiary education to a range of private and public sector training providers that could deliver courses at the facility.

“Several key recommendations from the Senate inquiry report will be supported by the transformation of Muresk into a multi-tenanted and multi-functional vocational training, tertiary education and research facility,” he said.

“The report’s recommendations also reflect a range of projects already being progressed by the department, such as a mapping pathways project and delivery of an agribusiness associate degree through Curtin University and CY O’Connor Institute.”

CY O’Connor currently offers a certificate IV in agribusiness at the Muresk campus.

DTWD has advised that the final cohort of third-year Curtin University agribusiness degree students would continue studying at Muresk Institute under the tutorage of university staff until semester two finishes in October this year.

It said Curtin University would continue to manage the 1738 hectare Muresk Farm until the end of harvest, likely to finish in early 2013.

Curtin University pro-vice chancellor of science and engineering Andris Stelbovics has previously told Countryman that the university would not cut ties with Muresk, despite moving its agribusiness degree to its Bentley campus.

He said the university was interested in meeting CY O’Connor and agricultural colleges to assist developing pathways into the Curtin agribusiness degree.

The Muresk Reference Group met last week and it is understood a Muresk Advisory Group will be set up to advise the DTWD.
Program to lift student results

TWENTY-THREE Tasmanian schools have been selected to take part in a federal and state government initiative to improve student outcomes by giving them more autonomy.

Schools in the North taking part include Brooks High School, Mayfield Primary School, Riverside Primary School and West Launceston Primary School.

The schools will be called Plus Schools and the program will be rolled out from next year.

Education Minister Nick McKim said the Empowering Local Schools National Partnership aimed to improve student outcomes by increasing the capacity of principals, parents and school communities to be involved in making decisions about governance, leadership and innovation.

“This is a wonderful opportunity to further strengthen and improve our practices,” Mr McKim said.

Senator Chris Evans said the Gillard government scheme was a $62.2 million initiative to support almost 1000 state and independent schools in phase 1.

Each of the schools will receive a one-off, start-up grant of between $40,000 and $50,000.

The state government will get an extra $909,000 to support changed administration systems.

— ROSITA GALLASCH
Youth Allowance changes commence

By TIM HARDING

More than 315,000 students who receive Youth Allowance or Austudy can let out a sigh of relief after the Federal government's changes to the schemes came into effect on Sunday.

This is in addition to the $190 extra assistance that was provided to students through the Household Assistance Package last month.

The new changes are in the form of an increase in the amount a student can earn through employment over a fortnightly period.

The increase is to the sum of $400 a fortnight, previously the threshold was at $236 per fortnight.

Minister for Tertiary Education, Senator Chris Evans said “This change to the income threshold will allow students to earn more each week before their payments are reduced.”

The Parliamentary Secretary for Higher Education, Sharon Bird also announced, in addition to the threshold increase, changes have been made to the Student Income Bank, with an increase from $6,000 to $10,000.

The Student Income Bank allows students who do not use all their fortnightly payments to ‘bank’ the surplus.

“The accumulated credit can be used to offset higher income earned in other fortnights, for example, if students increase their work hours during university holidays,” she said.

Students can also expect to receive a twice-yearly Supplementary Allowance of $210 for individuals and $175 for a member of a couple.
Quality courses the key to Asian market, educators told

AUSTRALIA’S higher education sector has been challenged to focus on quality if it is to regain its position as a major destination for Chinese students.

David Finegold, the senior vice-president for Lifelong Learning and Strategic Growth at Rutgers University, said Australian institutions needed to accept they had lost their dominance of the Asian market, with the US, Canada and Europe increasingly important as education destinations.

“There’s a huge hunger for high-quality opportunities at all levels – TAFE, higher education and graduate degrees,” Professor Finegold said. “But the question is going to be whether Australia can recover and really reassert its position where it was an early leader.”

Total overseas student numbers are down 22 per cent from a peak in 2008-09 yet the number of students leaving China is growing by more than 20 per cent a year.

China and India remain the key markets, home to 35 per cent of the global workforce. Australia’s early success was built on proximity, value and the opportunity to pursue permanent residency. A booming dollar is wiping out the cost advantage, while visa rules have been tightened.

“The focus has to shift to quality and value,” he said. “The first wave might have been easy pickings. The government said you can go and recruit, they charged high fees and got lots of international students without having to ask: ‘Are we delivering high-value education? Are we placing these students in good jobs?’”

This view is echoed by the general manager, sales and marketing, of UTS:Insearch, Belinda Howell. “Whereas Australia was accessible and well priced, it is now considerably more expensive than study in the US.”

As a lure, lifestyle will not work, Ms Howell emphasised. “Chinese parents and students are much more goal-oriented than that. They are much more focused. The first question they ask agents is what is a good career for my child. Then it’s what course do they have to do to get that career. And then, how much money will they earn and will they get a job,” she said.

“We need to be articulating the benefits of Australia on that wavelength and not in terms of sun, surf and sand.”

An overseas education remained a huge expense for Chinese families, said Professor Finegold, who yesterday addressed an Adelaide conference organised by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research. But what has changed is an increasing desire to develop skills that can be used in their home country rather than hoping their degree will be a pathway to permanent residency.

“Now, the vast majority of students are looking to work for a few years and gain really good experience but they recognise that many of the best growth opportunities will be when they go back,” he said.

Ms Howell predicted Australia’s two-year post-university work visa would be a strong selling point.

“Students want things that are really powerful on their CV because they are all focused on what’s going to differentiate them from millions of other students,” she said.

“Australia needs to be much more at the forefront of promoting educational quality and the value of its education – not just to operate in Australia but to operate in any relevant environment.”
A class act: billionaire venture capitalist gives $114m to Oxford

VENTURE capitalist Michael Moritz has donated £75 million ($114m) to the University of Oxford, an unusually large gift for a British institution as the country’s universities come to rely increasingly on private contributions.

Mr Moritz, the chairman of Sequoia Capital, recently stepped down from daily management for medical reasons. The money will be used to set up a scholarship fund for low-income students.

Mr Moritz, 57, who was born in Wales and educated at Oxford, is worth SUS1.7 billion ($1.66bn) and ranks 273rd on the Forbes 400 list of the richest people in the US.

The gift, the largest single contribution to undergraduate financial assistance in European history, comes as budget pressures in Britain have caused a controversial increase in university tuition fees.

The higher fees and increased reliance on gifts from donors such as Mr Moritz have sparked debate over what some call the “Americanisation” of British higher education.

“It’s absolutely essential for all UK universities to tackle this challenge through a diversification of their income sources,” said Oxford vice-chancellor Andrew Hamilton, in reference to the cuts and increased fees.

British universities are increasingly turning to their US counterparts for lessons on fundraising.

Less than 2 per cent of British universities’ funding comes from donations “but it’s starting to edge up,” said Oxford chancellor Chris Patton.

Oxford gets 15 per cent of its funding from donations.

Mr Moritz in 2008 donated $US50m to Oxford’s Christ Church college, where he gained a degree in history in 1976.

He worked as a journalist before joining Sequoia Capital, based in California, where he invested heavily in internet companies such as Google, Yahoo and PayPal. He sits on several boards, including that of LinkedIn.

Mr Moritz said he hoped his new gift would encourage other universities to invest in opportunities for disadvantaged students.

“I wouldn’t be here today were it not for the generosity of strangers,” Mr Moritz said.

The Universities and Colleges Admission Service, which oversees all British university admissions, says applications to English universities have dropped by 10 per cent since fees began to rise.

For less prestigious universities, relying on private donations is hardly an option, particularly in times of economic hardship.

“For the majority of UK institutions, charitable income is negligible,” said Paul Cottrell, head of policy at the University and College Union, Britain’s largest higher-education union.