NSW: Ex-dean to probe NSW agriculture education

SYDNEY, July 26 AAP - The NSW farming industry will examine how to recruit more young people through a wide-ranging study into agricultural education and training.

Former Charles Sturt University agriculture dean Jim Pratley has been chosen to head the inquiry, which will make recommendations on whether the state's agriculture education sector can respond to industry needs.

Professor Dean will assess the quality of school, tertiary and vocational education programs across the state.

He will also consider projected industry needs and ways to promote careers in agriculture.

Primary Industries minister Katrina Hodgkinson said the study was essential to both the agriculture industry and the wider state economy.

"When agriculture contributes around $9 billion to the NSW economy every year, it is incumbent on us to ensure agricultural education and training in this state is second to none," Ms Hodgkinson said in a statement on Thursday.

NSW Education minister Adrian Piccoli said school-age students needed a better understanding of food and fibre production.

"Only recently, research revealed that three-quarters of Australian children in their final year of primary school believe cotton socks come from animals and alarmingly 27 per cent were convinced that yoghurt grows on trees," he said.

"We also want to address the decline in enrolments for agriculture in the higher education sector."

Prof Pratley is to report to the ministers by June 2013.

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Private education not the only way

Keeping a private school tradition alive has come at a huge expense for many farm businesses struggling to make the best of dry seasons in the past decade.

Farmers realise that funding private school education out of cash-flow can be a crippling expense, particularly if there are two or more children to be educated at one time.

But dry years have made such savings difficult and parents are now confronted with paying private school costs out of cash flow, starving the business of much-needed dollars in the process.

As one who left home at eleven years of age to attend Horsham Technical School and board privately, I have some idea of what it is like to “go away for school”.

My parents and I decided that training in mechanics, welding, wool classing and building construction would be good for me. I look back and identify this time as a real turning point in my life.

In my 15 years as a TAFE lecturer, I led training programs for certificate II and III in Agriculture for about 200 young farmers in what was known as the On Farm Training Scheme.

Students there had a good mix of public and private school backgrounds. I have remained relatively close to most of these now middle-aged farmers, and fail to see any great advantage of a private school education from a farming perspective.

To believe a person can “make it” with a private school education is clearly wrong.

My son Tim attended Naracoorte Secondary School and is a professional actor. His classmates now fill the roles of a dentist, mining engineer, school teacher, importer, air force commander and chemist – ten years on from their high-school graduation.

Another inspiring example of public education is that of Jordan Lynch from Poochera on upper Eyre Peninsula. She was the only student in her year when she completed year 12 at Karcultaby Area School. Studying two subjects through face-to-face teaching and another three by distance education, Jordan gained the required Tertiary Entrance Score to study physiotherapy at University and is now nearing completion of her studies and about to embark on a challenging career.

I am convinced that a public school education with additional opportunities created by parents can lead to a sound springboard for a rewarding life and career.

It is not a crime to break the private-school tradition if finances are lacking. The biggest challenge will be to swallow a bit of pride, get on with life, and not worry what others might think.

If farm equity is bruised and cash flow has suffered, we need to cut our cloth. Otherwise, we may just find that the hand that feeds us can no longer do that.