



National project aims to shape future tertiary studies

Australia's agricultural industry continues to create opportunities to attract the next generation of scientists and researchers.

Across the country, companies and organisations are hosting a range of in-house platforms and programs which aim to address the skills shortage experienced by the industry.

Initiatives include graduate training programs, mentoring options, international exchanges and student work placements. And just as industry is concerned, so is the higher education sector.

A new national research project is aiming to align and shape how agriculture is taught at Australian universities.

Through the AgLTAS (Agriculture Learning and Teaching Academic Standards) project, academics and industry are working together to create a greater understanding of what is being taught, and where greater opportunities exist with industry for learning pathways and graduate training.

The project is developing a National Academic Standards Statement for Agriculture: where students graduating from agriculture and related disciplines will have across the board knowledge and skills set.

Agriculture, for the purposes of the project, encompasses agriculture, agricultural science, agribusiness, agricultural economics, agrifood, horticulture, viticulture and wine science.

Project leader, Dr Tina Acuna from the University of Tasmania, is working in collaboration with colleagues from the University of Adelaide, University of Western Sydney and Charles Sturt University.

"It is a shared responsibility," Dr Acuna said.

Recent research shows there are about 2000 jobs available every year, compared with the 800 graduates in agriculture and related disciplines.



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Editorial...

Ian Macleod
Managing Director

It's a well known, and documented, fact that the agricultural industry needs to make serious inroads towards recruiting future scientists and researchers.

Just how we are going to feed a projected population boom of 9 billion by 2050, all the while coping with rising fuel costs and diminishing land and water resources, has been cause for international concern.

Coupled with this is how do we not only attract, but nurture and develop, the next leaders and thinkers has been top of mind for many across all aspects of the industry.

At Peracto it is something we have always felt quite passionate about.

We have participated in national forums and initiatives, as well hosting our own Graduate Development Program.

Just recently I was invited to be a part of a reference group for a new research


project, AgLTAS, which is featured in this edition.

For me, what has made this project really unique, and exciting to be a part of, is as an industry we have been given the chance to talk directly to the higher education sector regarding science graduates.

Over the last couple of months, the project team has travelled the country to hold workshops with industry, academics and students.

The team wanted to find out first-hand just what a 21st century science graduate looks like.

Are they job-ready? Do they have the appropriate scientific skills set? Do they have the necessary communication and problem-solving skills? – all of these questions and more were posed to the project group.

It's been a fabulous opportunity to work with universities to provide feedback and be a part of helping to shape the needs of our science graduates. 



Peracto continues to support programs designed to attract future scientists with student Anne (left) receiving on-the-job experience with Peracto Research Officer Karina Bennett.



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"It is such an important opportunity to stop and think, and help create a shared understanding of what we would really like to see happen," Dr Acuna said.

Since August last year, the project team has held 20 successful workshops across the country with academics, students and industry.

These workshops have provided invaluable feedback and generated much discussion as to what the industry wants in agriculture graduates.

A reference group has also been established with industry, students and academics, with the project funded by the Australian Government's Office for Learning and Teaching.


"It is a way to define what a graduate knows, understands and can do when they graduate from university," Dr Acuna said.

The new Statement will exist alongside the recently published Science Standards Statement, and aims to address the nature and extent of the Agriculture disciplines, and detail the Threshold Learning Outcomes (TLOs) for Agriculture.



AgLTAS project leader Dr Tina Acuna.

As part of the project, the new Statement will be piloted across four Australian universities.

To find out more visit www.agltas.edu.au 

The AgLTAS project aims to produce four outcomes:

1. Nationally-agreed AgLTAS statement (including the nature and extent of Agriculture and Agriculture Threshold Learning Outcomes (TLO) statements) to enable alignment of academic standards across universities
2. Confidence among students that their degree reaches minimum standards, while each university can clearly promote what is unique about their degree offering as delivered
3. A holistic appreciation amongst academics and industry of the agriculture curriculum taught at university with opportunity to improve: linkages between units/courses; learning pathways through the degree levels; provision of graduate training by industry
4. A network of practice between universities and industry through shared engagement in the development of the AgLTAS statement.



Peracto celebrates big milestones in 2014



This year will go down as an important year for Peracto, as the company achieves two significant milestones.

Firstly, in July, Peracto will celebrate its 10 year anniversary and secondly it is now the largest Australian owned and managed contract research organisation.

"We are now the only truly locally owned national business in our sector," Peracto Managing Director Ian Macleod said.

"Globalization trends have and continue to affect many aspects of the agricultural industry, as with many other industries.

"We have always worked hard to consistently offer our clients research services, advice and direction at a local level.

"We have been able to achieve this through being independently owned; with our offices managed locally, helping to provide a consistent service and a commitment to our local clients in any given region across Australia and New Zealand."

Peracto continues to strive to be Australasia's innovation leader and preferred research organisation.

The company's commitment to innovation has resulted in the development of strong partnerships with industry groups both across Australasia and internationally.

The company's investment in infrastructure and operations has seen growth in the number of offices throughout Australia and New Zealand over the past decade.

Peracto began as a research and development arm of Serve-Ag in 1976.

The potential to grow services and clientele led to it being established as an independent business in 2004.

This new entity was re-branded as Peracto in 2006.

"We started with one office in Devonport, Tasmania and have grown to establish an office in every state of Australia, as well as both islands of New Zealand," Mr Macleod said.

Each office caters specifically to the research and technical services needs of its region.

ABOVE: At the Skilling the Food Bowl seminar are (from left) Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Agriculture, Senator Richard Colbeck, Dominique Cotterill and Peracto Managing Director Ian Macleod.

For example, Peracto North Queensland worked with a local grower to establish a commercial farm environment where they can carry out trials in a variety of horticultural crops.

With its national footprint, Peracto has the ability to provide research services to every crop grown in Australia and New Zealand

This research is delivered by the company's 60-strong workforce, incorporating 500 years of industry experience.

A thirst for knowledge, enthusiasm and continual improvement is at the core of Peracto.

For example, Peracto was instrumental in developing two broadleaf herbicides for horticultural crops in Australia.

Peracto was also involved in devising a quick response for Australia's lettuce

industry when it faced an infestation of a new pest, Lettuce aphid, in 2004.

Investment in technical services and research excellence goes beyond the paddock.

The company devotes much time and energy towards coordinating a number of training and development programs for its staff.

In-house professional development courses, inter-office transfers and international exchanges are open to all employees.

Peracto also designed its own Graduate Development Program in 2008.

The 12 month course offers new staff an opportunity to network with fellow employees and participate in development activities including designing trial programs; field trips, mentoring partnerships and practical exercises.

The company's contribution to industry has also been recognised, by being awarded with the Elders Productivity Partner Award at the 2011 AUSVEG National Awards for Excellence.

Peracto has also been acknowledged with a Department of Economic Development Export Award in Tasmania's CGU North West Business and Industry awards in 2011.

The company's ethos towards supporting a work/life balance and career progression was further demonstrated with the achievement of a Tasmanian Employer of Choice award in 2011. 🌿



Participants in Peracto's Graduate Development Program, 2013-2014.



Former Tasmanian Minister for Economic Development David O'Byrne presents Peracto Managing Director Ian Macleod with a 2011 Employer of Choice award.



Peracto staff celebrating the re-branding in 2006

SA office responds to industry

Richard Porter leads the team at Peracto's South Australian office, where they continue to meet industry needs.

Firstly, how did you come to pursue a career in agricultural science?

Having grown up on a cereal/sheep farm at Jamestown in the mid north of South Australia, there was an innate desire to remain in agriculture following school. This eventually led to university study in agriculture, as two brothers (and now their sons) continue to work the family farm. Prior to graduating, I was fortunate to be taken under the wing of well-known pasture researcher, Mr Ted Carter, at the Waite Agricultural Research Institute, and an involvement in applied research commenced. Working with Mr Carter on research and

extension projects on the Eyre Peninsula of the state proved to be a great training ground, and was career forming.

What are some of the unique aspects of your work in South Australia?

A feature of agriculture in this state is the diversity of both product and growing region - facilitating the branding of grain from Kangaroo Island, saltbush lamb from arid pastoral regions around Port Augusta, Angus beef from the Coorong, and wines from Coonawarra to the Southern Flinders. We get to work in the nation's best wine growing regions with some outstanding producers, in some scenic broad acre locations, and spend time on the River. We live and work in the driest state, which can be challenging, but this also builds resilience and drives our industry in the pursuit of efficiency and innovation.

What is South Australian agricultural research best known for?

The Waite Agricultural Research Institute and Roseworthy campuses both have a strong record of achievement, at regional and global levels. These two campuses have produced many of the country's leading researchers and industry identities, and have also become the recruiting grounds for our own business. Seven of the last eight recruits to our business have come via Adelaide University, with six of those remaining with us today. One thing we are not known for is our GMO technology, despite the Australian Centre for Plant Functional Genomics being based at the Waite precinct. Hopefully one day soon, good science will prevail over political posturing, and we will also move forward in that area.



Richard Porter (third from left) training staff during a recent study block.



Where does your work take you? Who makes up your team?

Our work takes us to the Riverland for citrus and table grape research; to the Murraylands for potato and onion projects; through the Barossa, Adelaide Hills and McLaren Vale regions for wine grape work, and the Adelaide Plains for protected cropping and vegetable trials. These regions are pretty much the domain of Ben Hill-Ling, who oversees the operational side of our GLP and horticultural projects. Tom Blake is assuming more responsibility for our broad acre crop protection business, which takes him to the Yorke and Fleurieu peninsulas, the Mid North, Mallee and upper south east regions. Neil Wittwer goes a little further with plant breeding, which this year will expand to include the Eyre Peninsula for the first time. I think Neil will have the pick of locations this year, as the Eyre is the most welcoming and picturesque region in the state, as well as having great fishing. Working alongside our senior researchers is a group of technical officers, headed by Andrew Lehmann, who are the next crop of research officers in our business. Behind the scenes we have some very supportive

staff, most notably my wife Annie who is responsible for the book keeping and office management, and Liz Pitcher who oversees our reporting process. Rounding out the team at Peracto SA is a great group of casual workers, without whom we could never achieve the output we do.

What are some of the challenges your industry in South Australia faces?

We have a dynamic environment in many respects. One thing we have built in to our business here is agility, and the subsequent ability to adapt to, and take advantage of, changes in industry structure or direction. We have seen this in recent times with the merging of crop protection and seed companies, the rapid development of protected crop production, and increasing aridity in some of our marginal cropping zones. Each of these scenarios throws up new challenges, and simultaneously, opportunities which we need to read and be prepared for. A more holistic view of the agricultural industry would identify challenges posed by policy which are sacrificing our local producers, and exposing our consumers to low quality, cheap food.

What does the future hold?

We want to continue to expand our plant breeding services in this state. From small beginnings in 2010, we have established a network of clients with whom we are keen to explore further opportunities. In this state at least, I have come to understand the benefits that a breeding program can have in a diversified R&D business. Other opportunities lie in expanding our capability in horticulture. Having experienced growing pains in the past, we are conscious of having the appropriate resources in place prior to pursuing growth. We believe we are now well positioned to exploit such opportunities. We have been very fortunate to have Trevor Wicks acting in a mentoring role for some of our younger staff in the field, which is providing real benefit through his leadership and knowledge sharing. In the past month we have recruited Steph Lunn and Kalon Green, as well as Michael Heyneman, three recent graduates from Adelaide University, emphasising a need for appropriate training, mentoring and leadership. Like my first research job, working here could potentially be a career defining experience for these new graduates. 

Peracto expands operations in New Zealand

As Peracto continues to grow its operations, it has opened another office in New Zealand.

The new South Island office is located in Christchurch under the helm of Senior Research Officer Sean Lange.

The Christchurch office further extends Peracto's presence across the country including Pukekohe, and the opening of the Hawkes Bay office in late 2012.

Christchurch is located in Canterbury which is bordered in the west by the Southern Alps, in the east by the Pacific Ocean and incorporates vast plains, alpine and coastal landscapes.

Given the expansive territory, the Christchurch office carries out research trial work across a huge range of crops and farming practices.

"Canterbury region is best known for its arable land and process crops," Sean said.

"There is also viticulture, vegetable cropping, and pastoral farming and there has been a huge increase in dairy production in many areas of the region.

"However, the Christchurch office also extends its research capabilities throughout the South Island, giving us access to apple and grape productions in the northern regions of the South Island, as well as stonefruit, grapes, pasture and cropping productions down south through Central Otago and Southland."

Sean works closely with local industry, farmers and clients and is supported by his colleagues from offices on the North Island.

"Research skills obtained from years of experience, with a large pool of resources and skills available from within Peracto, and an obsession for knowledge and new technologies, has led to the office specialising in a diverse range of research trials," Sean said.

The company's expansion in the South Island, now offering on-the-ground expertise with the new Christchurch office, allows the business to further develop key relationships with industry and clients.



Christchurch office Senior Research Officer Sean Lange.

"We will continue to expand our research capabilities through improved skills, knowledge and support from our colleagues and clients," Sean said. 