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Have your say on ag courses

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A BURNING issue for the agriculture industry surrounds the capabilities required of university graduates.

What should they know? What do we want them to understand? What should they be able to do?

Tina Acuna, a senior lecturer at the Tasmanian Institute of Agriculture and the School of Agricultural Science, is leading a national project to answer those questions, and members of the farming community and agricultural industries are invited to have their say at a workshop.

Agriculture and related disciplines – which includes areas such as agricultural science, horticulture, wine science, agricultural economics and agribusiness – are taught at 14 universities across Australia, and Dr Acuna believes university education in agriculture is at a cross-roads.

“We know that tertiary skills in agriculture are

essential so that we can meet the future need for food, fibre and medicinal purposes, but there are currently more jobs than there are agriculture graduates,” she says.

“There are also a lot of changes in university regulations about the design of courses and learning outcomes that can lead to tensions between universities and employers if we don’t align our expectations.

“The AgLTAS project is giving us – not only teachers, but students and industry as well – an opportunity to stop, think and talk about what we want our agriculture students to know, understand and do when they graduate from university.”

The project team, which includes people from Charles Sturt University, the University of Adelaide and the University of Western Sydney, will consult with universities, graduates and employers to develop a statement of learning out-

comes standards for all agriculture university degrees. The project is funded for two years by the Australian Government’s Office of Learning and Teaching.

Workshops are planned for the AgLTAS project in most Australian states over the next five months with teachers, students and industry representatives. A reference group has been formed, which includes academics Ian McLeod, from Peracto, and Geoff Thomas, from the Ag Institute.

“The reference group will work with us to write the national academics standard statement for agriculture based on the feedback from the workshops and an online survey,” Dr Acuna says.

So, does this mean content offered in Australian university degrees in agriculture will become similar? “Not at all. It will be up to each individual university to shape their agriculture curriculum. We will

be comparing the academic standards of the graduates from the four universities involved in the AgLTAS project, which will help us to design courses that meet the needs of our future students and agricultural industries,” she says.

“We are encouraging as many people as possible to come along and have their say – we need diverse opinions so that the national academic standard statement for agriculture reflects the views of the broader agricultural community.”

THE AgLTAS workshop will be held at the Devonport Entertainment Centre from 3.30-5.30pm on Tuesday. For further project information, including newsletter subscription, visit the AgLTAS website: www.agltas.edu.au. People interested in getting involved with a workshop can contact Phoebe Bobbi at bobbi@utas.edu.au



GREAT EXPECTATIONS: Tina Acuna wants to shape courses to opportunities in agriculture. Picture: PETER MATHEW