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## Ag uni courses in decline

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Chris McLennan | February 15, 2012

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### A RECORD low number of students will begin their agriculture studies in Victorian universities this year.

"Agriculture is no longer a sexy subject with young people," Liberal MP David Southwick, chairman of a State Government probe into agricultural education and training, said yesterday.

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The rapid decline in enrolments for farm courses has continued as university starts for thousands of students across the state in the next week.

A *Weekly Times* investigation has revealed:

**FEWER** than 700 agricultural science graduates will be produced nationally this year.

**THE University of Western Sydney** has axed its century-old agriculture course at Hawkesbury after fewer than 10 students enrolled this year.

**THE** number of providers of agricultural-based courses declined nationally from 15 to seven between 2000 and 2010.

Victorian universities are loathe to release enrolment numbers until students commit later in the first semester but it is understood several tertiary institutions are under pressure to keep their courses going with only a handful of students enrolling.

Education experts blame the poor promotion of agriculture, particularly by careers teachers at secondary schools, but more so the "dumbing down" of farming in the media at the root of the crisis.

The long drought also meant many rural families could not afford tertiary study for their children.

Only a few mainstream universities still offer degree courses in agriculture and the cheaper-to-run law and business programs are attracting more local and international enrolments.



Up in the air: Fewer students will graduate from agriculture courses in coming years as applicants seek other vocations.

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There are only 20 students at the University of Melbourne's [Dookie campus](#) finishing their Bachelor of Agriculture this year.

The degree's first two years are spent in Melbourne with the finishing third year at Dookie.

A university spokeswoman yesterday said the 2010 intake "was the smallest for many years, and highlights that the issues that the Victorian Parliament is investigating are valid".

Fifty-five students will begin the Bachelor of Agriculture course at the university's Parkville campus this year.

[La Trobe University's](#) numbers for its Bachelor of Agricultural Science course have also fallen, with 38 enrolments this year against an average of 46 students over the past three years.

However, colleges such as the business management-orientated private Marcus Oldham at Geelong and Longerenong near Horsham say they are still performing well.

With 42 enrolments this year in its two-year diploma courses for agronomy and agriculture, Longerenong has recorded its best result for a decade, which it credits to "hands-on" training.

[South West TAFE](#) has had success marketing its diploma livestock courses at its Glenormiston campus.

But it is because the more highly credentialled three-year university courses are in such dire straits that the Government launched an inquiry, Mr Southwick said.

Mr Southwick's committee met in Warragul yesterday for a public hearing chiefly addressed by local government, education and training providers and farmer groups.

"We need a lot more young people to study agriculture, but at the moment it is almost a last resort," Mr Southwick said.

"We have found there is such an incredible shortage out there of agricultural scientists, agronomists, the specialised subjects."

Agriculture Minister [Peter Walsh](#) said he hoped more people would apply for agricultural courses now returns in farming had improved.

"I have put a heavy emphasis within the Department of Primary Industries on improving the profitability of the sector because the biggest inducement to enter the industry will always be the prospect of making a good dollar," Mr Walsh said.

Federal Parliamentary Secretary for Agriculture Sid Sidebottom said: "Attracting young people to choose agricultural studies at university is a real challenge, and is part of the broader problem the agricultural sector is facing in attracting and retaining skilled labour.

"We all need to do a much better job in promoting agriculture to young Australians and explaining the vast spectrum of career options available in the sector," Mr Sidebottom said.

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