

**CHANGING THE FACE OF AGRICULTURE – ATTRACTING YOUNG  
NEW ZEALANDERS TO A PROFESSIONAL INDUSTRY**

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**Abstract**

*There are many factors which influence people's career choices. Young New Zealanders are very clear about their priorities; high income, job satisfaction, location, a good work-life balance and according to Professor Jacqueline Rowath, Director of Agriculture at Massey University, they are also after leadership and opportunities for career growth. However, a large proportion of current school leavers are struggling to make the transition into Tertiary Education, notably agriculture related courses. New innovations and approaches are required to address this dire situation. This paper discusses some of the factors keeping young New Zealanders out of the agricultural work force and also examines the industry's need for skilled labour. Its purpose is to encourage the on-going development of the 'modern and skilled farmer'; receptive to new technologies and innovations and to facilitate the progression of young New Zealanders into Tertiary Training. We are confident that the development of new training initiatives and a proactive approach, targeted specifically at industry needs, will encourage New Zealanders into a professional industry as confident and skilled employees and on track for a career of lifelong learning.*

*Keywords:* Taratahi, tertiary, training, professional, agriculture, innovation

*Subtheme:* Education

Growing trends in agriculture and education are going to continually force the industry to address the obstacles inhibiting the development of a professional and appealing industry. An industry which, as the 'back bone' of the New Zealand economy, needs to attract quality people to fill all niches – from farm assistant to herd manager, owner to research scientist - and one which all current and potential stakeholders see as a lucrative and viable career, needing innovation and trained skills. Sadly, the industry is struggling to shake the reputation of being the dumping ground for school dropouts and for those with low skills. With a decline in enrolments in some areas of agriculture related tertiary qualifications, the urbanisation of society, the changing career priorities of younger generations and the current trend towards more appealing careers, agriculture is facing a shortage of skilled workers and as such recruiters are looking overseas to fill these positions. While the labour shortage is nothing new, this slight on New Zealand's Primary Industry which contributes approximately two thirds of New Zealand's wealth generated by exports, should be a concern for the economy and the growth of the industry – even more so considering that in the year to June 2010 the Department of Labour stated that 67,500 New Zealanders aged between 15 and 24 were not in employment, education or training. In a report prepared by Stevens, Roth, Small, and White (2007) as cited by the Tertiary Education Commission in the Land-based Review (2008) it was stated that education and training institutions have noted that enrolment numbers in agriculture and horticulture related programmes have been declining over the last two decades and that the

demand for labour at all skill levels is greater than the available supply. Massey University has since discontinued its Diploma in Agriculture due to low enrolment numbers. This paper describes some of the encumbrances that are preventing young New Zealanders from seeking a career in the agricultural sector and some of the strategies that Taratahi, along with other organisations, are implementing to counteract them.

New Zealand is no longer the 'rural country' it used to be. This is patently illustrated by the fact that in 2006 85.9% of the population was living in urban locations, many with little direct exposure to the agricultural industry. This has led to the general misunderstanding of the industry and of the opportunities that are available within it. With the urbanisation of New Zealand, partnered with the changing priorities of school leavers, the perception (rightly so in some cases) that 'farming' equates to living in isolation, suffering low wages and a poor working environment is not encouraging New Zealanders into agriculture. The industry needs to proactively promote agriculture as a professional career and 'be on the radar' – for the right reasons. The general, and hopefully changing, trend is for parents and schools to encourage students into higher level degrees, more 'popular' industries such as tourism and the Arts and away from land based training. To give students a tangible insight into the industry Taratahi runs a series of 'Taster' programmes throughout the year. These programmes run for 4 days and give people interested in a career in agriculture the opportunity to experience what life would be like if they were to enrol in the fulltime residential programme. These fulltime programmes are best suited to those interested in pre-employment training. Evidence has shown that students who studies full time and as a progression from secondary school have higher completion rates than those who look to enter tertiary education later in life or while they are in employment (Ministry of Education, 2010). Three years ago Taratahi was running 4 of these courses enabling 80 potential students a taste of the learning model that Taratahi provides for learners – 'real training on real farms'. In 2010, to date, Taratahi have run 4 Taster courses involving 173 participants. Another course is scheduled for December. Enrolments into the Taster programmes are as a result of an annual and proactive programme that involves visiting schools, expos, field days and building relationships with careers advisors. This programme helps to get people started in a career of lifelong development in agriculture and to 'get the right people into the right training', as advised by our Minister, The Honourable David Carter, in his 2009 speech at the annual Agriculture Industry Training Organisation (AgITO) meeting.

Schools, parents, career advisors and the peers of potential students are our vital stakeholders. In order to encourage recommendations into land-based training it has been critical that we acknowledge and respond to their positioning and communicate effectively regarding the programmes that we offer, the career-pathing that we facilitate and how we can best meet the needs of the students and the industry. Government statistics show that there are 60,000 students leaving secondary school each year looking for tertiary education. 70% of these are looking for non-university options. Unfortunately, it seems that half of all school leavers are struggling to make the transition to tertiary training. A key priority in the Government's Tertiary Education Strategy (2010-15) is the facilitation and progression of secondary students into tertiary education. Taratahi is involved in a number of initiatives that encourage training progression for secondary students. These are programmes such as Secondary Tertiary Alignment Resource (STAR), Gateway and the new initiative for 2011: Trades Academies. Taratahi is the lead provider for the Government's new Trade Academy scheme. This scheme is specifically targeted to facilitate and encourage students, from years 11 -13, into a career in the primary trades. While completing NZCEA levels they are

concurrently enrolled in a nationally transferable tertiary qualification allowing them to complete levels 1, 2 or 3 of a national certificate. This programme is designed to keep students engaged at school, develop competency in literacy and numeracy, and give them a head start on a vocational qualifications. The programme is not designed to target those 'failing at school' but rather to those who show a genuine interest in the industry and want to get started on their journey into agriculture.

Clear career-pathing, before and while in employment, and appropriate training which is targeted to develop skilled workers at all levels is going to be another key driver towards professionalising the industry. This will encourage the flow of ideas, retain workers for longer periods of employment and increase productivity. The increase in the demand for a skilled workforce is largely due to industry changes, emerging technology and an aging workforce. It is important to note that the quest for an increase in farm performance and industry outcomes will only come to fruition if relevant opportunities for skill development are targeted to all levels of the industry, from vocational training to degree graduates and scientific research, and that learners can move in and out of this training when required. The decrease in the percentage of graduates from degree level courses and the current drop in the availability and completion rates of students at qualifications of level 4 and above (compared to the plethora of Level 1 – 3 courses) is concerning. The current level of qualification completions within the industry does little to enhance our reputation of underachieving. Therefore, in line with this key Government priority, Taratahi is working to continue to increase qualification completions and encourage progression on to Level 4 and above training or to other relevant training packages as a part instilling a philosophy of lifelong learning. Individual learning programmes are developed and targeted to suit specific student needs, the pedagogy ensures that students are work ready and that the benefit of lifelong training is fully understood. Training can be full-time, residential, pre-employment training or post-employment training; for those looking to gain further development and further their careers.

It would be surprising if there was any dispute that the industry is in need of a skilled workforce. Albeit in decreasing number, employers have historically been prone to employ the unskilled. While the immediate return for this investment is a lower wage package, the long term investment is more supervision, less diversification of available skills, less productivity and less innovation. The challenge is to continue to promote the skilled employee and increase the understanding that a skilled employee, while perhaps deserving of a higher wage is an asset beyond monetary means. As an example, an employee can show a 30% increase in Dairy Feed Utilisation performance after the relevant training (Bryant, K & Hardy, F, 2009) As the current Tertiary Education Strategy points out 'people involved in tertiary education generally generate many of the ideas that lead to innovation, new products and infrastructure improvements, they are proven to be more productive therefore raising the country's GDP'. Innovation is critical to the country's economy and, at the crux of the matter, to an industry's productivity. Stakeholder engagement is fundamental to the success of the changing industry. The entire industry must accommodate this change, share ideas and new technologies and employ the skilled worker.

Taratahi is currently collaborating with various other Tertiary institutions such as the Eastern Institute of Technology, AgITO, Lincoln University and the Western Institute of Technology Taranaki, in order to provide partnerships that will give the learner the best opportunities, chance for completion and also decrease the confusion that currently exists regarding the overabundance of

agriculture related courses. This is an example of combining specialist services and individual institution strengths to better meet the needs of the industry and the Government's Tertiary Education Strategy. In the current capped funding environment it has become critical for organisations to become innovative in their approach to meeting learner needs.

A significant amount of work has already been done within the industry to address the aforementioned hurdles. However, a continuation of collaboration, proactivity and innovation is required to see well needed momentum in this area realised. In facing and addressing some of the truths of how and why the current reputation and misconceptions of the agricultural industry have occurred, will we become rightly recognised as a lucrative career with abundant options and opportunities, especially for young New Zealanders.

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