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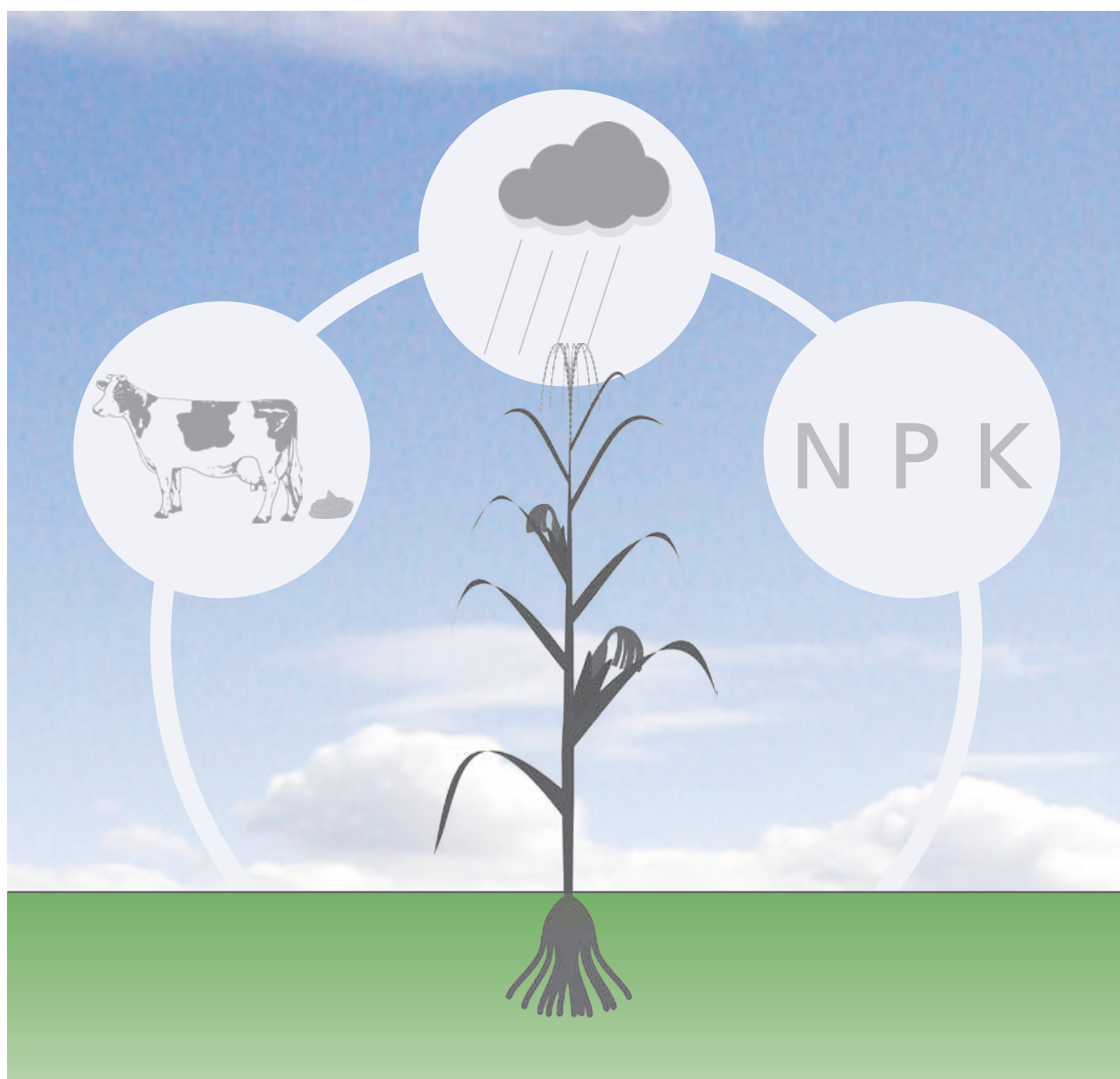
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Primary Industry Management



Donovan Wearing

What standard of agricultural student are we creating?



School liaison officers at the Taratahi Agricultural Training Centre continue to struggle to open some secondary school doors. On occasion we are still denied the chance to spread the word about agriculture and to have the opportunity to update schools on the breadth of career pathways that exist and are being created. There are many interesting and cutting edge careers within the industry and it is very frustrating to be denied the chance to show these opportunities to students.

In our training centres around New Zealand we educate young people who can take the agricultural industry from the 21st century into the next century and beyond. They will have a positive financial effect on the state of New Zealand's economy. What is to say they will not also be helping the world to feed itself in the future?

The reluctance we sometimes face is the misguided perception some people have of the agricultural industry. To be blunt, this perception is that the industry is the natural dumping ground for students who struggle with literacy or numeracy, have behavioural problems or are unmotivated. I am frustrated that this perception exists. We therefore need advocates around us to encourage schools and parents to see that agriculture is the industry to be in.

Student profile and accommodation

The statistics below show a more accurate picture about agricultural students.

- Currently the full-time student intakes are an equal split from urban and rural backgrounds
- Students have a variety of experience, those who are not in education, training programmes or employment and those from families with generations of farming experience
- The average age range is 16 to 21 years
- Approximately 80 per cent of full-time students are school leavers, and the remaining 20 per cent are either career changers or have discovered an interest in agriculture and would like to give it a go
- Around 75 per cent of our students learn by being practical, which is why wherever we can, a theory component is turned into a practical activity to reinforce the main points
- First year students who complete the year-long programmes tend to stay in agriculture, and approximately 50 per cent of first year students will progress to second year study
- A high percentage of second year students will remain within the agricultural industry and are very motivated.

There is often a dawning realisation in students during their course of study that having a qualification really does open doors. If they want to get ahead and change the direction of their life then they need one.

At our residential campus in the Wairarapa we have accommodation which has been designed to create a flatting environment for students. They have their own

bedroom with shared kitchen, laundry and living spaces. First year students are well catered for and have three cooked meals a day, but second year students are responsible for shopping and cooking for themselves.

As well as gaining critical theoretical and practical skills on the farm they are also learning basic life skills. Many campuses around New Zealand also provide budgeting and cooking classes. Some students come straight from living with their parents and have no idea how to cook an economical and nutritious meal for themselves.

Programmes and placements

Taratahi has been training students for agricultural careers since 1919 and offers full-time courses, extramural study, short courses and STAR/Gateway programmes as well as the Primary Industries Trades Academy. The programmes range from training in schools, introductory pre-employment, work ready and diplomas in agriculture.

A student can start at Year 11 and end up as a graduate of Lincoln or Massey University. Second year students spend six months of their study on farm placements which is a critical point in their education. All of the practical, theory and life skills they have learned are put into practice when they are working and living on the farm and being part of a farm team.

We spend considerable time ensuring that we place the right student with the right farm manager or owner. If we have a student who lacks confidence then we will try to find a farm placement where the farm manager or owner will be able to provide the support and guidance necessary. The farm liaison officer will help the student and farm to ensure that the placement is working well and the student is thriving.

Learning problems

As with every educational establishment the world over, each class will contain students with a mix of attitudes. We can have a group of students which is unmotivated and difficult to involve but the next group may be passionate, interested and soak up information and the acquisition of new skills.

For some students we need to manage numeracy and literacy problems. Students can range from needing total support to needing no support at all. Our staff provide significant resources to students who need help. We offer up to four night classes a week, taken by tutors in their own time. We do everything we can to give them the best chance to succeed in their chosen programme. Although they may struggle in a theoretical environment, more often than not they are very practical and will shine on the farm.

The three most common challenges to learning problems that we manage are autism, Aspergers and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. The formula of only seven students to one tutor helps those dealing with these problems to cope better. This is in contrast to being in a classroom of 30 where there is less personal attention and ability to monitor how well a student is absorbing information. We also liaise with local medical and counselling services to ensure these

are available to students should they need them.

It is essential that we work with these students to make sure that those who struggle, but are still interested and gifted in other ways, have every chance to be as successful as those who do not have any literacy or numeracy problems. We also have students who compete in young farmers competitions, receive scholarships and move quickly up the managerial ladder.

Students as potential employees

Our programmes are designed to create a skilled and well-rounded future employee and a person who is able to look after themselves. These life skills are critical as some students may find themselves working on remote stations where it is essential that they are self-sufficient. Just as some secondary schools do not understand how this industry could provide a positive direction for their students, at times we also struggle with expectations of students from our communities.

We are acutely aware that we must provide students with as many training experiences as we can. The best way to do this is to train them in a variety of different environments, whether it is on a dairy farm in Masterton or on a remote sheep and beef station in Hawke's Bay. Students could end up working anywhere in New Zealand. If they have experience in many different environments they are more employable, which is why we continue to look for new training environments.

Employer support

We also want students to be exposed to the many different pathways the agricultural industry offers. This could include engineering, research and information technology, which is why we are involved with the research programmes on many of our properties. It is our responsibility to give students the chance to get involved so that they can make an informed decision about which pathway is right for them.

I am often heard saying that every student is different, has different skills, a different personality and different ways of learning and absorbing new information. Future employers of any students need to be realistic. Think back about your first job, and your first employer, and remember the feeling of being overwhelmed and realising how much you still had to learn.

Some of our most successful students who are already in managerial roles on the farm say the same thing – they could not do it without the support of their employers. To be encouraged to keep on training, to take responsibility, to make decisions and to have a mentor with many more years of experience makes a big difference to their performance and the contribution they will make to the agricultural industry.

When we are denied the opportunity to demonstrate all of these points at secondary schools we find it disappointing. The programmes, pastoral care and farming opportunities we can provide to young people is extensive and it is unfortunate that we are not always able to explain this to schools. How

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