

SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY AGRICULTURE

633. Mr T.K. WALDRON to the Minister for Training and Workforce Development:

Before I ask my question, can I please acknowledge and welcome—they are just leaving!—the children and staff from Kalgoorlie Primary School. Welcome, on behalf of the member for Kalgoorlie.

The agricultural sector has been identified as one of the main areas of growth for Western Australia's economy. Can the minister outline what she is doing in her capacity as Minister for Training and Workforce Development to develop the skills needed to further develop this very important sector?

Mrs L.M. HARVEY replied:

I thank the member for Wagin for the question. I was really thrilled last month to be joined in Northam by the member for Central Wheatbelt, and some other members of Parliament who show a great interest in the agricultural sector, to make some exciting announcements about new training opportunities that will be available for the agricultural sector and delivered through Muresk Institute. As members would know, Muresk has a very proud history of developing skills in the agricultural industry since it was established in 1926. However, Muresk and the agricultural sector broadly have faced some significant challenges over time, not the least of these being the increasing cost of labour and also the fact that we need to attract new entrants into this sector, given that the average age of employees is over 48 years. More than half the sector working in agriculture is over the age of 48 years. The key challenge for me as Minister for Training and Workforce Development is in upskilling a sector in which two-thirds of its employees do not hold any post-high school qualifications. This is a problem because there is now an unmet demand for workers with higher levels of skill in the agricultural sector, and if we do not make some inroads into this issue, it will threaten our competitiveness in this sector. This is a global market and we need to ensure that we have the most highly trained professionals working in this industry to ensure our competitiveness into the future.

It was a real privilege to be with Hon Mia Davies, the member for Central Wheatbelt, in announcing the Liberal-National government's \$10 million commitment from the Seizing the Opportunity Agriculture initiative to put towards the development of new programs at Muresk. That \$10 million will go some way towards helping us develop Muresk to be a contemporary institution into the future. We intend to develop Muresk as a mixed-use multi-tenanted facility and to encourage more industry partnerships to ensure that it is contemporary and we have buy-in from the sector that it is there to service. The \$10 million will go towards a new suite of courses including a Bachelor of Agricultural Business Management and an integrated diploma in agricultural technologies. Importantly, in responding to the needs of the community in the wheatbelt, the government will offer a range of short courses through Muresk. That is specifically in response to businesses in the central wheatbelt and the wheatbelt areas —

[Interruption.]

The SPEAKER: Member for Girrawheen!

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: It highlights that some of the short courses we will be offering to people in the wheatbelt area will be courses in managing technology.

One of the other core elements about the Muresk announcement was a key partnership with the Australian Dohne Breeders Association. The Dohne Breeders Association of Western Australia is an industry leader in breeding sheep stock. It has very kindly donated 200 ewes to be used in establishing a breeding program through Muresk and ensuring that new entrants into the agricultural sector are specifically trained in establishing and developing the Dohne breed of sheep. It is a very exciting new partnership. I hope it is the first of many industry partnerships that Muresk will establish with the agricultural sector. We look forward to the revitalisation of Muresk. It has been a key component of the agricultural sector and the agricultural industry since 1926. We want to make sure it is contemporary and that it has a sustainable business model into the future.