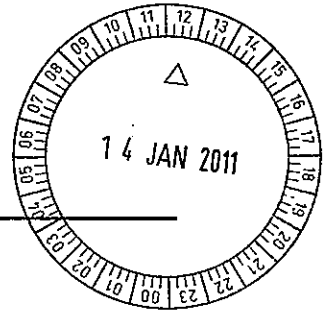


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The Muresk Old Collegians' Association Incorporated

14 January 2011

Hon Brian Ellis MLC  
Chairman  
Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs  
Parliament House  
PERTH WA 6000

Dear Mr Ellis,

**PETITION No 84 – CLOSURE OF THE MURESK CAMPUS NEAR NORTHAM**

Thank you for your letter of 24 November 2010 and the opportunity to provide further comment for your Committee's consideration.

In response I inform your committee as follows:

1. The Premier has an interest in this matter having informed a 2010 Dowerin Field Day audience there is a positive and exciting future for Muresk.
2. I do not accept the Minister's assertion that the future of Muresk is secure. It will only be secure if there is adequate funding not only to redress the lack of infrastructure funding by Curtin since 2004, but to provide a secure financial future.
3. In overview, despite current assurances, the future of Muresk remains at threat and without future action, will be a likely 'loss' to the future well-being of WA's farming and agribusiness sector; and the rural, regional, and remote areas they inhabit.

**THE ORIGINAL PETITION(S)**

4. The original petition was organised The Muresk Old Collegian's Association Incorporated (MOCA) and 'Friends of Muresk'. Similar wording was used in a resolution of the WA Liberal Party State Council last year urging the retention of Muresk for the benefit of the people of rural and regional Western Australia.

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NOURISHING THE WORLD WITHOUT LOSS

5. Curtin first made public announcements about their intentions to withdraw their courses from the original Muresk Agricultural College (Muresk) campus in September 2009. At that time, because of the lack of clarity in their intentions ‘on the record’, and subsequent paucity of formal written information about their intentions, there existed the real possibility of the closure of Muresk campus, and its loss to the agricultural sector as a centre of excellence in tertiary agricultural education. That is why the phrase ‘closure’ entered the lexicon.
6. The current situation is that Curtin University is withdrawing its courses from the Muresk campus. From 2011 there are now no 1<sup>st</sup> year tertiary enrolments at Muresk. For reasons outlined below, despite public assurances to the contrary, the future of the Muresk campus remains uncertain. Under current business case scenarios, as MOCA understand them, the loss of Muresk as a delivery point for tertiary agricultural education is almost certain (unless further ameliorating actions are taken).

#### **THE MURESK OLD COLLEGIANS’ ASSOCIATION INCORPORATED**

7. At no time has the Minister for Education, Curtin University, or any Government instrumentality sought to formally consult with MOCA (or the Muresk Chapter of the Curtin University Alumni) concerning the closure.
8. There have been 5,920 students educated at Muresk since 1926, these are the very people that Muresk exists for (yet their expertise has largely been ignored).
9. MOCA, through its member’s networks in WA farming and agribusiness, is not aware of any agricultural organisation that would support the closure of Muresk for tertiary agricultural educational purposes.
10. The Muresk Agricultural College officially opened on 30 October 1926, and MOCA was created shortly thereafter on 30 January 1930, 81 years ago. This was long before Curtin University assumed control of Muresk in 1969.

#### **THE NATURE OF TERTIARY EDUCATION TODAY**

11. Nowadays, tertiary education is mostly controlled by the WA Government<sup>1</sup> by virtue the physical assets and non-physical assets (land, buildings, and intellectual property it owns), and the legislation that governs them (Acts for each University, the Higher Education Act, and the Vocational Education Act (TAFE sector)).

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<sup>1</sup> Some tertiary educational institutions are privately owned (e.g. Notre Dame University), but all are controlled via their own Act or the Higher Education Act 2004.

12. Paradoxically, while controlled and mostly owned by the WA Government, the tertiary education sector is almost totally funded by the Commonwealth. The funding mechanisms are mostly ‘without strings attached’, following the Bradley Committee Report model.<sup>2</sup> Simply put, public Universities receive funding based upon the numbers of students enrolled.
13. In the WA State legislation, the only requirement of a University to address the needs of WA industry are contained the Acts for Curtin University and Edith Cowan University as part of their purpose for existence, but there is otherwise no requirement of any University to provide tertiary education outcomes in a way that matches WA’s domestic industry needs. MOCA believes this goes a long way to explaining the extensive skills shortages currently being experienced in the mining and agricultural sectors (the engines of the WA economy). To MOCA’s knowledge, there are no other legislative regulations or enforceable minimum standards requiring our Universities to provide anything in response to our domestic industry needs.
14. In the Commonwealth jurisdiction, there is also no formal process or mechanism that links industry skills needs with tertiary educational outcomes. However, again in the TAFE sector, there exists Commonwealth advisory mechanisms in the form of industry skills training councils, but these do not have a formal role with respect to tertiary education.
15. The relevant Commonwealth body for farming and agribusiness is known as the “Agri-Foods Industry Skills Council”.<sup>3</sup> MOCA members involved with that body have confirmed that if the tertiary education needs of agriculture are discussed, it is *ad hoc* in nature, and there are no formal requirements which that Council must follow to linking industry needs to tertiary education outcomes in any manner.
16. Research by the Productivity Commission shows that only 7% of participants in farming and any related industry (agribusiness) have a degree of any type. This compares with 23% for all other industries. In MOCA’s view, this indicates that the current ‘system’ has failed, and will continue to fail rural and regional Australia (containing WA and Australia’s second largest wealth-creating industry).
17. Universities are rewarded for the number of students enrolled, and it is in their interests to take generic approaches to obtaining the largest number of the

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<sup>2</sup> See report at [www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/.../Higher%20Education%20Review\\_one%20document\\_02.pdf](http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/.../Higher%20Education%20Review_one%20document_02.pdf).

<sup>3</sup><http://www.agrifoodskills.net.au>

cheapest possible students to educate. Agricultural students are among the most expensive to educate of three grounds: (1) the comparative cost of the agricultural academic discipline to others, (2) their regional delivery location, and (3) its experiential multi-disciplinary nature (rather than a reductionist scientific approach).

18. In general terms, National protocol agreements for tertiary education revolve about standardisation of educational approaches, and there is an inappropriate under-emphasis in matching supply to industry demand needs (as evidence by the lack of formal nexus mechanisms). Widespread industry skills shortages now in existence for our main wealth-creating industries (mining and agriculture).
19. The Muresk 'situation' is mirrored around Australia, with every tertiary agricultural education institution (Roseworthy, Gatton, Dookie, Glenormiston, Longerenong, Orange, etc.), except one, closed or struggling. All of these were transferred into a large metropolitan university during the past 40 years.
20. The notable exception, Marcus Oldham, is the only institution of similar ilk to prosper. The reason it prospers are instructive:
  - They do not have a parent organisation.
  - They are 'close to industry'
  - They are run on private lines
  - They control their own marketing budgets (and target market to their industry).
  - The failure of other University-controlled agricultural campuses to attract students wanting an industry based education.

#### **MINISTER FOR EDUCATION**

21. You invited me to respond to the Minister's letter to you dated 29 October 2010, which I do here, and then will make some more general points:
  - I believe there is support for the idea of a Year 13 pathway program but would need to examine the detail of the proposal
  - The use of the Muresk campus to develop skills at various levels of post school agricultural education is part of the CY O'Connor plan for 2011.
22. From 1969, many previous WA Education Ministers have commissioned reports into Muresk and or post-secondary agricultural education. There has been a review roughly every four (4) years of various types with many of them making similar recommendations, and all arguing to keep and improve Muresk. There is scant evidence that any reports were acted fully acted upon.

23. The Minister for Education (Dr Elizabeth Constable MLA), in response to Curtin's decision to withdraw its courses from the Muresk campus, in January 2010 commissioned the former Deputy Premier, the Hon. Hendy Cowan to prepare a report into the situation (now known as the Cowan Report).
24. Mr Cowan conducted his review called "Review of Post-Secondary Agricultural Education in Western Australia" and handed his report to Minister Constable on 21 April 2010.
25. The Minister did not release the report until some five (5) months later on 22 September 2010. While the accompanying press statements gave general indication of the Minister's support for all the six (6) main recommendations contained in the report, MOCA and the general public is otherwise unaware of the Government's official response to the report. The Minister's accompanying press statement simply is entitled "Muresk's future as an agricultural education institution". However, the word 'tertiary' and any emphasis on tertiary agricultural education within is missing, effectively consigning Muresk to the TAFE sector. The Minister has omitted to articulate 'how' this will be achieved in practical terms and whether she supports the Cowan Report recommendations of not.
26. Consequently, MOCA is not aware of any concrete actions taken by the current Government in response to the Cowan Report recommendations. As best we are aware, the matter has never been to Cabinet, there are no Government officials tasked to progress implementation of the report, and there is no (current or future) budget provisions to enable the report to be implemented. No Board has been formed, members appointed, or a budget allocated to anyone that we know of.
27. The Minister has never consulted with or responded to MOCA's requests for a meeting (and some of our members acting as individuals have been similarly ignored).

#### **CURTIN UNIVERSITY**

28. Curtin University assumed control of Muresk in 1969.
29. Various MOCA members can attest to many attempts to close Muresk right through the four decades Curtin has been involved.
30. In 1991, the *Bulletin Magazine* named the (then) Curtin Agribusiness Degree offered only at Muresk as the best agricultural degree course in Australia.

31. From the late 1990's Curtin University substantially changed the nature of this successful industry-oriented Muresk agribusiness degree course, and the current course offerings differ significantly. Enrolments for the Muresk-based course offerings subsequently declined.
32. Because of the costs of maintaining the Muresk campus, the Muresk course offerings are very expensive relative to Curtin's Bentley-based offerings.
33. During September 2009, Curtin University announced that it intends to withdraw its courses from Muresk and close its operations there at the end of 2012. There are no Muresk-based 1<sup>st</sup> year tertiary enrolments in 2011.
34. In the longer term, Curtin will likely achieve lowed costs tertiary agricultural enrolments at their Bentley campus, leaving the higher cost Muresk-based course offerings with the CY O'Connor Institute. This would be fine if proposed supplemental grant funding arrives from the Commonwealth to facilitate that. If not, or after the grant funds are expended, Curtin will have achieved a *de facto cost shift* from the Commonwealth to the State for future Muresk-based tertiary agricultural students.
35. Curtin University makes much of the nebulous notion of the '*need to make agriculture more attractive to potential employees*', a phrase used by the Minister, yet it does little in that regard itself (have you or members of your Standing Committee ever seen Curtin advertise Muresk in the rural sector with the same vigour of its city-based campaigns?) Our industry is already attractive; it pays better, and graduate demand is increasing. MOCA believes that the real issue is the need to make Curtin University qualifications more relevant to the needs of prospective employees in our industry. This means understanding that the 'one size fits all' generic approach does not work in Muresk's case. The 'Muresk-model' is fundamentally and culturally different to the 'Curtin way'.
36. After 40 years of managing Muresk, on 23 November 2010, well after Curtin announced that it was leaving Muresk, it submitted an application for trade mark protection of the 'Muresk' brand. Why now?
37. In good faith, from early April 2010, MOCA has engaged with Curtin University with the view to reach a memorandum of understanding about the amicable unwinding of Curtin from Muresk. While several meetings have occurred, Curtin has not cooperated with MOCA or responded in an '*open and honest*' way with respect to MOCA and the future of Muresk. MOCA written requests for information concerning the 'Muresk decision' remain largely unanswered.

38. In 1999, at Curtin's then encouragement, MOCA rolled its membership records into the Curtin University Alumni organisation (specifically its 'Muresk Chapter'), including records dating from 1926. Curtin University will not return those records citing the Privacy Act as the reason it cannot return them. This effectively destroyed MOCA's records, and current negotiations between MOCA and Curtin remain stagnant; our requests for meetings go unanswered.
39. In September 2010, MOCA put forward mutually beneficial proposals to Curtin University about Muresk and requested a formal response to them (note: this proposal is attached). Our requests remain unanswered.
40. Curtin University has not formally consulted with MOCA during any part of its decision with respect to Muresk, whether in the form of the current MOCA organisation, or its own internal version of it (the Curtin Alumni Muresk Chapter). No current or former President of MOCA or the Curtin Alumni Muresk Chapter was approached at any time.

#### **CY O'CONNOR INSTITUTE'S FUTURE ROLE**

41. MOCA applauds the prospect of the CY O'Connor Institute's (formerly the CY O'Connor College of TAFE) future involvement in the delivery of higher education courses at the Muresk campus. Many of our members are involved in internal staff and advisory roles. As well as being the MOCA President, I am also the Chair of the CY O'Connor Muresk Advisory Committee.
42. However, MOCA believes that sole reliance upon the CY O'Connor Institute's as a solution to the overall problem of unmet industry demand for graduates, and as a solution to the Muresk issue, would be misplaced. Simply put, the real underlying cost structures of Muresk and the cultural demands of becoming an approved higher education institution will be a 'bridge too far' without substantial supplementary State budget funding.
43. MOCA's comments elsewhere about this outcome resulting in long-term cost-shifting from the Commonwealth to the State applies here too.

#### **INDUSTRY FOR GRADUATES (DEMAND SIDE)**

44. There are 63,000 farm and agribusiness vacancies Australia-wide, of which only about 20% is for unskilled works. The WA equivalent figures are 6,300 vacancies, including approximately 5,000 graduate vacancies.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Source: The Australian Council of the Deans of Agriculture (ACDA)

45. The demand for graduates is at unprecedented high levels. Even higher demands in the mining sector are further exacerbating this problem of supply. Many Muresk graduates are working in the mining industry (all levels, several are CEOs).

#### **SOURCE OF STUDENTS FOR FARMING AND AGRIBUSINESS (SUPPLY SIDE)**

46. The supply of students is also at unprecedented high levels. The WA State Government is expanding capacity in its agricultural high schools (Muresk's feeder schools), all are full to capacity, and there are some with waiting lists.
47. Until recently, Curtin University's entry criteria prevented many students from this source entering Muresk-based courses. This school to University educational pathway problem has been noted in the literature and various reports from 1970.
48. MOCA is informed that Curtin has relaxed enrolment criteria to facilitate educational pathways for the purposes of the emerging 'educational pathway' relationship with the CY O'Connor Institute. MOCA only warns that Curtin can change these entry criteria at any time in the future, and if it happens this could dramatically adversely affect CY O'Connor (and other pathway providers of Muresk-based students).

#### **MURESK'S ROLE IN REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

49. In the area of regional development, the constant supply of trained people with relevant industry skills into rural, regional, and remote areas of WA is the primary goal of any regional development policy.
50. The output of graduates from Muresk (and other agricultural institutions) is the only thing that achieves that goal perpetually...year in year out. Muresk was/is the main supplier in Western Australia of relevant graduates to rural, regional & remote (pastoral) areas.
51. Muresk graduates are the best possible way to perpetually contribute to the economic, social, and environmental development of all regions in Western Australia. 81 years of MOCA members spread throughout WA attests to that.

#### **KEY POLICY ISSUES**

52. MOCA's main concern is wider than the issue of keeping the Muresk campus situation akin to the *status quo*: our primary concern is the much bigger issue of the parlous state of tertiary agricultural education in Australia today. There is a



total mismatch between industry demand for graduates (in the thousands [6,300], the highest it has ever been) and supply, the graduation rates (less than 100 per annum all Universities). This is despite the fact that WA's agricultural high schools are full to overflowing and the State government has recently committed millions to upgrading them.

53. The proper context for MOCA's representations is to keep Muresk for its original intended purpose as an industry-focused tertiary agricultural college as the best means of meeting the graduate demands for the farming and agribusiness sector – the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest wealth-creating industry in WA. It is these means, not the ends that we are primarily concerned about.

1. Optimally matching Industry Skills Demands and Tertiary Education Outcomes
2. Preventing Commonwealth-to-State Cost Shifting
3. Ensuring a future Muresk remains a 'strategic asset' of our Farming and Agribusiness Sector (i.e. not lost to other uses).

#### **THE MOCA PROPOSAL**

54. Attached herewith is MOCA's proposal for the future of Muresk for the information of your committee members. Previous versions of this have been forwarded to Government, key industry players, the press, Curtin University and CY O'Connor Institute.

#### **FUTURE PETITION(S)**

MOCA lodged the Petition No 84 because of concerns about the closure of the Muresk campus.

With the passage of time, and greater depth of analysis, MOCA clearly sees the Muresk situation as only a symptom of a greater disease; namely, the extent to which the tertiary education sector can supply enough graduates to meet our wealth-creating industry needs (in the context of tertiary education, mining and agriculture are a small minority). Current skill shortages evidence problems now and in the future. As one of the two great industries that WA is internationally noted for, the future wealth-creation abilities of the farming and agribusiness sector will be restrained in its capacity to out-perform without a good supply of well-trained, industry-relevant graduates.

The current performance of the entire tertiary education sector suggest that 'business model' will not solve the problems of the future.

Thus, MOCA believes that a future petition directly addressing this issue may be appropriate. The key issue is the optimal matching of our wealth-creating industry needs with our outcomes from our own tertiary educational institutions. Without suitable ameliorating actions soon, the wide gap that already exists will get even wider, and Western Australia will be all the poorer for it.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Ian Fairnie  
President