

Dryland salinity: who is teaching the basics?

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Dryland salinity is a serious environmental threat facing Western Australia. Clearing bushland for broad acre agriculture has upset the water balance – rising watertables are moving salts the ground surface, which in turn, are causing problems for agricultural productivity, biodiversity, rural infrastructure and water supplies.

The University of Western Australia is at the forefront of research relating to dryland salinity. As early as 1917, the University reported to a Royal Commission on the implications of clearing the mallee lands of Western Australia. Despite giving a clear warning of the impending land degradation, the University's advice was refuted as being "scientifically prejudiced". This did not hinder the research efforts of the University, who now hosts a Cooperative Research Centre for Plant-based Management of Dryland Salinity.

However, research is not the sole focus for any tertiary institution – academic instruction is also a crucial and valued responsibility. According to the University Act (1911), UWA is required to engage in "further instruction in those practical arts and liberal studies which are needed to advance the prosperity and welfare of the people ...". Dryland salinity is adversely impacting on WA's prosperity and welfare: by 2050, at risk will be 6.5 million hectares of agricultural land, 1.8 million hectares of bushland, 29 towns and 28,000 kilometres of road network.

At UWA, instruction in the area of dryland salinity generally falls within the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences. Whilst stating on its website that "WA provides a unique laboratory for the study and understanding of natural and agricultural sciences", it is clear from a survey of academics and students that opportunities exist for developing a targeted and coordinated teaching program in the area of dryland salinity. This will hopefully address some of the deficiencies that were discovered in the general knowledge of students regarding this issue.

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