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## Cotton Gap program returns to expand students' horizons

The Australian cotton industry is hoping to attract a new cohort of students to its relaunched Cotton Gap program, so they can experience farm life and explore the career pathways available in agriculture.

Cotton Australia's Cotton Gap program is a future-focused industry program that exposes school leavers to the diverse range of careers available in the cotton industry.

The program was first launched in 2017, but it didn't run last year because of the impact drought and reduced water allocations had on jobs in rural industries.

Cotton Australia Education Coordinator Jenny Hughes said the relaunch of Cotton Gap engages with the next generation of workers, so the industry can secure a skilled and enthusiastic workforce for seasons to come.

"The closure of international borders due to the COVID-19 pandemic will see thousands of students who had planned to travel overseas for a gap year now looking for alternate experiences here in Australia," Ms Hughes said.

Cotton Australia is currently seeking expressions of interest from growers to host young people on farm in 2021 as part of the Cotton Gap program.

"This is a great opportunity for the Australian cotton industry to attract a new group of students to experience farm life and all it has to offer as a future career pathway," Ms Hughes said.

Ms Hughes said the first-hand experience for school leavers would deepen their overall understanding of the systems and processes in place within agriculture.

"This is an opportunity for school leavers to break out of known constraints, get inspired, explore, act and rethink their future career path," Ms Hughes said.

Matt Clearwater completed Cotton Gap on a property west of Moree, NSW, in 2017.

"Growing up in Canberra, I had no exposure to careers in the cotton industry prior to joining Cotton Gap," Mr Clearwater said.

"The thing I enjoyed most about Cotton Gap was the opportunities to upskill throughout the year through informal on-farm lessons and formal certificates, such as those offered through AgSkilled. Everyone was friendly, happy to answer questions and offer help when I got stuck. It was also a great way to meet people in the industry and establish connections," Mr Clearwater said.

"During my Cotton Gap experience, I was exposed to a range of enterprises and potential career paths. When I started, I didn't know what I wanted to do in agriculture, but the more hands-on experience I got the more determined I was to pursue a career in agronomy."

Mr Clearwater is now in his final year studying a Bachelor of Agriculture at the University of New England and has continued working on rural properties during his university breaks thanks to the connections he established during Cotton Gap. He is hoping to return to the cotton industry as an agronomist after he completes his studies.

For more information visit: <https://cottonaustralia.com.au/cotton-gap>

*Image attached:* Cotton Gap graduate Matt Clearwater

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