



## **Submission to House of Representatives Enquiry into Rural Skills Training and Research**

The Cooperative Venture for Capacity Building (CVCB) in rural industries was established in 2001 by R&D corporations to enhance capacity building in rural industries in Australia.

Its goal is to instigate and support learning by farmer and rural communities. Through research and development initiatives initiated by the CVCB, our rural communities will be placed in a position to prosper and grow as Australian rural industry adapts successfully to global change. We aim to give all primary producers the opportunity and skills to obtain the information and education needed to embrace innovation.

The CVCB invests in R&D that focuses on; enhancing the understanding of learning, improving organisational arrangements to support rural capacity building, and inspiring innovative farming practices.

**Who are its partners?** Partners are: Australian Wool Innovation, Dairy Australia, Grains Research and Development Corporation, Grape and Wine Research and Development Corporation, Land & Water Australia, Meat & Livestock Australia, Murray-Darling Basin Commission, Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation, Sugar Research and Development Corporation, The Australia Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. The CVCB is managed by RIRDC on behalf of the partners.

### **Research relevant to this enquiry**

The work of the CVCB applies mainly to the third term of reference for the enquiry. Electronic copies of the reports referred to can be provided.

The CVCB would also like the opportunity to expand on these issues by way of a verbal submission to the enquiry if this is possible.

1. Research on agricultural extension, learning and change – A comprehensive review by Fulton et al (2003), found that:

- The Australian agricultural sector is supported by a wide and varied group of farm advisers, described here as extension practitioners. These include public sector extension officers (including Landcare, Bushcare, Waterwatch etc.) private sector consultants (on all aspects of farming, including farm management, personal relationships, finances, taxation, business development etc), agribusiness field officers, product sales advisers, stock agents, scientists and more. The professional development of these extension practitioners is linked to their ability to foster learning and change on farms and in agriculture. Their structural arrangements (such as length of contract and

- opportunities for professional development) and their career opportunities, influence the agricultural sector's ability to support on farm change
- extension structures are undergoing major change worldwide and in Australia
  - existing structures and institutions may have elements that foster learning and change processes (such as their links with industry), and elements that do not (such as the way they reward their staff). The relationships between each of these organisations (e.g., public and private; research and extension) will influence learning and change on-farm.
  - there is little evidence of the implementation of research on ways in which extension organisations can improve their own effectiveness
  - Extension aims to bring about positive change on farms and in agriculture. This largely involves the use of processes to facilitate learning and change within the agricultural community. These processes, or 'extension methods', include groups, media, field days, education, advice, facilitation, lead farmers, focus farms, demonstrations, videos, publications and more. Extension also includes the process of planning research and extension, from understanding client needs, developing a plan, appointing staff and implementing and monitoring a program, through to evaluating impact
  - for the research or extension practitioner it is difficult for them to determine what processes are most appropriate for their situation, and thus how they should design their extension effort to be more effective, and more efficient.
  - little data has been collected on actual farmer participation in learning and change opportunities. Little is therefore known about potential untapped opportunities or problems with current provisioning

## 2. Extension for capacity building – Coutts et al (2005) found:

- Extension is described in terms of its outcome, i.e. capacity building. It is defined as the process of engaging with individuals, groups and communities so that people are more able to deal with issues affecting them and opportunities open to them
- there are more than 4000 extension positions across Australia (2748 in the public, or public-community, sectors). Because figures are based on full-time equivalents, then perhaps half that number again of people is actually involved in extension work. Most public sector extension work and much of that done by the private sector is based on developing and delivering projects. These projects are funded by rural research and development corporations, government and other funding bodies charged with making a difference to economic, environmental or social conditions within rural and regional Australia
- a large number of people and programs are involved in extension in its many forms. State governments have remained significant players and the Federal Government is a major funder of extension activities across Australia. There has undoubtedly been a shift in public extension from one-on-one to group approaches and from a production/economic focus to a broader platform involving environmental and social concerns. The private sector continues to expand and, as well as undertaking individual technical advice, operates in the same sphere as public extension
- the projects that were included in this report fell within four clearly defined extension models: group facilitation/empowerment; programmed learning; technology development; and information access. An important fifth model was acknowledged as the individual consultant/mentor model. These models were argued to form the supports and rungs of a capacity building ladder and all were seen to be complementary and necessary for the capacity building process. It was pointed out that stronger collaboration and cooperation between funding bodies could help ensure that the range of effective learning platforms were in place
- a guide has been developed, based on the analysis, to help develop and manage similar projects falling under each generic model as well as a web-based database of projects to enable practitioners to use the models. There are underlying philosophies and practices that provide the rigour for projects under the different models, similar to the rigour of quantitative research work.

3. Fostering involvement – how to improve participation in learning. Andrew et al (2005), provide a set of strategies to improve farmers' participation in learning:

- *Expressing the benefits of learning in terms that have meaning for individual farmers.* Farmers tended to participate in learning when direct on-farm benefits to their business were evident. As a result, before learning events take place extension providers need to identify and describe the benefits of learning in terms that are relevant to the individual enterprise
- *Localised learning.* Learning programs need to be organised in such a way as to respond to local needs and conditions. This does not just mean that learning is to be situated in local areas: it means localising in terms of issues, organisation (through local farming groups or other social groups) and responding to the community's time and relevance demands. Local people should also be involved in the development of learning opportunities.
- *Intervention in group and individual learning settings.* Intervention in more personal interactions—such as individual farm settings and families and use of stock and station agents and accountants as learning providers—is necessary if people who tend to not engage in group processes are to be involved in learning beyond their current systems. The cost of this level of intervention is high for the service provider, whether it be government or industry.
- *Time and costs as central factors* All farming enterprises have considerable demands associated with on-farm work, but account must also be taken of other demands that are part of farming—for example, travel time, family responsibilities, maintenance of farm equipment and infrastructure, holidays, changes in the weather, 'staffing', and office work. The value placed on the learning opportunity must be such that other demands are put aside in order to participate.
- *Two-way, open interaction* It is necessary to use differing learning opportunities to foster wider community discussion and identify areas in need of attention. There should be a two-way communication channel between farmers and government and industry. Identification of opportunities should come through an understanding of how different communities interact and communicate.
- *Extension officer training to support a greater understanding of social learning and the farmer context.* There is a need to formalise extension officers' training in social learning processes and participatory approaches. Farmers' participation in learning is not determined by a lack of education, extension, information and training experiences and programs; rather, it is determined by the difficulty of being able to 'match' the available learning experiences with what the learners want. There is an important role here for a learning or knowledge broker.
- *Building relationships with individuals.* For the extension officer, travelling to properties and getting involved through face-to-face communication with farmers can generate an understanding of the local context and the local people. These interactions can be built on over time and can help establish dialogue and a genuine understanding of how extension can help farmers in a particular area. Finding out what they want to know by listening and watching what they are doing is important. Relationship building comes at a high cost for both the service provider and the extension officer.
- *Following up.* Following up on what is needed is fundamental to forming solid and beneficial relationships in local areas. This is often a difficult thing for extension officers to do because it takes time and they need to move on to other work duties.
- *Monitoring and revising as change takes place in an area.* It is important to take into consideration changes in production, natural resource management, threats to livelihood, and changes to family and social circumstances that might affect participation. An understanding of these circumstances can be reflected in learning opportunities.

4. Institutional arrangements – Macadam et al (2004) provide a list of criteria considered necessary for effective extension/capacity building:

- Effective capacity building maintains a focus on outcomes as improvements in the stock of capital(human, social, financial, natural) sought by stakeholders. It strives for consistency between the outcomes sought and the nature, design and conduct of interventions
- Effective capacity building defines and engages the relevant communities of practice (groups of peers who share common goals, practices and language). In doing so, it encompasses a diversity of interests and world views and avoids the losses associated with marginalisation of potentially significant people
- Effective capacity building creates a common agenda and a willingness to collaborate among the members of the relevant communities of practice
- Effective capacity building depends on political and institutional commitment to the goal of capacity-building programs and the alignment with it of strategically important organisations
- Continuous enhancement of capacity building depends on the availability of skilled practitioners, on their reflective practice, and on research into all its aspects

5. Extension service providers. In a study of service providers, Roberts et al (2005) found that the greatest inhibitor encountered by service providers in their professional development is the organisational and external environment. Within the scope of what they do there is a high level of job satisfaction, and broadly service providers believe they have enough skills to do their job, but there is considerable frustration at the constancy of organisational change and a lack of leadership in managing that change. More specifically, the respondents find the high level of project work and the resultant loss of continuity of staff and expertise is a particular burden when trying to achieve change. In short, from the providers' standpoint it is not so much the nature of the job or their skills that are as crucial as the external factors relating to security and support.

6. Training for service providers. Roberts et al (2005) indicate that a high proportion of service providers have university qualifications (76%) with many also possessing post-graduate qualifications. While the university training provides knowledge and skills in the technical areas required for effective service provision there is a reduced emphasis on extension theory and practice in most undergraduate degrees. There are few institutions in Australia providing post-graduate education and training in extension.

7. The role of agribusiness in extension, education and training. Stone (2005) found in the study area of northern NSW and southern Queensland, and across six rural industries, agribusiness has largely supplanted the previous government extension role. Stone also found that:

- Grower-directed information supply groups are emerging to provide unbiased technical information, whereas consultants provide honest broker advice
- Agribusiness has a role as a catalyst for change in information delivery methods, especially regarding electronic communication and internet-based information delivery processes
- The issue of staff turnover and professional development for more junior staff is a problem for agribusiness
- In regional areas the low skill levels and comparatively lower quality of all staff, including business advisory staff such as accountants and lawyers, adversely affects the high level decision making required of the top 20% as well as the next 60% of farmers in the increasingly global marketplace.

8. Research Capacity. DEST's current proposal for a Research Quality Framework points to the likely possibility that funding for universities and publicly funded agencies will be on the basis of excellence and impact. The weighting is proposed to be very heavily biased towards those researchers and agencies with high levels of publication in internationally acclaimed academic journals. Apparently, the Deans of Australian agricultural faculties are of the opinion that if this framework goes ahead as the basis for block funding that their departments will be decimated as their major focus is Australian impact(and publication occurs in Australian journals) and not

international impact. This could have devastating consequences for RDCs in terms of finding research capacity for their high priority research

Another factor likely to influence the capacity to provide quality research is the trend in some state departments to rationalise and centralise research and extension which may reduce the ability in some states to provide R&D for smaller industries.

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