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COMMUNITY-BASED FARM MANAGEMENT TRAINING IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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Abstract

This paper gives a historical account of the development of an innovative community-based program of farm management training. It describes how a market survey was conducted of farmer needs for farm management training and how this was used to develop course content and delivery methods for a Certificate level award. It considers some wider issues that have arisen from the program, such as the barriers to participation in rural education, the need for a diversity of programs, the resource implication of such programs and the scope for collaboration between providers of education.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to inform congress participants of the development of what the author considers to be an innovative program of farm management training and to consider some of the issues that have arisen with course implementation.

Historical Background

A need for short courses in farm business management was identified in 1982 in a review of agricultural education in South Australia (TEASA, 1983).

In 1983, Hugh Wynter of the Department of Technical and Further Education - South Australia (DTAFE - SA), started to conduct short courses in Farm Financial Management. In 1984, Hugh was joined by Jim Richardson; between them, they ran short courses on a range of farm management topics. These courses were well received by primary producers, and by the end of 1986 over 1200 people had participated in them (Wynter, 1990).

Following the success of these courses, it was suggested that DTAFE - SA conduct formal award courses to complement the Associate Diploma in Farm Management that was being offered as a two-year, full-time course at Roseworthy Agricultural College. It had been found that, since its introduction in 1976, very few practising farmers had enrolled in that course. It was assumed that this was because farmers could not afford to leave their farms and participate in full-time education. Napier and Chudleigh (1987) also raised this problem of accessibility to full-time courses by farmers in their survey of farm management training.

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It was decided by DTAFE - SA to conduct a market survey of the needs of farmers for farm management education in order to obtain data that could be used to develop an appropriate curriculum and method of course delivery.

Market Survey

The survey was carried out by G. Coombe of DTAFE - SA who established six discussion groups across the state with eight people in each group. He requested each group discuss a range of given topics that related to the delivery and content of farm management courses. The views of the participants in each group were recorded on an audio-tape. The results of the survey are given in the Appendix.

Curriculum Development

In 1987, the results of this survey, plus the experience gained by Wynter and Richardson in running short courses in farm management, were used by the author of this paper to develop a draft curriculum for a Certificate in Rural Management. This curriculum was discussed by a Course Advisory Group that was drawn from farmers and people servicing agriculture. The document that arose from that meeting was approved for implementation in 1988.

Course Promotion

Initially the course was promoted through a major advertisement in the state's rural press, promotion at the community level and by inviting the participation of those who had attended the short courses run in previous years.

After the initial year, it was found that the course participants became the main promotional agents for the course.

Course Delivery, Content and Structure

The following has been summarised from the Curriculum Document for the Certificate in Rural Management (DTAFE-SA).

Aims:

This course is designed to be undertaken by managers of businesses engaged in primary production or those aspiring to be managers of such businesses. Participants learn the skills and processes of business planning, organising, controlling and evaluating a farming business.

Methods:

The teaching methods involve a combination of face-to-face sessions and home studies. The face-to-face teaching includes lectures, case studies, discussion groups, problem-solving activities and some computer applications. The participants' farming businesses constitute the central theme of the course, assignment work being based on these businesses.

Facilitators

Course co-ordination and delivery is provided by a Rural Studies Lecturer at the College offering the program, assistance is given by specialist lecturers from Adelaide College plus people in the local community that have appropriate expertise eg. accountants, farm management consultants, solicitors, bankers, financial consultants and experienced rural producers.

Admission Requirements:

There are no educational or age restrictions to entry. It is assumed that participants will have practical rural skills and basic technical knowledge.

Course Delivery

The course comprises about 200 hours of part-time, face-to-face study over two years. The course is offered through workshops and tutorials at country locations. There are three workshops, each of three to four days duration each year with a one-day tutorial between workshops. The timing of these workshop and tutorials is negotiated with participants to most conveniently fit into their work schedules. These activities are conducted in Country TAFE Colleges, community halls, hotels and on farmers' properties, as best meets the needs of participants.

A newsletter is published twice a year to maintain communications across the state and foster participants' interest between workshops. Participants who cannot attend their local workshops are encouraged to attend a workshop in another area. A dinner is held as part of each workshop. Partners and friends are invited to this and there is an invited speaker.

Subjects

Year 1

Business planning and financial management

Enterprise management

Farm machinery decisions

Taxation and forms of ownership

Year 2

Business analysis and evaluation

New enterprises and marketing

Managing self and others

Business expansion and development

Rural industry law

Estate planning, investment and retirement

Methods of Assessment of Student Progress

As the course is designed to develop management skills, participants are assessed as having developed their skills to either a satisfactory or unsatisfactory level of competency for each subject. The assessment of these competencies is based on the assignment guidelines provided with each unit syllabus statement.

Course Demand

In 1988, courses were commenced in three regions of the state, the Eyre Peninsula, Mid-North plus Yorke Peninsula and South-East (see Figure 1). A total of 48 people enrolled, including four partnerships of either husband and wife, or father and son. All participants were involved in farming operations and ranged in age from 23 - 50. Nearly all those enrolling were involved in mixed farming, mainly sheep and cereal enterprises.

In 1989, intakes occurred on the Eyre Peninsula (33 students), Mid-North (9), and South East (16), a total of 58.

There was a further expansion of the program in 1990, with enrolments in four regions, the Mid-North (19), Yorke Peninsula (21), Murray Mallee (13) and South East (22), a total of 75.

Predictions for new enrolments in 1991 are:

Eyre Peninsula (30), Yorke Peninsula (15), Mid-North (15) and South East (20), a total of 80.

It is anticipated the program will be expanded to service specific industry groups, such as arid-zone pastoralists, dairy farmers and horticulturalists.

Course Outcomes

In February 1990, 31 of the 48 participants who had enrolled at the beginning of 1988 received their Certificates in Rural Management.

The Value of the Certificate to the Participants

Participants have expressed strong support for this Certificate and testify to its value to them as farm managers. They constantly refer to the confidence they have gained in their decision making and the way in which the Certificate has assisted them in developing a systematic approach to problem solving. It has also shown them the need for accurate and timely information in decision making. Comment is often made by lending institutions of the high standard of information which participants from this course provide when negotiating loans. As it seems unlikely that economic pressures on family farms will lessen, participants often say how much better equipped they believe they are to face future challenges (Wynter, 1990).

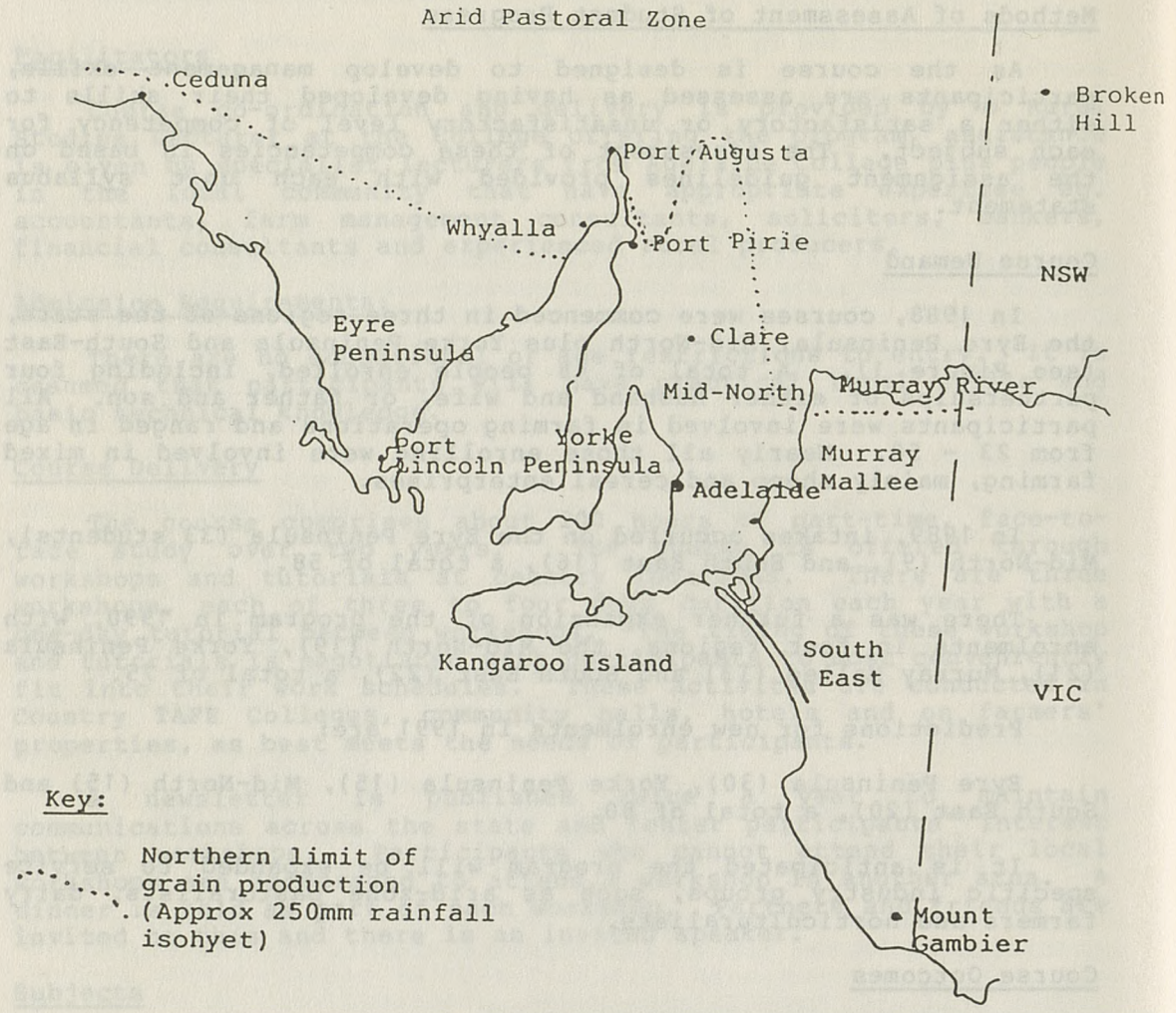


Figure 1 The Major Towns and Agricultural
Regions of South Australia

Future Prospects and Developments

It is considered that although the initial demand for the course was only moderate, this demand could increase considerably. Enquiries are coming from people who have participated in other rural TAFE programs such as the Certificates in Farm Practice and Rural Office Practice. These people have had a favourable "taste" of education. Demand is also coming from the service industries such as the trading banks and stock firms, with staff from two banks and one finance company being enrolled.

As there are approximately 15,000 managers and a further 12,000 partners involved in managing properties in South Australia, it is considered there will be an ongoing demand for rural management training for many years (Wynter, 1990).

Course Changes

The wide range of topics covered in the course gives broad exposure to many management issues. However, it does not allow sufficient time for a high level of subject mastery. Many of the people who have completed or nearly completed the course are asking the question, "Where do we go from here?". DTAFE - SA is therefore reassessing the program.

Reducing the number of subjects in the course is seen as one solution to this, with the remaining subjects being available in a third year and enabling participants to gain an Advanced Certificate. Other considerations are inter-linking a series of courses which could lead to an Associate Diploma in Agribusiness. Such a proposal could appeal to other sections of the agricultural industry as well as farmers.

Resource Considerations

It has been found that a Rural Studies Lecturer spends 30 - 40% of his/her time servicing the needs of a group of 15 - 18 participants. DTAFE - SA has found it necessary to undertake in-service training for staff wishing to work in this area.

Although some written notes have been prepared for this course, the development of more written material is considered necessary.

Barriers to Participation

Although the course has been acclaimed as being useful to those who have participated, the demand to date has only been moderate. This raises the question, "What factors might be acting as barriers to greater participation?"

A chain-of-response model for understanding the main factors that influence participation in adult learning programs was developed by Cross (1981).

She identified the initial factors influencing the potential participants as being:

- Their self - confidence or esteem,
- Their attitude to education,
- The importance of learning goals to them and their expectations of achieving them.

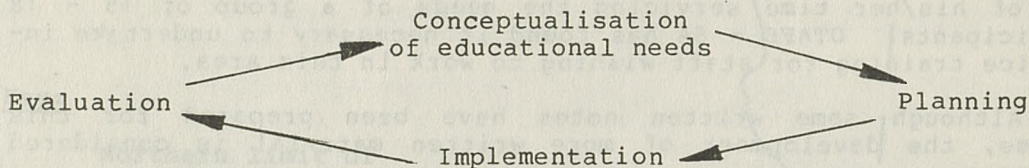
In this first intake, some general characteristics of the participants were:

- they had moderately good/high self esteem.
- they had received a good education or a household member was actively involved in education.
- they perceived the course would be highly relevant to them becoming better managers.

It is considered that when planning educational programs for the rural community in Australia, it is desirable to have a range of programs. In this way, the needs of those who have had limited educational experience are met as well as those who seek more advanced courses. Although the Australian government is encouraging more formal or award courses to achieve its goal of the "Clever Country", there is still a need for non-award short courses. The DTAFE - SA experience suggests that short courses can help people with a limited interest in education develop a more favourable attitude to education and a greater confidence in their ability to learn.

Managing Learning Programs

In the management of learning programs we must not forget to practice the principles of management that we teach, via:



- Do we do enough in our educational organisations to ensure this process of managing learning is kept alive and well?
- How much market research is done in assessing needs?
- Do we put sufficient effort into planning and implementation to ensure learning goals and teaching strategies meet the needs of our clients?
- How often do we evaluate the effectiveness of our teaching in helping participants achieve learning goals?

Wider Implications

Considerable experience has been gained from the development of this Certificate program. However, there has been little interaction with other states.

Are parallel pathways of development occurring there? Is there scope for utilizing the DTAFE - SA model as the basis for a National curriculum? If all states accepted such a National curriculum, considerable savings could be achieved through sharing in the development of written materials.

If the scale of rural management training is to expand, are there suitably trained people available to deliver these programs? If not, which is better, in-service training conducted by organisations such as DTAFE or is there an opportunity for a University to offer a Graduate Certificate or Graduate Diploma in Farm Management to meet that need?

Napier and Chudleigh (1987) reported that insufficient attention was being given in Australia to training educators in farm management and that levels of co-operation between institutions was low. There appears to be a need to develop programs to "train the trainers" in farm management, as most agricultural courses, particularly at the degree level, focus principally on agricultural science and production..

A farm management program for educators could be developed jointly between a University that is teaching farm management and the organisations that require graduates to conduct farm management training. The course for trainers could involve practical teaching, in which the lecturers and students are jointly involved in the presentation of short courses to farmers. The practical teaching could provide teaching experience for the students, enable University staff to maintain contact with the farming community, ensure the University courses maintain relevance and provide low cost short courses for farmers. These short courses could be conducted in conjunction with organisations such as DTAFE, Departments of Agriculture and Landcare Australia in a wide range of topics, such as Financial Management, Whole Farm Planning, Personnel Management, Marketing and Economics. Course topics could be identified by the client group, thereby giving a bottom up approach to farm management training rather than the more commonly used top down method.

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Acknowledgements

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APPENDIX

Farm Management - Sources of Knowledge and Skills

- There was a diversity of views on the meaning of the term "Farm Management". Many people considered it to be synonymous with farm book-keeping.
- Most people saw a need to increase their skills in financial management.
- Farmers were found to gain information from a wide range of sources, (eg. stock agents, banks, suppliers of equipment and agricultural chemicals, Department of Agriculture etc.).

DTAFE as provider of Farm Management Training

- Farmers expected course presenters to be experienced and knowledgeable in farm management.
- The Farm Financial Management seminars presented by DTAFE were viewed very positively.

How Individuals Learn Best

- There was a strong preference for "hands-on" methods.
- Informal learning was preferred.
- Attendance at courses by both husband and wife was considered highly desirable by many people.
- The use of Case Study Farms in the Financial Management courses was viewed as a valuable teaching strategy.
- Written notes were considered to be useful reference material by some but not others.

Course Content and Delivery

Some of the commonly suggested topics were:

- Farm Financial Management,
- Personnel Management,
- How to obtain good advice from "experts",
- International affairs and economics,
- Machinery replacement advice.

Views on course length and timing of delivery varied widely.

- Short courses and evening courses were two options.
- Preferences for content and length varied widely.

Attitudes to Formal Qualifications

- Formal qualifications were not generally viewed as being of importance.

Computers in Farm Management

- Computers were generally not considered to be useful or relevant farm management tools.

NB: G. Coombe considered that this view may have arisen because many people had been introduced to computers as "programmers" rather than "users" of "friendly", relevant programmes.