

Becoming an adviser within the privatized extension sector: Challenges and successes of seven early career advisers

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Abstract: *Privatisation of agricultural extension services creates new challenges for on-the-job training of early career advisers. Whereas under the public sector system new advisers could readily access support and knowledge of more experienced advisers and did not have to justify their time as 'billable hours' the privatised advisory sector has limited training resources and high expectations of accountability. While a university degree is an entry requirement for new advisers many skills, including building professional networks, need to be learnt on the job. It is therefore a significant undertaking to ensure that that new advisers can develop the critical skills they need to be effective and confident to commit to a long term career in the agriculture sector. Mentoring is an informal training strategy that offers opportunities for sharing knowledge between senior and new career advisers. It is particularly important for building the confidence, networks and facilitation skills of early career advisers now entering privatised extension roles.*

Keywords: *mentoring; agriculture; on-job training; networks*

Introduction

Due to the public sector relinquishing its provision of agriculture extension the private sector is taking increasing responsibility for agriculture extension in Australia (Nettle et al., 2018). This has created many different impacts on advisers and farmers including providing training of early career advisers. While some new advisers find roles in 'not for profit' agriculture organisations others become immediately embedded in commercial businesses incentivised by profit. For businesses taking on new advisers this requires factoring in the resources for training and time required to get to know and become established in relevant networks. However training is expensive and time consuming and most commercial consulting businesses need to weigh up the cost and benefit against their need for 'billable hours'. There are many ways that training can be provided for new advisers including formal training, although most new advisers are graduates with at least a three year university degree and are ready for on-job training. Mentoring is an opportunity to introduce early career advisers into their working environment and professional networks and was a fundamental tool used by the public sector when it was responsible for agriculture extension. In the context of privatised extension mentoring involves senior advisers willing to share technical knowledge and skills as well as more tacit knowledge about effective advisory practice.

To address a range of issues arising from privatisation of agriculture extension in Australia the federal government funded a project to undertake research, develop and test models for enhancing the capacity of the commercial and private sector in delivering research, development and extension (RD&E) services to Australian farmers. The three year project

(2016-2018) was called 'Rural R&D for Profit: Stimulating private sector extension in Australia to increase returns from R&D'. It involved cross-collaboration between six Rural Development Corporations (Dairy Australia, Meat and Livestock Australia, Cotton Research and Development Corporation, Sugar Research Australia, Australian Pork Limited and Horticulture Innovation Australia) as well as the Victorian and New South Wales Governments and the University of Melbourne (Fact Sheet 1, Australian Government, 2017). As a result of an early scoping exercise (Fact Sheet Two: Regional Forums, Australian Government 2017), the purpose of which was to better understand how private sector extension engages with farmers and other RD&E stakeholders and identify barriers to private sector involvement in agriculture extension, four priority areas were identified as needing research. These included better collaboration between stakeholders across the dairy and red meat supply chains particularly in their technical support of farmers; facilitating adviser engagement with precision agriculture technologies; enabling early career advisory pathways and the need for better understanding of complex knowledge systems and how agriculture stakeholders can access these (Fact Sheet 3: Trials to enhance the private sector in extension, Australian Government, 2017). Each of the priority topics became the focus of four 'Trials' which were action research processes to develop and test models of engagement between the private sectors and RD&E system (ibid).

The focus of this paper is on Trial 3: The Advisory Pathways Trial (referred to in this paper as "the Trial"). Its purpose was to explore ways for rural R&D corporations, universities and small to medium private farm consultancy businesses to develop new strategies to develop the capability and career opportunities of early career agriculture advisers. It was project managed by a team that included a representative of Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA), a Project Officer who was a sole trading private agricultural consultant and also acted as a mentor within the project, and a social researcher from the University of Melbourne. The project also included twelve selected early career and senior agricultural advisers from a range of agriculture sectors including from horticulture, dairy, and red meat. Participants were employed in a range of business structures including sole trader consultancies and not-for-profit agriculture industry organizations. The project management team chose the mentoring lens to explore training pathways knowing that limited project resources of time and budget necessitated a very clear focus while also enabling action research methods. The mentoring focus was also chosen because this was a strategy that had been successfully used by the public sector in training agriculture graduates and continued to be used and endorsed by the public sector in its training of non-agriculture graduates (Victorian Government, 2018).

With their agreement, the Trial participants were paired in mentor-mentee relationships to create informal opportunities for knowledge sharing, networking, career and leadership development. This trial was intended to complement formal training opportunities developed as another component of the Rural R&D for Profit project in which a series of eight on-line modules were developed and offered by the University of Melbourne. This Trial and the Modules were both intended to provide insights and resources to enhance the capacity of the commercial and private sector in delivering Research, Development and Extension (RD&E) services to Australian producers.

This paper presents findings based on empirical data of mentees only although a full report and paper covering data from all participants and trial activities will be available at the completion of the project. The research question used to guide the paper's analysis and

discussion is ‘what enables or constrains opportunities for early career researchers to develop sustainable careers in the private extension sector’?

Mentoring as concept and practice

Mentoring has a long history dating back to Grecian times and has generally been used to describe an informal one-to-one relationship between a senior person, a mentor, who acts as a learning sponsor for a protégé, or mentee, who is new to a job or profession (Greenhalgh and Rawlinson, 2013). Bozeman and Feeney (2008) refer to mentoring as providing opportunities to impart informal institutional and ‘craft’ knowledge but is otherwise not explicitly recorded. While there are many definitions of mentoring, most have their roots in the seminal description by Kram (1985) who suggests that mentoring is an intense relationship whereby advice, counselling, and developmental opportunities are provided by a mentor which in turn shapes the protégés career experiences (Eby, 1997). This dyadic definition is considered too narrow by others who suggest that conceptualising mentoring requires a degree ‘plasticity’ due to the ‘depth and sweep of the phenomena’ (Bozeman and Feeney, 2007: 721). It is important to recognise that mentoring is fundamentally relational and that in practice each mentoring experience is unique.

In addition to being a relational process mentoring also enables socialisation (Ajjawi and Higgs, 2008; Kobeleva and Strongman, 2010). This refers to tacit learning of new career entrants particularly in their development of reasoning within a professional context. Socialisation is described by Ajjawi and Higgs (2008) as ‘being both an individual’s journey of professional development and a social, accultural process occurring within a professional group and context’. A mentoring relationship facilitates socialisation through the imparting of knowledge by direct example (Bozeman and Feeney, 1997)

In practice mentoring is regarded as an important tool in professional development of new entrants to a wide range of professional roles and is multifaceted in both concept and practice (Bozeman and Feeney 2007; Victorian Government 2018). Some findings show that mentoring is associated with higher salaries and opportunities for career advancement as well as greater job satisfaction and productivity of those mentored compared to those who are not (Hunt and Michael, 1983; Straus et al., 2009). Mentors may be supervisors within the same organisation as their mentees or non-supervisors from outside the mentee’s place of employment however mentors who are also supervisors have the advantage of accessible face-to-face interaction (Bozeman and Feeney, 1997). Positive and negative mentoring experiences have been reported in either case (ibid). Positive mentoring experiences are associated with those in which there is a respectful relationship and psychosocial benefits of friendship, sponsorship, counselling, psychological and emotional support (Kram and Isabella, 1985; Bozeman and Feeney, 1997).

Mentoring need not only be based on a one-to- one interaction but may also include groups such as work teams and professional associations that build social networks and tap into the resources of the group as a whole (Bozeman and Feeney 2007). Peer mentoring can also play a key role in knowledge sharing, confidence building and career development at different career stages (Kram and Isabella, 1995). Peer mentors may provide information, collegial support or other special interactions, the outcome being learning and professional development (ibid). Kram and Isabella argue that mentoring and peer mentoring relationships are differentiated by the former involving hierarchical and age differences and

the latter being based on two-way rather than one-way flow of knowledge and support. In practice any successful relationship is likely to require a sense of mutuality, reciprocity and opportunity to enhance social capital.

In the Australian agriculture sector mentoring was a traditional form of on the job training involving one-to-one pairings between senior and junior advisers in the public sector extension service. New forms of mentoring are now emerging such as peer-to-peer mentoring. One example from the Australian dairy industry is 'DairySage' which is a six month mentoring project focused on helping set up relationships where a mentor assists a farmer, manufacturer or service provider to work on personal goals and develop their networks (DairySage, 2018). Greenhalgh and Rawlinson's (2013) review of four agriculture mentoring schemes in Australia and New Zealand suggest that successful mentoring relationships need to be based foremost on a good match between mentor and mentee and that mentors in particular need to be trained and resourced appropriately. Both mentors and mentees need to be committed and prepare for meetings based on a mutually pre-agreed plan (ibid).

Another Australian mentoring programme, referred to as 'On the Fast Track', specifically offered capacity building for practitioners (including agriculture consultants) to make greater use of new extension resources (Nettle et al., 2010). A review of this initiative highlighted that successful mentoring takes time and that both mentors and mentees needed support to understand how to make best advantage from the process. As emphasised by Greenhalgh and Rawlinson, Nettle et al., (2010) concluded that mentor-mentee relationships need to be based on rapport, trust, respect and mutuality; mentors need to be well prepared and resourced; and mentees need to use initiative and effort. A critical finding also included that mentoring 'emerged as a vehicle for capacity building itself' (Nettle et al., 2010:80).

Public sector funders of mentoring programmes include expectations that, in addition to developing skills and capability in a specific field mentees will also develop leadership skills to be called on in their future careers (Bozeman and Feeney, 2008; Victorian Government 2018). Bozeman and Feeney (2008) argue that leadership development is important for government graduate employees because public sector management roles are less transferrable as in the private sector. However because the agriculture sector is reliant on many small businesses there are limited organizational opportunities to generate formal leadership compared to most other sectors. Therefore supporting early career advisers develop advisory skills can also prepare them to become future leaders in the agriculture sector (Martens and McLean, 2002; Greenhalgh and Rawlinson, 2013). While one-to-one mentoring can contribute to leadership development of mentees, peer mentoring can provide a personal level of feedback and important insights for mentees learning about their own leadership styles (Kram and Isabella, 1985; Martens and McLean, 2002).

Mentoring is not a stand-alone approach to professional skill development but involves informal knowledge sharing and is complementary to formal education (Bozeman and Feeney, 1997; Greenhalgh and Rawlinson, 2013). It is also part of a learning journey that is unique for each mentee; however its greater significance is when it provides benefits for both mentee and mentor (Kram and Isabella, 1985).

There is limited extant literature focused solely on the preparation and support of mentees and supervisees within a mentoring relationship (for examples see: Carrol and Gilbert, 2011;

QEM Network 2016) and conceptualisation of the role and implications of being a mentee is silent. For practical purposes and to take best advantage of their mentoring opportunity mentees are encouraged to be self-aware and take responsibility for maintaining an open, proactive and respectful relationship with their mentor (ibid). However more work is needed to understand the social, structural, and functional conditions that mediate how mentees particularly, but also mentors and the broader stakeholders within which they are embedded, capture mentoring benefits. The empirical findings presented in this paper are intended to contribute formative theorising about mentees' experience.

Background and methodology

The need for the trial emerged as a critical area of interest expressed by industry participants who took part in a series of scoping Forums between 2016 and 2017. The purpose of the Trial was to better understand the strategies and pathways that enable early career advisers and professionals to develop sustainable careers in the agricultural sector; to better understand the experiences of professional development within the private sector and identify how rural RDC's, private farm consultancy businesses, universities and state governments can more effectively support capacity building and career development of extension professionals in an increasingly privatised extension context.

Action research underpins the trial research to develop and test the mentoring model with mentees. As a research strategy, action research requires three elements that include action, research and participation (Greenwood and Levin, 2007). Supported by 'the friendly outsider' (the academic researcher) mentee participants played a key role in developing knowledge and understanding about benefits, or otherwise, of their mentoring experiences and testing this in practice (ibid).

Each individual participant and each mentor-mentoring pair constituted a 'case' for research purposes. For this paper data analysis is based on the seven mentees only. Data was collected during three workshops held during 2017, a technical and advisory skills needs analysis and one-to-one telephone interviews with participants that took place between Workshop 2 (June 2017) and Workshop 3 (November 2017). The methods used included participant observation, semi-structured interviewing and secondary data analysis. Each interview was taped with permission of the interviewee and transcribed verbatim. Content analysis of each transcript allowed for emergent themes to be identified and for thematic comparison across all transcripts. Data was coded using NVivo 11 followed by analysis.

Case descriptions

Each mentee's employment status and mentor relationship is summarised in Table 1 below. The mentees were employed within five different types of business structures including self-employed (2), single trader farm consultancy (1), large multi-member farm consultancy (1), (2) not-for-profit agriculture industry organization, and (1) and a private small family owed business. Three mentees were paired with mentors who were also their direct supervisors and four were paired with mentors who were not their supervisory and did not work in the same business. In one case a mentoring relationship finished part way through the course of the trial because the mentor left to take up a position in another business.

Table 1: Mentee ID, employer and mentor relationship

Mentee case ID	Mentee's employer's business	Mentee's mentor
A	Self	Non-supervisory
B	Self	Non-supervisory
C	Single trader farm consultancy	Supervisory
D	Large multi member farm consultancy	Supervisory
E	Not-for-profit agriculture industry organization	Non-supervisory
F	Not-for-profit agriculture industry organization	Supervisory
G	Small family owed business	Non-supervisory

Due to the limited number of cases available for this study no attempt is intended to generalise from the findings. Each case and the seven cases collectively contribute to an ongoing discussion about issues related to mentoring in the context of private sector extension.

Overview of Cases:

Case A: Mentee A was a self-employed agriculture consultant with six years' experience specialising in small project management consulting. Mentor A was a highly experienced self-employed consultant widely specialising in grains, people development and communication. Mentee A and Mentor A lived in different states of Australian so their mentoring relationship was mainly conducted through phone calls and emails. The mentoring relationship was non-supervisory.

Case B: Mentee B was a self-employed agriculture consultant specialised in providing livestock related advice. The mentoring relationship with Mentor B failed to be realised due to issues beyond Mentee B's control. Mentee B participated in all three Trial 3 workshops and took an opportunity to join a professional association which provided access to several mentors, none of whom were supervisors.

Case C: Mentee C had three years advisory experience and was co-employed in two agriculture consultancies as an intern specialising in livestock consultancy. Mentor C was a self-employed agriculture consultant and was Mentee C's co-supervisor and part employer.

Case D: When Trial 3 began Mentee D was an intern employed by a large agriculture consultancy practice and Mentor D was his employer and supervisor. Part-way through 2017 Mentee D left this practice and joined a large rural finance business. Due to the role change the mentoring arrangement was concluded. Mentee D continued to participate in workshops and was very involved in peer mentoring young farmers.

Case E: Mentee E had two years' experience as an adviser in a not-for-profit agriculture industry organization. Mentor E was a highly experience self-employed farm consultant who was not Mentee E's supervisor.

Case F: Mentee F had two years' experience as an adviser for a not-for-profit horticulture industry organisation. Mentor F was a senior adviser in the same organisation and also Mentee F's supervisor.

Case G: Mentee G was a pasture agronomist who, at the start of the Trial, was employed by a small private family based business. Part-way through 2017 Mentee G left this role to take up another agronomy role with a larger private agricultural business. Mentor G was a lecturer at a leading agriculture university and had previously taught Mentee G but for the Trial was a mentor and not a supervisor.

Of the seven mentees five were female and of the three of five mentors were female. The mentees included new graduates in their early 20's through to self-employed consultants with at least five years' advisory practice experience. Overall five mentees were positive with respect to their mentoring experiences throughout the trial. Two mentees were disappointed that their relationship with their mentor did not work as they had hoped.

Discussion and Results

The discussion and results are combined to address the research question:

'What enables or constrains opportunities for early career researchers to develop sustainable careers in the private extension sector?'

Enabling themes shared by mentees are presented next followed by constraining themes. All themes are then summarized to highlight implications for early career advisers employed in privatised agriculture extension.

'Enabling' themes common across mentees

A common enabler for mentees, as widely acknowledged in mentoring literature, was that they have a safe and effective working relationship with their mentor. This does not depend on whether the mentor is their supervisor or not. However when a mentor is also a direct supervisor the former relationship cannot be taken for granted and dedicated mentoring meetings need to be prioritised by both partners.

Mentees very much appreciated the technical, psychosocial support and socialisation opportunities available through their mentoring relationships. Some mentors also enabled mentees to step out of 'maintenance mode, just working from project to project' and take a more strategic focus on their business and advisory practice:

I definitely feel very comfortable sharing everything with Mentor A...I think it's just made me step back from my day to day project work and think about the strategic direction of my business, my goal. Where I want to be in the future and stopping and directing what the challenges are at the moment, what the opportunities are and what strategies I can put in place now to address those. (Mentee A)

Mentee F mentioned how his mentoring relationship with his supervisor has helped his professional development and this has been recognised in his latest performance review:

It's all about developing me...becoming a bit more of a professional in my role. (Mentee F).

Each mentoring relationship works differently and for some mentees it was an informal process:

We have a really great relationship in the sense that I'm always free to ask her questions and I do go to her for a lot of advice fairly regularly... but we don't really have a formal meeting time. (Mentee C).

For some mentees working with a mentor was a learning experience particularly for those who took an unstructured approach and did not necessarily prepare or record interactions with their mentor. In hindsight this is a step that mentees recognised as important for maintaining focus and also recalling advice for later application.

For other mentees, their mentor ensured that they scheduled time to connect:

Mentor A's always been the one (to say)...let's make a time in a months' time, set the time and the date and just dedicate a time. (Mentee A).

The success of a mentoring relationship can sometimes rely on geographic proximity that provides opportunities to meet face to face:

I think that's partly because Mentor E and I get along really well together and we also live in the same town, so I think it's been quite easy to catch up with him when I've needed to. (Mentee E).

A mentoring relationship also needs to work both ways:

Once it becomes recognised as a two-way relationship, it's a lot more beneficial for everyone. (Mentee D).

Mentors can be role models who provide support for early career advisers when they are working with farmers who are experiencing financial hardship and uncertainty about the future of their industries. This was the experience of Mentee E who had only just become employed by an agriculture industry organisation when there was a severe drop in milk price which put dairy farmers under considerable stress. Mentor E was not her supervisor or colleague but someone she regarded as a 'neutral' person who was able to share previous experience of similar issues and potential coping strategies:

I think it's been really good to have someone there that's not actually in the company, but to be able to talk about situations and ask do you think that would have been right, or do you think I should have gone a different way about it?...discussing and working out if my approach is right, or getting a feedback on what other people do as well. (Mentee E).

An emergent opportunity from mentoring relationships that develop into trusting collegial relationships is the potential to work in partnership on projects. This has particular value for advisers operating solo consultancies who lack resources or specific skills for a given project and cannot afford to employ another advisor but can work with a temporary partner for specific projects.

'Constraining' themes across mentees

Small consulting businesses are under considerable pressure to generate billable hours which impacts on the time and resources available for professional development of mentees. Businesses that are strongly driven by profit goals are also less likely to provide training opportunities.

For somebody to work for Mentor C they need to generate their own income and for Mentor C to justify their wage she has to justify her own time in training that person and then they can do a job for her. It's a vicious little cycle and I don't know how you break it without some funding...there might be opportunities for collaboration between service providers. (Mentee C).

The requirement on early career advisers to achieve billable hours means they have limited opportunities to develop professional networks on which their future career will depend. Mentee C was prepared to invest her own personal time to develop professional relationships:

I am very conscious to make sure that my time is billable... I try and make sure at least 60-65% of my client contact is actually billable hours, rather than them seeing me for a chat and then wasting an hour and not having actually done anything productive. I think I put in about, on average 48-49 hour week. I go to a lot of field days and present at a lot of field days and I use ... the lunch hour to try and make my time as productive as possible... a lot of that is not billable. (Mentee C).

With advisory knowledge and information becoming a 'private good' and source of competitive advantage an ongoing challenge for some mentees is to understand the balance between what information they share freely to build a relationship compared to information that is billable:

I still don't understand) the balance between billable hours and relationship building. How much information is too much free information? You can't just bill everybody for every conversation that you have. (Mentee C).

As professional advisers mentees are highly conscious of their need to develop credibility, respect and trust with their clients and colleagues but realise this takes time:

Building your reputation I think is probably one of the biggest challenges that you can have as an extension advisor, because ... you want to be respected and you want to be able to say all the right things. You don't want to say anything wrong because it can undo a lot of work in a short time period, and your reputation. (Mentee F).

Mentees need to realise that if they are not feeling enabled within a mentoring relationship they need to develop the confidence to challenge their mentor:

Something that I've learnt out of that previous mentoring relationship is that you actually need to feel confident enough to say, well no that's actually just wrong for me... and holding them accountable as well. It's not always a fluid relationship between the two parties...there's a risk that it becomes a dictatorship and that the mentor expects that the mentee will listen to everything that they say. (Mentee D).

Thematic summary

The seven mentees who participated in this study shared a range of enabling and constraining factors in relation to their mentoring experience as summarized in Table 2 below. Common themes emerged from the case studies of seven early career advisers who participated in this study. Based on their experiences it was clear that successful mentoring relationships with trusted more senior mentors as well as peers provide opportunities for developing both skills and confidence. Mentees however need to take responsibility for planning and preparing for scheduled meetings with their mentors. Mentees also need to be prepared to explore other options if the mentoring relationship is not constructive.

Table 2: Summary of mentoring enablers and constraints for early career advisers

Enablers of mentoring	Constraints to mentoring
Regular meeting times, and appropriate preparation, a mentoring plan	Lack of preparation for meetings and excessively informal process
A safe, open and effective working relationship	Pressure to generate billable hours that limit

with their mentor based on mutual respect	opportunities for professional development and reflexivity
Opportunities for technical, and psychosocial support as well as socialisation to advisory networks	Lack of recognition by employers of mentoring as a training opportunity
Focus on advisory practice as a business (working on as well as in the business)	Lack of recognition of how mentoring can support early career advisers build professional networks and leadership capability
Focus in professional development aspirations	A sense of competition between providers of professional or commercial services
Geographic proximity that facilitates face to face meetings	A lack of respect between mentor and mentee that undermines mentee's confidence

Conclusion

Becoming an advisor and doing professional work in the private agriculture extension sector draws on mentees' passion for working in agriculture. Their good will and desire to be part of the sector over the long term is why some invest their personal time in building connections and networks. This process is enhanced when mentees have at least one mentor prepared to help socialise them into the culture and networks of advisory and farming practice as well as help them develop skills, confidence and reflexivity. Mentees need mentors they respect and choose as role models but who also enable mentees to develop their own talents. Mentors need to be prepared to work with mentees as mutual partners rather than as subordinates in the relationship.

One to one mentoring is just one option for a mentoring relationship and as shown by the mentees in this study, other mentoring opportunities include working with colleagues from professional associations and also peers. Over time as mentees' needs change they may need to look for new mentors some of whom could be from outside the agriculture sector and include researchers, business professionals and marketing experts. Due to competitiveness within the private sector, mentees may also need to find a mentor outside their own industry to avoid conflicts of interest. The experience of being a mentee provides opportunities to become aware of the strategic implications of an advisory role, the need for ongoing learning and develops an inclination to become a future mentor. In this project it was clear that mentees developed sensitivity to the learning needs of others as well as themselves.

Industry organisations responsible for funding research and development need to recognise the value of mentoring for enabling skill development and confidence building of early career advisers in privatised agriculture extension. This is because investment in research is only realised when farmers have access to expertise that supports them adopt new practices. This in turn is dependent on the availability of competent, capable advisory services. Universities could take greater responsibility for preparing future mentees to optimise the capability building potential of mentoring opportunities as well as ensure that early career advisers are able to identify their on-going professional development needs post-university. Small private advisory consultancies will continue to find training for new staff challenging particularly in those sectors where farmers are still hesitant to pay for advice. There is a future role for both industry and government to enable mentoring processes for early career training although this will require resources and supportive institutional arrangements.

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