Graduate certificate in rural extension and community development

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Abstract. For many organisations, in both the private and public sectors, community liaison and social responsibility is increasingly important. Consultation and communication with local communities enables the development of positive stakeholder relations. The challenges facing extension officers and community educators in primary industries, natural resources, human health, industry development and community capacity building are wide and varied and require a range of skills and competencies. The North Coast Institute of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) has developed a Graduate Certificate in Rural Extension and Community Development. This course is designed to further the skills and knowledge of extension and community development practitioners and provide professional development to these accomplished professionals. It is also intended to be an initial qualification for new recruits into the fields of extension and community development. The Certificate provides participants with the tools to facilitate, manage and develop behavioural change at an individual and a community level and is designed for application across all sectors and several industries.

Background

Extension is essentially the process of managing change of behaviour within communities to achieve common desired outcomes. Facilitated by both government and non government organisations this happens through communication and activities that create shifts in attitudes and then subsequent behaviour change by individuals and groups.

Traditionally extension was associated with the rural sector; however as the need for other services and communications arose across rural communities the use of extension was transposed into other industries such as health, technology and conservation.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the term 'extension' is not widely used outside the rural sector. However, the associated activities and role are commonly applied to other sectors. Desktop research highlights that more commonly used descriptions for these roles include (but not limited to):

- community liaison and economic development officers
- project officers
- education officers.

All of these roles involve working with communities to develop skills and knowledge within population groups to benefit them socially, environmentally and/or economically.

The Graduate Certificate in Rural Extension and Community Development provides participants with the tools to facilitate manage and develop behavioural change at an individual and a community level. It is designed for all sectors: government, non government (NGOs) and not for profit organisations, and spans several industries and disciplines, including:

- agriculture, natural resources and conservation
- health
- community development including international aid and advocacy
- Aboriginal and indigenous community service industries
- Government and non government agencies involved in emergency services, education and tourism

Candidates entering this course will be qualified and experienced in their own discipline and will possess skills in vocational learning. Proficiency will be gained through research, analysis, application, action-learning, peer exchange and reflection. This will enhance improvements in practice to plan, motivate, lead and manage programs to achieve organisation goals.

On completion of the course the participants will be able to:

- apply theoretical perspectives on adult and work based learning in order to improve their own practice in extension
- refine and improve their existing facilitation and communication skills
- refine their practice within a specialised field to better prepare, plan, lead and manage and evaluate extension
- critically analyse their work practice and context, and make changes accordingly
- undertake work-based projects that incorporate inclusive and reflective practices

- apply new understanding of adult learning, behavioural change in individuals and communities, and social systems to the transformation of communities.

The changing role of the extension practitioner

Extension practitioners in Australia have traditionally worked in the agricultural sector, to help their clients gain knowledge and apply it to improve their productivity. In England the concept of extension had a more general definition: The aims of the Society for Diffusion of Useful Knowledge included the goal of '….imparting useful information to all classes of the community, particularly to such as are unable to avail themselves of experienced teachers, or may prefer learning by themselves. Extension has been considered to involve the use of communication and adult education processes to help people and communities identify improvements to their practices, and then provide them with the skills and resources to effect these improvements' (Botha and Weatherly 2003). This definition relates closely to the concept of 'capacity building', which is described by Macadam, Drinan, Inall & McKenzie (2004) as '….externally or internally initiated processes designed to help individuals and groups associated with rural Australia to appreciate and manage their changing circumstances, with the objective of improving human, social, financial, physical and natural capital in an ethically defensible way'.

Recent studies suggest that extension provider's work in a range of employment situations, and that, in the traditional agricultural sector, extension is also important in 'dealing with public good issues at catchment/landscape scale'. One of the main reasons for this shift in focus relates to Australia's unique and difficult environmental problems (Coutts, Douglas & Campbell 2001).

Traditional extension practices have been described as following a 'linear model', with information being transferred from scientists to farmers. Contemporary attitudes reflect a move away from 'top down' approaches towards an emphasis on information flows, an awareness of adult learning principles and increased participation by the community members (see Marsh & Pannell 2000). In particular, the need to understand the principles of sustainable development has greatly increased the importance of participatory approaches in extension practices. Moreover, the application of extension practices is now considered for sectors beyond agriculture, including youth development, indigenous issues, health, natural resources and family and community sciences (Gibson & Brown 2002).

The importance of participatory approaches in extension practices has been stressed for overseas aid projects. Aid workers in third world countries need to adjust to altering economic, cultural, political and social conditions. NGOs are filling the gaps left by government agencies. These organisations tend to be aware of the need for environmental protection, improved technologies and a tendency to return to small-scale agricultural practices. Recent projects involving these new attitudes to extension practices include:

- empowering women (China and Slovenia)
- client-oriented extension (Ethiopia)
- biodiversity management (India), rural youth curricula (Uganda) and
- people's participation (Zambia) (UNDP/FAO 2002).

An attempt to combine such aims is 'Participatory Rural/Relaxed Appraisal' (PRA), which is described as '….a growing combination of approaches and methods that enable rural people to share, enhance and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and act and to monitor and evaluate. The role of the outsider is that of a catalyst, a facilitator of processes within a community that is prepared to alter their situation' Sonthheimer, Callens & Seiffert (1999). The features of RPA include; offsetting biases and gender sensitivity; rapid and progressive learning, by flexible and interactive techniques; focussed learning; and the uses of role reversal, in order to find, understand and appreciate local knowledge.

Agricultural Knowledge Systems Analysis (Ramirez 2001) attempts to increase the knowledge base obtained from PRA by obtaining technical assistance and scientific information that has been specifically requested by the community.

Another significant change in extension practices relates to the shift and/or reduction in services provided by state government departments and the increasing extension role played by local government and non government agencies such as Landcare and the greater role industry bodies and private consultants play in delivering extension services.

Generic skills across extension roles

A successful extension practitioner needs to have a wide range of skills, including:

- verbal and written communication skills

- knowledge of and empathy with the target community and skills in forming collaborative partnerships and relationships
- knowledge of the industry and the local economy
- planning, budgeting, monitoring and management of projects
- interpersonal skills, including sociological and psychological knowledge
- knowledge of marketing and business management
- ability to explain complex scientific data and
- leadership and motivation skills.

From this generic list the most common skills needed for successful extension practitioners are:

- the ability to build capacity for self-help in others
- ability to communicate and network
- facilitation of a learning environment
- understanding the predictable stages of change
- evaluation of these changes
- understanding participative research and development processes.

Modern extension objectives

Extension aims to bring about positive change on farms and in agriculture by the use of processes that facilitate learning within the agricultural community. Fulton et al. (2003) and Dart et al. (1998) give examples of evaluations of extension programs which have demonstrably led to increased knowledge and skills, and positive change on farms. Research indicates that farmers prefer informal training (see Bamberry et al. (1997) and Kilpatrick (1996)). Bamberry et al. (1997) define informal learning as '....all those mechanisms not included as part of the structured accredited courses of study offered through educational institutions.' Kilpatrick and Johns (1999) define it, as '....individual learning from experience and observation, other people and the media....'

Recent attitudes to agricultural extension in Australia

The current practice of extension focuses on the processes of assisting people to gain and apply knowledge to their endeavours with improvement as an outcome.

Extension should involve delivering research information to farmers and conveying farmers' information back to researchers (Fulton et al. 2003; Millar and Curtis 1999).

The change involves a shift from:

- the transfer of technology to concerns for human development
- individual problem solving to community-based considerations and
- narrow-focused scientific considerations to a more holistic context.

In this context, the need to consider all forms of learning (including experiential, lifelong and situational learning) as valid learning tools. Extension should focus on '....overall likelihood of enhancement...' and needs to be responsive to the changing needs of rural people (see Kaiminowitz (1990).

The extension officer needs to, be clear about the purpose of the extension process, and articulate the process so that it is useful and appropriate (Foster 2001).

The roles of the extension officer are to:

- transfer technology
- facilitate human development (Coutts 1995).

Competencies required of a contemporary extension officer

- interpersonal, facilitation and communication skills
- knowledge, planning, evaluation and ethical competence (Straw et al. 1996)
- setting goals and standards
- getting unbiased information
- time management and prioritizing
- appraising people and performance
- disciplining and counselling (Ladewig and Rohs 2000)
- business, human, marketing and tourism skills (Phelan 1995)
- social mobilization
- participatory rural appraisal (Carney 1998; Keen and Stocklmayer 1999; Haug 1999; Dore 1997)
- awareness of the social context within which farm management occurs (Vanclay 1999)
- understand and utilize group processes (Clark et al. 1999).

Methodology in skills analysis and competency definition

The following methodology was followed to prepare the skills analysis that resulted from the findings of the consultative process which guided the curriculum development:

- literature review of rural extension and capacity development skills, knowledge and attitudes of proficient practitioners
- consultations with managers in the state agencies ie New South Wales (NSW) Primary Industries & State and Regional Development, NSW Health and Catchment Management Authority's
- study of a range of position descriptions and statements of duties within government agencies and non-government organisations
- study of the internal training programs within NSW government agencies to identify generic and specialised competencies and articulate performance standards
- review of current extension/community development courses in the higher education sector
- survey of the training needs existing of Landcare Community support and Aboriginal NRM Extension officers and Local Government NRM officers
- consultations with extension and community-development specialists from Africa, Asia and the South Pacific, specialists in agriculture and human health including feedback received from short-course precursors developed and delivered in these areas
- research conducted for the Department of Agriculture and Livestock in Papua New Guinea into extension and farmer associations and education and training needs
- advice, input and feedback received from a project reference group, including academics, accomplished field practitioners, and program managers from relevant NSW TAFE Curriculum Centres with extension-related expertise
- review by a panel of experts drawn from NSW Department of Primary Industries, the University of Western Sydney, and NSW TAFE Curriculum Centres, followed by accreditation by the NSW Accreditation Council, NSW TAFE Commission.

Findings from consultative studies

In 2003 exploratory research was carried out, based on a concept put forward by Dr Paul Brockwell[1]. The course was initiated from a meeting of practitioners and educationists and as a consequence a feasibility survey was completed with Landcare, Aboriginal Community Support and Local government officers around NSW. Additional feedback was obtained from extension officers working in the South Pacific and Solomon Islands. Following a positive response a literature review was completed prior to the development of a project methodology and draft curriculum. Findings from these studies provided the framework for developing the course.

Prospective students generally stated that they would seek a flexible, practical course with a mixture of external and on campus study modes to maximise understanding and application.

Common features sought by prospective students were:

- a relevant course that can be completed in a year (part time)
- a course that complements and develops their existing technical skills
- one that fits into life and work commitments
- offers practical units based on industry needs and provides real world skills that can be used immediately
- is of excellent value (as it includes study materials in the price)
- enhance candidate prospects to undertake more senior or specialist roles within an agency serving communities or industries
- an option to specialise in extension and contributes to rural development.

Organisations said they would value a graduate certificate that:

- doesn't take employees away from work at extended periods of time
- offers practical units based on industry needs and is customised to fit the organisation
- provides real world skills that can be used immediately
- is of excellent value (value-add facility through negotiations/customisation).

On completion of the course, participants will be able to:

- apply theoretical perspectives on adult and work-based learning in order to improve their own practice in extension
- refine and improve their existing facilitation and communication skills
- refine their practice within a specialised field to better prepare, plan, lead and manage extensions programs and projects

- critically analyse their work practice and context, and make changes accordingly
- undertake work-based projects that incorporate inclusive and reflective practices
- apply new understanding of adult learning and behavioural change in individuals, communities and social systems to the transformation of communities
- plan, implement, monitor and evaluate extension programs

Competencies prepared from skills analysis – learning outcomes for successful study and assessment

From the studies performed, the following competencies were articulated into elements that comprise the competency and associated performance criteria to assess attainment of competency and the degree of proficiency. The key learning outcomes of the course are delivered through the four core subjects and two elective units. The elective subjects include Work Placement 2 8971DB which is a work based project incorporating the courses key learning outcomes. The other elective *Conduct* Development Programs in Remote Communities NSWTEXT805A is targeted at indigenous people working in remote parts of Australia.

Modify behaviour in client communities NSWTEXT801A.

This unit gives an enhanced understanding of psychological principles which underpin methods used in changing behaviour at individual and community levels. As this unit assumes no prior knowledge in psychology, students will consider a number of differing perspectives within psychology, from behavioural to social organisational principles. A thorough understanding of these principles will provide you, the extension professional, with a rich theoretical framework from which to build creative solutions to every-day problems in motivating and supporting effective change in client communities. On completion of the unit students will be able to:

- characterise goals and limitations of learning within a community or industry framework
- design and implement a behavioural intervention at an individual level to optimise outcomes for the community group
- incorporate social and organisational context into all aspects and stages of program management
- overcome social and organisational barriers to change
- apply theories of power, motivation and group dynamics to achieve planned outcomes.

Communicate for change and capacity building NSWTEXT802A

This unit focuses on presentation, media and advanced facilitation skills. The unit covers the competencies of inter-group communication and facilitation skills using the ORID (Objective, Reflective, Interpretive, Decision) and Technology of Participation (TOP) facilitation techniques. These skills and techniques will aid the practitioner, to play an instrumental role in facilitating optimal contributions from individuals, sometimes with disparate views, in a group situation. The outcome being that the ideas generated by the group are greater than the some of the individual parts. Students becoming competent facilitators can potentially reduce conflict and increase cooperation within a community or organisation leading to change management practices and capacity building within rural, remote and overseas communities.

Provide advisory and community coordination services NSWTEXT803A

This unit focuses on analytical, problem-solving, collaborative, educational and managerial skills which will assist practitioners to conduct effective programs in their communities and industries.

On successful completion of the unit, students will be able to:

- obtain the competencies as an extension practitioner to optimise cooperation and adoption of change management practices in social and economic systems
- develop an extension program to support the development of a client organisation
- apply high-level consulting and management skills to problem solving and program implementation
- facilitate collaborative partnerships with key stakeholders to build capacity and deliver jointly agreed mutual beneficial outcomes.

Manage projects for change in communities NSWTEXT804A

This unit covers the competencies of strategically managing diverse extension projects in a range of situations. This unit teaches the necessary skills to manage all aspects and stages of project development, and perform the following tasks: undertake a scoping study, develop project briefs, prepare submissions, plan a project, budget, set milestones and performance indicators, implement a project, monitor its progress, finalise its completion, evaluate its outcomes, prepare progress and final reports, and facilitate internal and external review.

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