

## Making capacity building theory practical: The *On the Fast Track* project

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**Abstract:** On the Fast Track was a project initiated, developed and delivered by the members of the Cooperative Venture for Capacity Building (CVCB). The project aimed to improve the use of CVCB research outputs by rural R&D corporation project managers and practitioners. It involved a trial of practical capacity building approaches that applied the CVCB research findings. The design involved consolidating CVCB research outputs into meaningful learning tools and supporting capacity-building practitioners in applying their learning in their day-to-day work or projects through mentoring. Sixty-three people from all over Australia participated in the project. Participants included farm/rural advisers and consultants, project officers and managers/investors, project designers and extension staff as well as people involved in community development. They came from rural industries (Dairy, Cotton, Sugar, Meat & Livestock, Horticulture, Wool, Grains), NRM/property planning, community and farmer representative organisations and research organisations. Each participant attended a 2-day workshop, applied what was learned on an issue in their own work with mentoring support over a 9-month period, and participated in a final reflective workshop. This paper provides an overview of the project’s tools and processes, the key learnings from applying the approach, and evaluation of the approach. The paper concludes with insights relevant to people seeking to enhance the practice of the professionals engaged in capacity building, and to better implement capacity-building research.

### Introduction

Capacity building is about improving our ability to learn and adapt through change (Macadam, et al. 2004). Given the current context facing rural industries (e.g. long-running droughts; uncertainty and complexity associated with climate change; access to resources like water and people; and changing consumer preferences) improving how we adapt through these conditions for resilient and sustainable industries can be seen as a priority investment for governments, research and development organisations and rural industries themselves. However, improving our ability to adapt is not straightforward and progress can be hindered. For instance, the push toward privatisation of knowledge can slow adaptation because knowledge and information are viewed as tradeable commodities to be protected rather than shared (Carney 1995; Leeuwis 2000; Marsh and Pannell 2000). Further, techno-centric investment in research and extension removes the focus from human and social capacity and privileges technology as the adaptation solution (Vanclay and Lawrence 1995). Finally, the capacity building professions that focus on how best to build and support an individual or groups ability to adapt (e.g. extension, farm advisers, natural resource management and community development services) may suffer from limited support and development and therefore the adaptation of an industry or system is constrained (Nettle 2003; Campbell 2001; Bouma 1999).

To address some of these hindrances R&D corporations collaborated to co-invest in a research initiative known as the Cooperative Venture for Capacity Building (CVCB) to improve capacity building for innovation in rural industries in Australia. The role of the CVCB was to develop a program of R&D that focused on enhancing the understanding of learning, improving organisational arrangements to support rural human capacity building, and inspiring innovative farming practices. Its partner members were: Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation; Australian Wool Innovation; Cotton Research and Development Corporation; Dairy Australia; Grains Research and Development Corporation; Grape and Wine Research and Development Corporation; Horticulture Australia Limited; Land & Water Australia; Meat & Livestock Australia; Murray-Darling Basin Commission; Sugar Research and Development Corporation; and the Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. This collective investment resulted in documentation of the body of literature and examples of

practice that described the importance of capacity building for the future of rural Australia ([www.rirc.gov.au](http://www.rirc.gov.au)). However, the program investors considered the use of these research outputs by the CVCB member organisations and capacity building practitioners were below potential. Experience by the project team suggested that the 'world' of the project managers and practitioners choosing, designing, implementing, supporting and evaluating capacity building had not aligned sufficiently (and meaningfully enough) with the 'world' of capacity-building research. This represented significant cost and inefficiency because the networks and linkages the member organisations brought to the CVCB were not being used effectively to support learning and change, and the research was viewed as not being grounded enough to effectively inform and transform the practice of capacity building.

To improve this situation, a 12-month project called '*On the Fast Track* - bringing capacity building research and practice together' was initiated by the CVCB members (Nettle 2008). The project aimed to: design and test a route-to-market for CVCB research; bring together key capacity building project managers and practitioners to enhance their capacity to choose (invest), design, support and evaluate their current capacity building programs; and, identify new research and/or development questions in capacity building. The practitioners were people involved in supporting innovation and change in industries. They include farm/rural advisers and consultants, project officers and managers/investors, project designers and extension staff, and people involved in community development. The objectives of the project were that participants in the project had: greater skills and knowledge in capacity building; improved practice; greater capacity to work together because of the links and networks created between managers and practitioners from different industries; and that capacity building projects that participants were currently working on demonstrated greater efficiency in resource use, less errors and better design, delivery and evaluation leading to more productive and sustainable industries.

This paper provides an overview of the *On the Fast Track* approach, that is, the tools and processes developed, key learnings from applying the approach and some results for participants in the project. The paper concludes with insights relevant to building the capacity of the profession and recommendations to better 'operationalise' capacity-building research.

### **The *On the Fast Track* approach: Making capacity building theory practical**

In order to design and test a process to embed the outputs of the CVCB research into the practice of capacity building professionals, it was necessary to mobilise a collaborative effort of people involved in capacity building in rural industries across Australia. The *On the Fast Track* project included a core project team responsible for delivering the project including key expertise in project leadership and management, content development and delivery, mentor support, communication and evaluation. The project also involved a working group consisting of all members of the CVCB to oversee project delivery. The *On the Fast Track* approach consisted of ten key activities (refer to Figure 1):

1. CVCB members collaborated to develop a route-to-market for the CVCB research investment.
2. Common issues experienced by rural industry project managers and practitioners in capacity building were identified, the CVCB research outputs were reviewed for their fit with these issues and a framework developed for people to think about capacity building ('The Capacity Building Wheel').
3. The CVCB research outputs (e.g. research reports) were translated into a workbook and workshop design building off 'The Capacity Building Wheel'.
4. Participants were invited to join the project through CVCB member networks and they completed a pro-forma that identified a project they wanted to improve and the main reason they wanted to be involved.
5. A 'pool' of mentors was selected using CVCB member networks and based on the range of participant projects and needs. Mentors were invited to join the project.
6. Cross-sector 2-day workshops were delivered in three locations around Australia.
7. Workshop participants developed action plans for their work and choose mentors.
8. Action plans are put into practice with mentor support.
9. Mentors are supported in their role through regular teleconferences and assistance from a mentor developer.
10. A final workshop reports on results of participants and a final report of the process and outcomes developed. A resource kit of tools developed through the project was also compiled.

Sixty-three people from all over Australia participated in the project. Participants came from rural industries (Dairy, Cotton, Sugar, Meat & Livestock, Horticulture, Wool, Grains), NRM/property planning, community and representative organisations and research. Each

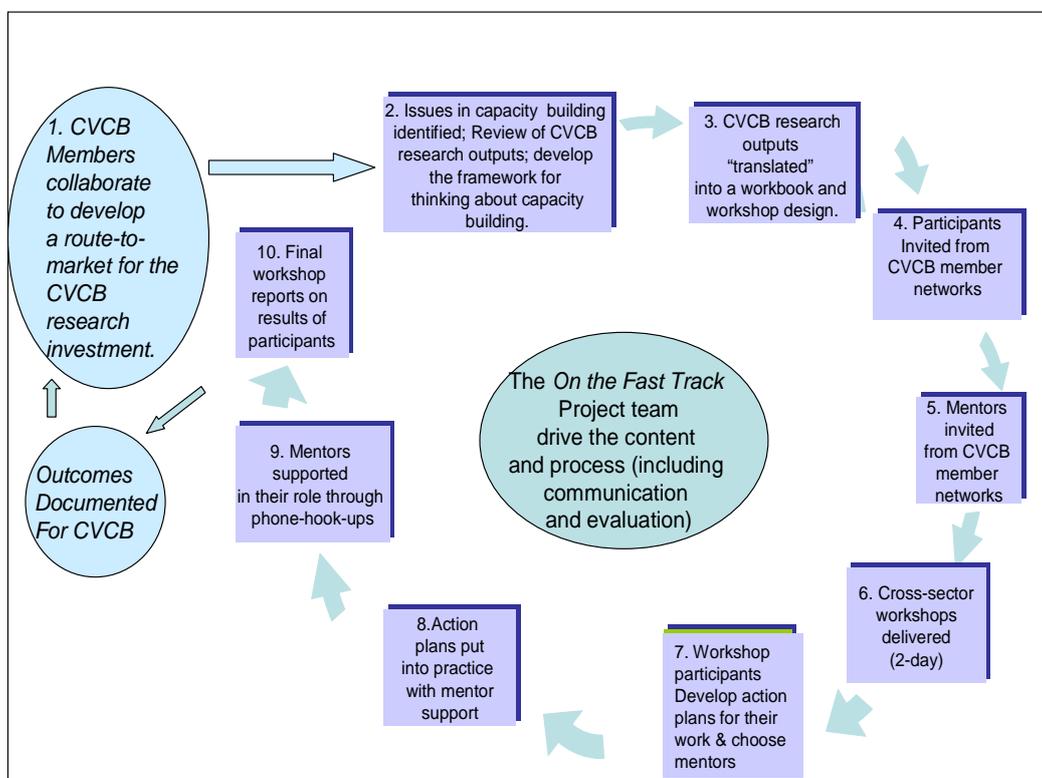
participant attended a two-day workshop, worked through a project or issue with mentoring support for nine months and attended a final wrap-up workshop. Participants’ projects ranged from improving the delivery, evaluation and reporting of industry projects (sugar, dairy, extensive livestock, NRM), to improving the effectiveness of grower groups and knowledge management in cotton and grain irrigation.

An evaluation plan for the project guided the data collection concerning the impacts and outcomes from the On the Fast Track project. Three main data collection methods were used: participant and mentor questionnaires (pre- and post-) about their experience in the workshops and use of CVCB resources; participant project reports detailing what participants did and the results they achieved; and mentor reports (Kelly 2008).

**The key processes involved in making capacity building research practical**

Each element of the project (Figure 1) proved essential for increasing the use and ‘practicality’ of CVCB research amongst capacity-building project managers and practitioners. However, three key processes provided the ‘glue’ or foundation for change. It is important to make these processes explicit when discussing the design, delivery and evaluation of projects as they are often overlooked and/or suffer from underinvestment.

**Figure 1. The On the Fast Track project elements**

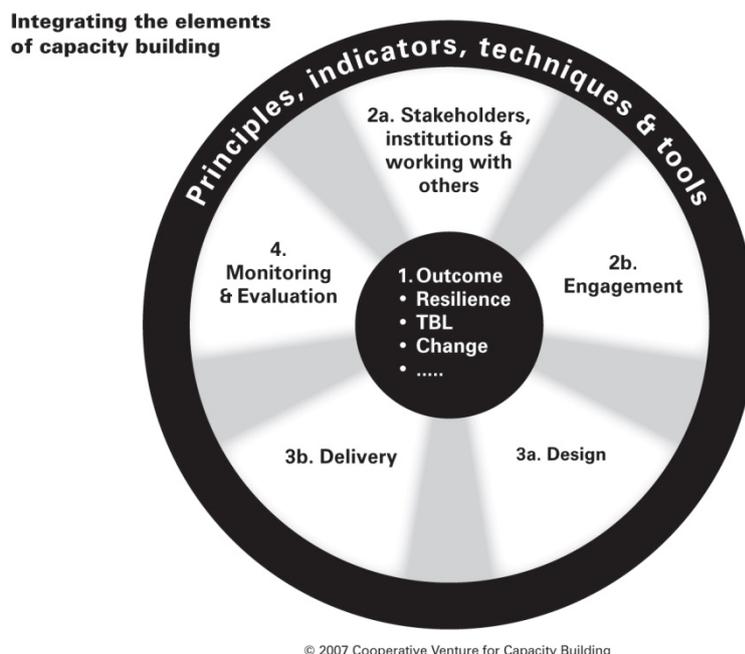


**1. A learning process: how can people best make sense of capacity building research?**

The importance of diagnosing learning needs and acknowledging and building from ‘lived-experience’ is well established in adult learning literature (Kolb 1976; Knowles 1990; Burns 1995) and foundational for supporting change in practice. Therefore, the *On the Fast Track* project team acknowledged that the CVCB research on its own would need to be transformed into meaningful information and tools that met such learning criteria. Further, since the work of managers and practitioners is predominantly based on project cycles, the research was organised around what became known as ‘the capacity building wheel’ (see Figure 2) which provided a framework for thinking about and working through the meaning and practice of ‘capacity building’ in the context of a project or program. The CVCB research outputs were then organised into a workbook for practitioners that linked practitioner questions and experiences to the relevant research outputs of the CVCB.

There was some confusion about what capacity building is and what approaches are (or are not) capacity building. The framework allowed people to think about capacity building – and how to position the CVCB research to their practice. It helped people think about capacity building as a process of focusing on outcomes for rural industries that built the 'capitals' (human, social, financial, natural and physical). The process then engaged both target audiences and stakeholders in achieving these outcomes. Next, innovative approaches were designed and delivered to support those outcomes. Finally the process was continuously monitored, adapted and evaluated to determine impacts.

**Figure 2. The capacity building wheel.**



The framework was built on a metaphor of a bike wheel. If the outcomes for capacity building are well defined and central to the process (wheel 'hub'), if all capacity building elements (wheel 'spokes') are operating well, if the elements are continually informed by best practice principles, and if there are sophisticated indicators of progress and useful techniques and tools (the bike tyre is pumped up so the tyre is at full inflation), then the wheel runs smoothly and achieves its intent (the destination). If one or more spokes, the hub or the tyre are not working well – so the wheel is unbalanced or broken – the aim will not be achieved. This framework was suggested as a way to think systemically about capacity building, applicable whether participants were project managers, practitioners or investors.

The framework was used to develop the workshop program and align CVCB research outputs to a 'topic', and became a key tool for participants and the project team to explain capacity building. It proved a powerful guide for both the project team and participants in aligning CVCB research, workshop delivery and action planning with the questions and needs of practitioners:

*"The wheel gave me a way of better explaining capacity building to others."* - On the Fast Track participant

*"I have found using the capacity building wheel to be a useful model for planning delivery of projects, and I will use it again."* - On the Fast Track participant.

The capacity building wheel became a tool for project participants to relate CVCB research outputs to their own situation and to communicate capacity building to others. It became a 'translating device' for CVCB research and was a creative development of the project.

The *On the Fast Track* Workshops were also designed using action learning principles where research findings were applied to participants' own issues or projects. Topics were aligned to questions such as:

- What are we trying to achieve from our efforts in capacity building?
- How do we engage stakeholders, organisations, farmers and communities in our efforts?
- What is best practice design and delivery for capacity building? How can we improve what we do and how we do it?

- How do we better evaluate what we do?

Case studies, exercises, 'expert panels' and participant presentations were used to help consolidate learning. Over the two days of the workshop, participants built action plans. These plans formed the basis of a mentoring relationship that supported plans into action over the next eight months.

### ***2. A networking process: capitalising on cross-industry experience and expertise***

The project philosophy was based on the idea that 'fast tracking' capacity of practitioners required more than exposure to research. In addition, it needed to capitalise on the different experience of different industries and people in different roles, e.g. project managers as well as field workers. This networking dimension meant people from industries such as dairy, wool, meat, cotton and sugar as well as from NRM and community groups got to know each other and were exposed to new ways of looking at capacity building. It also meant participants could work with people that had similar issues but worked in different contexts. A project blog was also established for participants to share progress.

The project ended with a final workshop in Sydney that involved people from all workshops coming together to share their results with each other. This not only consolidated and reinforced learning but also turned networking opportunities into more established relationships that would endure beyond the project.

### ***3. A mentoring process: building up the capacity builders does not happen overnight***

Building people's confidence and skills in the principles and elements of capacity building is not an immediate process. Mentoring was built into the project to support participants in using the learning from the workshops in an ongoing way in their own projects or work. The objective for the mentoring was to help participants put their plans into action after the workshop, continue to support their development as 'capacity builders' and encourage continued use of CVCB resources.

Twenty mentors with experience and an interest in capacity building were invited to participate. Mentors were identified through the CVCB members' networks and were briefed on the vision of the project and their role prior to the workshops. A mentor developer was also part of the project team. Her role was to support the mentors in their role through regular phone hook-ups.

The mentors attended the workshops and participants were able to nominate their preferred mentor. Mentoring agreements were then established between each participant and their mentor to help build the relationship and set out the aim of the mentoring experience. Mentors also appreciated being exposed to the CVCB research materials and interaction with other mentors as well as participants. This meant that participants, mentors and the project team were 'co-learning' throughout the whole project.

Some mentoring relationships were less successful than they could have been. To improve this, the project team believes more effort could go into helping participants understand how to use their mentors effectively and giving more guidance to both mentor and mentees in how to work effectively together.

Some participants' projects changed over the time or were too broad to enable effective action over a short period of time. The project team believes more effort in defining and tightening participants' projects and aims for involvement would have improved the outcomes for some participants.

### **Results for participants from On the Fast Track**

Sixty-three participants (including 20 mentors) were involved in the project. Participant projects were diverse and included:

- developing mentoring systems in the dairy industry;
- improving women's involvement in industry decision making;
- improving group processes;
- designing effective farm business management groups in the sugar industry;
- building stronger young farmers networks;
- developing a better extension project proposal with a greater focus on capacity building;
- creating extension leverage from NRM networks;
- building indigenous employment strategies in the cotton industry;
- building capacity of commercial irrigation services in the cotton industry;
- and more effective reporting of capacity building efforts to stakeholders.

Participants reported a range of impacts and outcomes from their involvement in the project including:

- improved team work in projects;
- more engagement with stakeholders in projects leading to better participation and greater results;
- greater confidence in capacity building efforts;
- better quality projects from well executed engagement strategies and design, delivery and evaluation of projects;
- using their experience to train others in capacity building;
- more motivated extension teams;
- greater use of CVCB research after workshops.

The self-reported use of CVCB research outputs by participants doubled through involvement in *On the Fast Track* with the reported rate of use of CVCB research by participants increasing from 25% pre-project to 56% post-project. This increase is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level (Kelly 2008). Further, participants suggested their confidence in capacity building had increased across a number of aspects of capacity building (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Participant's response to the survey question: By being involved with this project, in which aspect(s) of Capacity Building has your confidence increased?**

Capacity building aspect	Frequencies & % with confidence increased n=36
The definition and understanding of capacity building outcomes	26 (72%)
Engagement of different stakeholders and groups in capacity building	22 (61%)
Design and delivery of capacity building programs	24 (67%)
Evaluation of capacity building programs	18 (50%)

It is estimated that 40 of the 43 participants benefited directly from involvement in the workshop and exposure to the resources (three participants did not continue in the project after attending the first workshop). Of those that followed through into projects and mentoring: 30/40 (75%) had a moderate to high impact as evidenced by their project reports and mentor comments, and 10/40 had a low impact.

The experiences of participants in the project suggest that the *On the Fast Track* approach has led to their increased confidence in the methods, approaches and outcomes from capacity building. This confidence has led to better capacity building projects and through this, a greater reach and impact into rural industries. Many participants valued the mentoring and support to their practice and personal development in capacity building through the project. There was an expressed demand by managers and practitioners of capacity-building projects for continued support to help them to better support rural industries.

Some feedback from participants when asked what the results have been from their involvement included:

*"I have learnt how to do an evaluation plan that does a better job of demonstrating impacts on people's capacity from involvement in our NRM programs."*

*"It has reinforced the importance of an outcome and impact focus - to establish and demonstrate change and the benefits to industry, government and community from investment in RD&E."*

*"Through my involvement with the On the Fast Track project I led an exercise with our main stakeholders to work on a strategic direction, planning, mentoring and support for extension practitioners within the group". This extension manager used the capacity building wheel and lessons from the workshop to work with his team to plan more effective extension for the extensive beef industry – which is now being put into practice.*

*"My involvement in the project has meant I have a tighter focus on farmers' needs and ensure all efforts are put into producing a quality product to meet these needs"*

*"In designing and delivering an industry mentoring program I found myself jumping in and out of the spokes of the 'capacity building wheel' – integrating the elements of capacity building – it helped me focus, each decision I make or action to be*

*delivered. My mentor was amazing and contributed so much to my personal development and the project. I am inspired ..."*

*"Our mentor played a vital role in providing direction and challenged our thinking about capacity building for our projects and mostly importantly for ourselves."*

*"My mentor emphasised the importance of building celebration into the end of projects, and the workshops taught me that involving key contacts in organising workshops and inviting workshop participants is a very successful strategy. I am currently applying these learning's to the development of an e-network."*

### **Lessons from *On the Fast Track* - critical success factors in the *On the Fast Track* approach**

In compiling the final report from the project, participant feedback and project team reports (including the project evaluation report) were compiled to identify critical success factors within each element of the *On the Fast Track* approach. Critical success factors were identified and these form the basis of recommendations for improving processes in 'making capacity building research more practical':

1. **Collaborative development:** involving all CVCB member representatives in the project enabled different interests, expectations and perspectives on capacity building to be discussed and built into project objectives. This created ownership and involvement in the project by the CVCB stakeholders, and therefore an impact into their organisations.
2. **Walk-the-talk:** Applying the principles of capacity building to all the elements of the project provided a high level of responsiveness to participant needs.
3. **Develop 'translation' devices and design the learning experience:** The foundation elements of the *On the Fast Track* approach (elements 1 through to 5) ensured an effective and useful workshop for participants that increased the use of CVCB research. The 'Capacity Building Wheel' was a central development in the project, helping people position the CVCB research for their day-to-day work. It also provided a way for people to talk about capacity building with each other, helped in the logical design of the workshop and, it enabled participants to target areas for improvement (i.e. 'fast-track' their learning). It emerged as a key legacy of the project. The development of 'translation devices' such as this is important for bringing research and practice together.
4. **Develop tools to support reflection:** The project developed a number of tools to support participants and mentors in reflecting on their current practice of capacity building what better practice is and how to close the gap between current and ideal practice. These included: a) A practical workbook that previewed research findings, case studies and provided questions for reflection and discussion on each element of the capacity building wheel; b) An "action-planner" and an action planning process in triads during the workshops that took reflective questions into steps for new action; c) High quality action plans were the foundation for the mentoring process (what mentor and mentee's focused on in their interactions). These tools were highly valued by participants, led people to look further into research findings, made the full CVCB research reports more accessible, and enhanced the mentoring experience.
5. **Mentors are participants too:** Mentors are a key target audience for use of CVCB research and this was underestimated at first.
6. **Close the loop and celebrate success:** The final workshop is essential for consolidating learning's, celebrating successes and building networks to improve capacity building approaches.
7. **More time (1-3 years) is needed for more effective mentoring and more significant changes to capacity building approaches.** This project (its design, delivery and evaluation) was a 12-month project and would have benefited from longer time frames for mentoring and project enhancement.

There were also significant insights into the implementation of a mentor-participant relationship:

1. **A robust and valued mentor-matching process is essential:** The mentor matching and mentoring process increased the effectiveness of the follow up process to get the action plan 'on the ground'.
2. **Have a designated mentor-support role and a mentor support process:** Having a designated mentor development role was critical to the success of the mentor process.

Mentors learning from each other and hearing about each other's progress helped reduce isolation in the mentor role.

3. **Mentoring success is a two-way street:** Effective mentoring relationships require not only an effective matching process, but also effort and commitment from mentees and mentors to the relationship; understanding of roles by both mentor and mentee; rapport between mentor and mentee (including trust and respect) and a sharing of some common passion; a good understanding by the mentor of the organisation the mentee is working within; adequate time allocated to the relationship; use of communication skills, and a solid mentoring process built on action plans. The needs of the mentors (e.g. for benefits, stimulation, challenge and reward) also need to be prioritised and acknowledged through the mentoring experience.

## Conclusion

It is clear that the *On the Fast Track* approach delivered increased use of CVCB research and was well accepted by practitioners as a way to increase their confidence and improve their practice. Participants valued the mentor matching and mentoring process; meeting and learning from other industries and others working in the field; working in small groups to focus on each others' issues; a balanced mix of learning, pondering and doing; the effectiveness of follow-up process (mentoring and reporting) to get the action plan 'on the ground'.

The *On the Fast Track* approach led to increased confidence of participants in the methods, approaches and outcomes from capacity building and this confidence led to better capacity building projects and a greater reach and impact into rural industries.

### ***Mentoring as an approach to building capacity***

Mentoring was shown to be an important process in the *On the Fast Track* approach for: increasing confidence of participants; exposing more people (e.g. the mentors) to capacity building research; and supporting people to turn increased confidence into action.

Although mentoring may be viewed as one tool amongst many for increasing confidence in capacity building, we argue that characterising mentoring in this way diminishes its value. Certainly, without mentoring, this project would not have achieved the amount or extent of its impact. However, the more significant finding is that mentoring emerged as a vehicle for capacity building itself - for both mentee and mentor. That is, mentoring supported the development of the capacity-building practitioner and mentor alike.

Although the suitability and success of mentoring relationships varied widely in this project, it can be concluded that if mentoring processes are improved (as outlined in the report) and supported then mentoring provides the leverage for turning capacity-building knowledge into tangible outcomes for RD&E projects and ultimately rural industries.

### ***Building capacity in capacity building***

The *On the Fast Track* project met a need in this area for ongoing and meaningful connection to others with similar interests and needs. A community of practice (a group of people that share an interest in a way of doing things) is therefore developing and requires nurturing. A key feature of this community is that project funders, managers and deliverers share the need to develop themselves in this realm to improve outcomes from RD&E.

In many rural industries, the nurturing and development pathway for the field workers, managers and practitioners in the development and extension part of RD&E occurred via public sector investment in 'growing the profession'. With changes in public investment and greater privatisation, a sustainable professional development pathway has been lacking. *On the Fast Track* may offer an alternative for rural industries to build up lost confidence in the professional status of capacity building. Increasing people's ability to support themselves and others in adapting to the needs and issues of rural Australia requires development of the professional practice of capacity building, ongoing research to improve practice and ongoing support. Participants in this project report these three things as essential for increasing their effectiveness in contributing to the issues of rural industries.

Rural industries would benefit from investment in the mentoring of project managers and project practitioners involved in capacity building as part of their day-to-day practice.

### ***Where to from here?***

From this project, gaps have emerged in three main areas that would be of interest and concern to rural industries.

1. There is strong demand from practitioners for further professional development in capacity building, yet little more is known about the needs of the professional. A cross-industry needs analysis is suggested as a starting point to scope the development needs of the people expected to support adaptation and change in rural industries.
2. The right balance and timing of investment by rural industries in 'development' and 'delivery' is often difficult and yet there are limited tools or processes to help these decisions. For instance, the *On the Fast Track* approach was a key investment for the CVCB aimed at delivery of CVCB research outputs to target audiences. In order to 'deliver' however, required an investment in the development of resources and tools. Further, CVCB members would argue, in hindsight, that the investment in development and delivery needed to occur earlier in the R&D cycle. Tools or processes were not available for getting the balance and timing right of development and delivery. This has been substantiated by the CVCB evaluation findings (Hassall and Associates, 2008).
3. Building capacity in capacity building requires the right approach in the right situation. The *On the Fast Track* approach may be adequate (if adapted to fit the situation) to achieve greater capacity building outcomes for industries and to some extent address issues of market failure (e.g. CVCB research via *On the Fast Track* used widely in the private and public sectors to reduce hindrances from the privatisation of knowledge). However, this alone does not address future issues for capacity building such as how the professional adapts their practice to future challenges. It is these 'where-to-next?' questions that provide a focus for further collaborative investment.

To read the final report, access the *On the Fast Track* workbook, tools or CVCB research reports go to: <https://rirdc.infoservices.com.au/collections/cvcb>.

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