

Development of an innovative extension model for small landholders – an experiential learning journey

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Abstract. The Western Australia Small Landholder Information Service (SLIS) is an extension program that has grown out of a series of spatially focussed extension projects that sought behaviour change in areas given over to small landholdings. These projects highlighted that small landholders represented specific risks to agriculture and the environment. The small landholder has specific extension and information needs that differ from the needs of 'traditional' farmer clients engaged by agricultural extension programs. The Department of Agriculture and Food Western Australia recognised that there was a need to respond to the unique risks represented by small landholders and established an extension program to reduce the potential of these risks. The assumptions that underpinned the program in the planning phases were later confirmed by social, landuse planning and environmental impact research in a range of different locations (interstate and local). The SLIS employed a number of strategies to confirm assumptions and test efficacy of the extension campaign. The approach to continuously improve the extension model has been largely iterative and current social research investigating small landholders has been utilised. By necessity, the extension model has been reliant on the development and modification of a suite of tools and strategies for small landholder engagement and these are now being shared with national partners. The development of innovative partnerships for delivery has been integral to the program's success. The program has engaged more than 5,000 participants, many of whom had not previously sought support from the Department of Agriculture and Food. Most past participants in the program report that they have changed land management behaviours and moved to recommended land management practices. This paper describes the development of an innovative model for small landholders and explores the implications of this work in future program delivery. Key learnings:

1. A willingness to truly understand the client – the small landholder is different from mainstream farmers.
2. Where necessary, adapt and tailor an extension model(s) to suit the specific client group.
3. Be open to explore opportunities to synergistically deliver the extension package.
4. Have the courage to openly evaluate and then respond to resultant signals – back your judgement.

Introduction

In 2004, the Department of Agriculture and Food established the Small Landholder Information Service (SLIS) to provide an extension program targeting the burgeoning number of small rural lifestyle landholdings in Western Australia and the resultant challenges that they create. Prior to the SLIS program being implemented, any agricultural and environmental engagement with small landholders tended to be ad hoc and was incidental to other extension programs. The clear focus of the department was on the broadacre, commercial farmer.

In Western Australia, a small landholder is defined as the owner or manager of a rural property of between 1 and 100 ha in size. In the past decade, the number of small landholder properties in WA has increased by more than 20 per cent to over 55,000. These properties occupy around 650,000 ha of what was formerly agricultural land. Small landholdings are especially prevalent throughout the south west of the state and in the peri-urban ring around Perth, but also occur in coastal areas from Geraldton to Esperance.

Their characteristics typically include: their main income being derived off-farm, a range of highly varied agricultural activities (often on the same property) and strong 'lifestyle values'. Small landholders also tend to have a poor understanding of agricultural, environmental and biosecurity practices and lack the rural networks to build their capacity to manage these issues better. Associated with their expansion throughout traditional farming areas are elevated biosecurity (potential spread of pests, weeds and diseases) and natural resource management risks. Reinforcing department concerns about small landholders, Hollier (2006) also reported that small lifestyle landholders pose considerable biosecurity risk to Australian agriculture as well as create significant animal welfare concerns.

Recognising that typical departmental engagement with small landholder clients was ad hoc, incidental and inadequate to address the growing issue, the SLIS was established.

The extension task ahead

At the time of the establishment of the SLIS there was no clearly articulated extension model for small landholders and many of the initial assumptions that were made about how to engage with the small landholder needed to be based on anecdotal evidence. The department was responsible for delivery of the property planning component of the spatially-targeted “Swan Canning Cleanup Program” from 1999 to 2006, so this gave a useful (although limited) basis to test assumptions (Guise et al. 2005).

With a potential client group of over 50,000 with different characteristics, needs, capacities and extension requirements, a challenge lay in store. Additionally, minimal staff numbers and a tiny available budget (2.6 FTE and only \$10,000 operating) added to the challenge for the SLIS.

If the SLIS was going to effectively deliver a program whereby small landholders would pose reduced biosecurity and natural resource management risks, as well as contribute more positively to agricultural production, then nothing short of behavioural change would be acceptable. This became the core goal of the SLIS. Key desirable behaviour changes were planned for and program logic was used as a means to plan for the desired outcomes.

Developing the “Experiential Learning Model”

In the absence of definitive social research focussed on the small rural landholder sector, the SLIS team took the view that the desired approach was to combine the experiences of the team members, information collected through the Swan Canning project, and extensive “picking the brains” of whoever would discuss the issue with us, then document a series of assumptions about the characteristics of the client group. This allowed development of a behavioural change extension program to deliver the desired outcomes.

Importantly, a comprehensive evaluation strategy has been built into the program to allow for a process of continual review and improvement. Weiss (1998) refers to evaluation as *social research designed with specific use in mind*, so this gave some confidence that the planned approach was valid. Clements (2004) suggests that “evidence-based decision-making” is considered to consist of judgements informed by best available evidence, which may include research, organisational or political evidence. With virtually no funding to conduct social research, the SLIS experiential learning model has necessitated a boldness to back experiential judgements whilst constantly evaluating to increase the available evidence.

The most comprehensive Australian social research into the characteristics of the small landholder farmer group is that reported by Hollier et al. (2004, 2005, 2007) from Victoria. The authors describe the characteristics, values, attitudes and land ownership aspirations of small landholders as very different to mainstream commercial farmers. Diversity within the sector is the most striking characteristic of small landholders. Hollier et al. (2007) suggest that small landholders strongly value their rural lifestyle and have strong land stewardship ethics. Unfortunately, they often lack the skills, capacity, time and means to best manage their properties to achieve the desirable outcomes that they seek. The assumptions of the SLIS are consistent with these social research findings.

Kollmus and Agyeman (2002) argue that linear models of environmental education that simply provide information about issues and problems on the basis that people will change their attitudes and behaviour are profoundly inadequate. Unfortunately, there are many examples of so-called “extension” programs that use this approach. This is not a desired approach, especially for a client group with such diversity.

Coutts et al. (2005) define extension as the process of engaging with individuals, groups and communities so that people are more able to deal with issues affecting them and opportunities open to them. After an extensive review of agricultural extension in Australia, they then describe the five different extension models that are in practice: group facilitation/empowerment, programmed learning, technology development, information access and the additional individual consultant/mentor model. The authors noted that the different extension education models work well together as a suite of complementary capacity building avenues. They describe the “capacity building ladder” as a synergy of the five extension models. Arguably, the SLIS experiential learning model has incorporated elements of all five extension models either directly, or by positive referral. Interestingly, the SLIS model was developed in parallel with the Coutts et al. (2005) research so did not directly utilise the models, but still achieved a similar position – that a combined approach would be most effective – and importantly it is all about **people**.

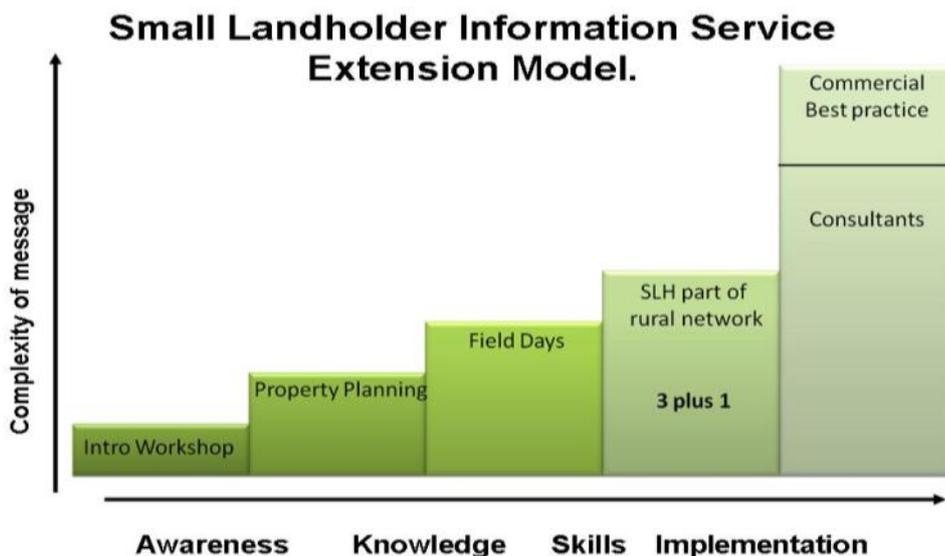
The experiential learning model in action

The SLIS employs a “Stages of Change Model” of behavioural change (Prochaska et al. 1992) that aims to attract small landholders to the program, raise their awareness of appropriate practices, build their capacity to respond and then stimulate adoption of those practices. An operating premise is that small landholders are generally unaware of their responsibilities as rural land managers and that they lack the skills, resources and networks to implement good land management practices.

The model is designed to provide a continuum of specially tailored information, advice, a comprehensive workshop and field day series based on a “tiered-learning” approach, plus local area demonstration properties to establish new norms. Additionally, support is provided in engaging partners across agri-industry, community and landcare groups to help build local area networks. SLIS has now refined the *3 plus 1* which is, in effect, when small landholders progress through the existing SLIS learning event series, then move on and are comfortable seeking advice from the rural and industry networks that they have now become a part of.

Figure 1 represents the SLIS extension model. The first three stages (Introductory workshops, property planning and topic-specific field days) engage the small landholder on the learning continuum, taking them through awareness, knowledge and skills development, and leading to implementation of new practices and behaviours. Information, advice and support materials are designed especially for the small landholder audience and are aligned to help the learning process. Clearly, traditional rural information and extension processes were not readily applicable to the small landholder audience because their needs, understanding and capacities were totally different from typical mainstream broadacre farmers. This “stepped” learning model has been adapted by our Victorian colleagues who refer to it as the “ladder of learning”.

Figure 1. Model of small landholder information service



Importantly, it is recognised that “best practice” for small landholder extension is not necessarily the same as for existing commercial farmers. Typically, the commercial farmer has studied in agriculture, has grown up in an agricultural environment and often employs a private consultant. As such, and because the small landholder is usually only seeking a supplementary income, the SLIS model aims to take the client through to step 4 (*3 plus 1*) and sees this as the valid “best practice” level for them to realistically achieve.

3 plus 1 is also about establishing new collective social norms through local area demonstrations on key properties. Both the workshop series and the demonstration sites utilise social learning theory (Bandura 1977) which depicts learners as more active participants in the learning process, who are influenced not just by intellectual facts and information, but also by social interaction. Many participants in the SLIS training relate that they are most excited about building their local area networks. This enables the demonstration of desired behaviours and practices to be modelled which are important parts of achieving social change.

Getting down to business

The SLIS has adapted the traditional tools of agricultural and environmental extension – the field days, technical information products to be attractive to the small landholder, tied to awareness raising campaigns that create a call to action – to engage participants further with the program and its networks. As there was no “ready-made” extension model for dealing with small landholders, the SLIS model was designed to cater for experiential learning – both for the participants and the program. The plan was to engage, deliver, test effectiveness, modify, improve and do it all again.

In parallel with setting up the enquiry line, specific website and determining typical information needs, it was crucial to roll out the workshop series beyond the initial Swan Canning area to enable the social learning aspect of the program to function. External funding was accessed to take the workshop series throughout the south west of WA by ensuring that the topics and delivery would be attractive to a range of potential funders. As the funders had different themes and were seeking different outcomes, it was important to demonstrate how a holistic series of workshops would be able to deliver multiple outcomes. The attractions of this approach are in the efficiency of sharing costs, ability to market the workshops as offering “that much more”, and for the time-poor small landholder – a bonus way to access a number of learning opportunities all at the same time and place.

SLIS principles

Whilst the development, basis and content of the SLIS experiential learning model have been discussed, it is also worth understanding the principles that underpin the SLIS as they not only shape the design, delivery and outcomes, but form the core values for the delivery team.

Understand the client

Apart from developing an initial understanding of the small landholder client sector as described earlier and reinforcing this with the findings from Hollier et al. (2006, 2007), the SLIS approach has been to never miss a chance to find out more and then use that information. Over 5,000 small landholders have participated in the 150 SLIS workshops held during the past five years. How did we achieve such a high attendance? Almost all of these events were held on weekends because that is when clients were available.

Employ marketing tools for engagement

“What’s in it for me” (WIIFM) is a well known marketing question that the SLIS employs frequently. Training activities and information products are targeted to appeal to the aspirations of the small landholder. If a program can help them to achieve the idyllic rural lifestyle without all of the property management challenges, then why wouldn’t it appeal? Likewise, in exploring potential partners and sponsors, the same question is asked to determine what the advantages are for them and thus, the best way to approach them. Products are given a certain appealing style so that clients can become familiar with the “SLIS look” and recognise it when further events are promoted. Promotional techniques such as targeted mail-outs, electronic promotion of flyers through regional partner advocates, and a negotiated regular spot in the Farm Weekly (a major WA rural newspaper) are some of the tools employed.

Make information appropriate

It was quickly realised that small landholders don’t generally understand the “language of agriculture”, so the existing information available to commercial farmers was not seen as applicable or it was too complex. All written information that is generated must pass the test of being relevant, simple, concise and interesting – and it should look good too! The innovative *Noteworthy* factsheet series has been especially developed by the SLIS in partnership with Kondinin Group (a national agricultural information, design and publishing company). Likewise, all presenters at the SLIS events are selected for their delivery ability and given specific directions on the type of information and message that is expected.

Build networks and relationships

This successful behaviour change program could not be delivered to such a broad audience as the WA small landholder sector without relying on networks. The SLIS has invested significant resources, time and energy on building relationship networks throughout the regions and with other programs. Crucially, enabling pathways for small landholders to become part of these existing networks is fundamental to their social learning.

The importance of absolute integrity in building these relationships can not be understated.

Flexibility is the key to innovation

Much of the success of the SLIS approach has been due to a willingness to be open to investigating new approaches to delivery and new ways to achieve desirable ends. When we needed to create a series of exciting information products we looked for a reputable private rural publishing partner keen to break into the small landholder market – the *Noteworthy* relationship with Kondinin Group resulted – and recently Landmark (a national rural industry company) have also joined forces so now we can distribute the factsheets far wider.

Plan and seek evaluation then be prepared to use it

Experiential learning must have a combination of evidence and judgement in how to use the gathered evidence to continuously improve. We recognise that the initial SLIS learning model was based on an “educated best guess”. However, we needed a clear, robust system of evaluation to allow us to answer a number of questions: Did it work? What could be done better? Are new behaviours being adopted? What difference are we making? What are the next issues/opportunities?

Every event that the SLIS delivers has a formal evaluation plan built in. The desired behavioural changes that the event is targeting are linked to the planned evaluation to determine effectiveness. One of the challenges of evaluation is time-scale, but that can be planned for too. For a comprehensive discussion of the SLIS evaluation methodology, see Gannaway et al. (2009 in press).

A word of warning – you must be prepared to act on the evaluation evidence that is gathered and interpreted for the experiential learning process to work. There may be a temptation not to ask the hard questions because you may not like the answer, but be bold because if you truly trust and follow the cycle then the results will continue to improve. Even a good thing can get better.

There are many examples of how the SLIS has used evaluation feedback to modify and improve. The example of tailored information such as the *Noteworthy* series was created during 2007/08, based on at least two years of feedback. The workshop series has been a continual evolution, with a particular emphasis now placed on accessing as many quality local presenters as possible. This delivers both the key learnings as well as the social networking element that is becoming increasingly important to participants.

3 plus 1

Apart from the tailor-made model, SLIS recognised that the extension and education program including information products and learning events can only get the small landholder so far down the pathway of implementation. Importantly, as SLIS resources were constrained, it was necessary to design a model that could engage service providers beyond SLIS to help with extension and to provide on-going capacity – this is the *3 plus 1*. SLIS has been working with traditional agricultural and environmental service providers to create a linkage from the activities facilitated by SLIS to those networks. This has involved educating rural service providers about how to engage with the small landholder as well as providing an introduction to these landholders as a way of developing networks. Many rural suppliers are now co-presenters at the various workshops and field days.

It was necessary for SLIS to delve into marketing concepts to help engage the rural service providers as well as the clients. Many service providers were conscious that small landholders were potential clients, but they were nervous that they were “high demand – low profit” (spend a lot of time asking questions then don’t buy much). They did not appreciate that the small landholder client could become a valuable customer and take up much less of the provider’s time if they were part of the SLIS program. However, they are well aware of the large number of potential new clients. A number of rural providers (led by Landmark) now are keen to engage with both the SLIS extension program and increasing numbers of small landholders. This demonstrates the value of *3 plus 1*.

How effective is the SLIS approach?

This question can be answered thanks to the comprehensive evaluation data that has been collected. The SLIS has had more than 5,000 participants through just over 150 workshops during the past five years. Annually 60-80 per cent of these participants are new to the program reflecting effectiveness of promotion and engagement. It is estimated that participants are responsible for managing at least 47,000 hectares of catchment, but this has been under-reported, as not all events gathered this data. Annually, the SLIS is engaging around 1,000 landholders through its workshop series as well as fielding upwards of 900 enquiries.

Those workshop participants who have been previously engaged with the program are asked at workshops to provide information on any new behaviours arising from their exposure to the program. In 2007/08, 35 per cent indicated they had some previous engagement with the program. Eighty per cent of these past participants described positive new behaviours; while more than 95 percent of all participants described new actions that they intended to implement following a workshop (i.e. 15 per cent hadn't quite got to the task yet). In a separate post workshop random survey of 10 per cent of participants in the 2007/08 program, 90 per cent described new behaviours that they could attribute to their engagement with the program.

Applicability in the broader practice of extension

The test of the SLIS approach has been its adaptability to the national level. In April 2008, a national forum of small landholder extension practitioners was held which culminated in the forming of a National Network for sharing of ideas, information, resources and methodologies. This group has been endorsed by the federal Primary Industries Standing Committee. The SLIS approach received wide interest and acclaim through national partners and there is much interest in applying similar approaches in various states. There is increasing interest in how the SLIS approach could be adapted to some "mainstream" agricultural extension projects as well.

The small landholder rural and peri-urban sector is a growing sector that will continue to provide challenges and opportunities for extension delivery. If future agricultural extension policy and practice does not adequately cater for this sector, the combined consequences of increased biosecurity risks, poor land management and the continued loss of productive agricultural land capacity could be dire in terms of cost, lost food production potential, and lost opportunities to help build resilient communities.

A positive alternative is to foster cross government and industry networks to provide complementary learning resources and pathways to improve the engagement of small landholders leading to the adoption of behaviours that respond to community natural resource management and food production expectations.

The SLIS experiential learning model and the value-adding *3 plus 1* extension to the program provides a suggested model that can be shared and adapted to facilitate these outcomes.

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