

## Stop, collaborate and listen: How a decrease in state-funded extension led to a thriving community of advisors in South Australia

Meg Bell

Coleraine Livestock Consulting, 789 Coleraine Edenhope Road, Konongwootong VIC 3315  
[meg@colerainelivestockconsulting.com.au](mailto:meg@colerainelivestockconsulting.com.au)

**Abstract.** As state funding for agricultural extension declined in South Australia (SA), livestock advisors throughout the state felt there was a gap. Craving collaboration, South Australian Livestock Consultants (SALC) was formed in 2011. Although the group meets twice-yearly to learn, discuss and collaborate, members felt the need for more technical content than could be provided at these sessions to meet their ongoing professional development needs. As a result, in 2017 SALC held the very first SA Livestock Advisor Update, aimed solely at advisors. The event has aimed to provide a forum for advisors to learn technical content, a place for networking, and an opportunity for collaboration. The Update has since been held annually, with the success of the event due to the ongoing backing of SALC and a range of co-funding industry partners. This support ensures that the SA Livestock Advisor Update will continue to provide benefit for advisors well into the future.

**Keywords:** Collaboration, livestock advisor, professional development, peer support

### Introduction

A decline in state government-funded extension services has occurred throughout Australia over the last 20-30 years, resulting in the emergence of small to medium independent livestock consultancy businesses throughout the country. These businesses are independent of product sales or livestock agency services and provide independent advice to livestock producers by interpreting research and development outcomes for implementation by farm businesses.

In 2010, a group of South Australian livestock consultants identified the need for a professional support network, and South Australian Livestock Consultants (SALC) was formed (Miller et al. 2021). In 2011, the first official meeting of SALC was held, with the group meeting twice-yearly on an ongoing basis. The aim of these meetings has been to enhance members' 'soft' and 'hard' skills, with meetings focussing on a variety of content based on members' needs.

By 2017, SALC had grown and matured as a group, resulting in a trusting, collaborative environment that fostered learning and professional development amongst members. However, the one-day, twice-yearly meetings that were occurring on an ongoing basis were no longer meeting the professional development needs of members, particularly in terms of continually acquiring and developing new technical knowledge. A decision was made to trial the SA Livestock Advisor Update (LAU); an event aimed at the wider livestock advisory sector. In this way, SALC could continue to build its networks whilst also aiding to grow the skills and capabilities of the livestock advisory sector. The LAU also allowed SALC to attract a wide range of guest speakers from across the country who could come together in a central place to impart new information that would benefit livestock advisors' clients and the livestock industry.

### Coordinator and committee

The success of each LAU is the result of a paid LAU Coordinator working closely with a small committee. The importance of having a paid coordinator in place cannot be understated. The coordinator ensures that tasks occur in a timely fashion and is the key contact point. This takes pressure off the volunteer committee and ensures that the LAU is executed professionally. The LAU Coordinator and the committee positions are filled by SALC members, meaning that their understanding of the style of the event and the content required is thorough. The committee is largely responsible for the direction and oversight of programming, venue selection, marketing, and sponsorship. The coordinator is responsible for the direction, oversight, and execution of all aspects of each LAU.

### Developing the program

The LAU program is developed with direction from the committee and is based on feedback from previous events and priority topics identified by SALC members. Each year, the committee and coordinator seek feedback from SALC members, and in addition to drawing on the feedback from previous events, formulate a short survey for SALC members to prioritise topics. The results from this survey are used to guide the formulation of the program for the LAU. The program prioritises new and emerging research, and/or new and emerging tools that are ready for implementation on farms. Research that is not yet released or complete is featured when it is deemed to be relevant to the target audience. The program is a balance of technical content (i.e. research

project results) and professional development (i.e. working on the business, rather than in the business), with a range of delivery types.

### **Format**

The format of the LAU has changed over the years in response to feedback, funding, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Feedback from past attendees informs the format of each event, with a preference for a one-day in-person event, followed or preceded by a networking dinner. The 2017 and 2018 events were plenary events, with all sessions delivered to the whole audience. The sessions were a mix of length, with shorter project update style sessions mixed with longer results or tools analysis style sessions. The 2019 event included plenary, concurrent, and exhibitor 'speed dating' sessions for the purpose of providing short, high-value product and service updates to attendees. Due to COVID-19, the 2020 event was held online and included plenary sessions and ended with a panel discussion. The 2021 event was held online and for the first time, over two days. The program also reintroduced the short 'speed dating' type sessions on day one, replicating the 2019 in-person event. Longer, more in-depth, and topic-focussed sessions were held on day two. In 2022, the event returned to in-person in a plenary style and with in-depth topics and content.

### **Funding**

Funding for the LAU has changed over the years as the funding landscape has changed. Recognising that there is a high level of private benefit for advisors in attending updates, attendees have always paid to attend updates. This contribution generally covers the venue and catering component and a portion of the speaker costs. Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA) and Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) have been stalwart supporters of the LAU from the start, sponsoring the events to varying degrees with both cash and in-kind contributions. The 2019-2021 LAUs were jointly sponsored by MLA and AWI with no contributions in these years from other sponsors. In other years, funding was sought from a variety of different sources, which allowed for a wider variety of organisations to contribute smaller amounts of funding. The feedback from sponsors for this type of sponsorship has been favourable, as it means that the burden of sponsorship is not placed on one or two sources only but is spread across the industry. Increasingly, sponsors have seen a direct benefit from supporting the LAU to gain exposure and achieve their own internal targets of supporting the livestock advisory sector.

### **Monitoring and evaluating the LAU**

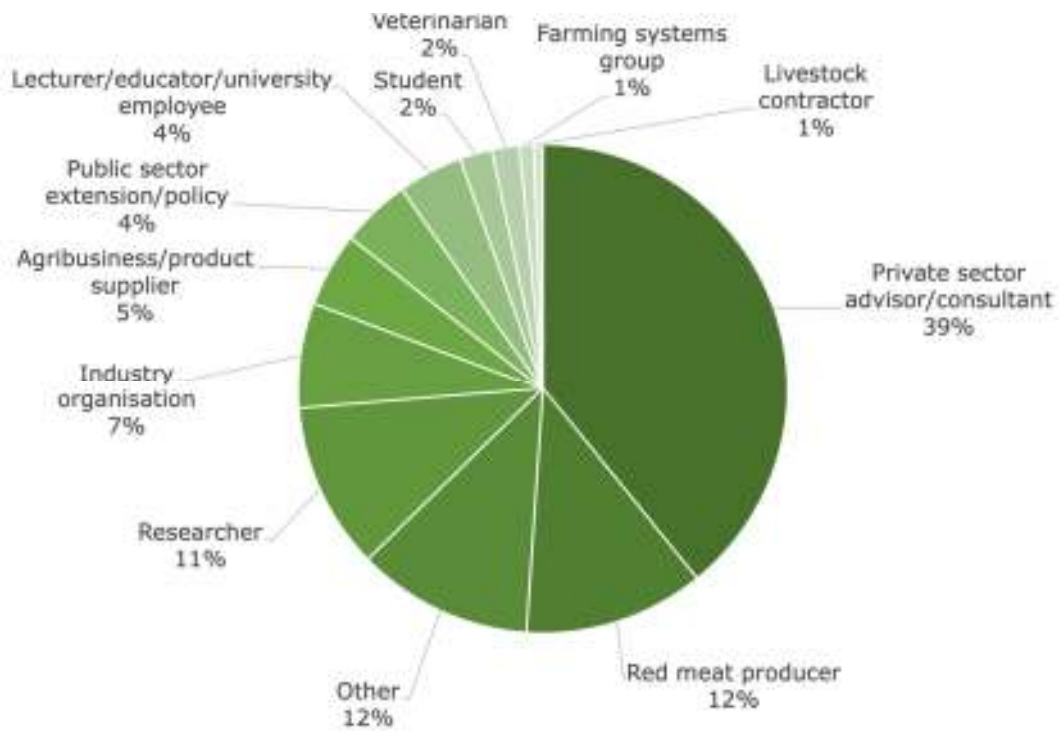
Monitoring and evaluation have been undertaken at each LAU to understand the value of the event to the sector. Several metrics have been tracked for each event and others have been tracked in specific years for a specific requirement from a sponsor. In addition, qualitative feedback has been collected consistently across each LAU.

The variation in industry role of attendees across the 6 LAUs is demonstrated in Figure 2. The largest proportion of attendees at 39% classified their role as a private sector advisor/consultant, indicating that the LAU is delivering satisfactory content to this sector. The next three largest proportion of attendees classified their roles as meat producers, researchers, and other non-specified industry roles, making up 35% of attendees. The remaining 26% of attendees were made of a range of industry roles as indicated in Figure 2. The LAU has strongly encouraged and attracted the participation of SA's animal, veterinary, and agricultural science students studying at the University of Adelaide; 2% of the attendees at LAUs classified their role as students.

Figure 3 shows the trends in average participant ratings of satisfaction and value at each event, the rating of content presented at each event, and the presentation of that content. The satisfaction and value rating for the LAU consistently sits at a high level, averaging 83% across the seven LAUs. The variation between the overall satisfaction/value rating and the speaker content and presentation rating likely comes from the appeal of different speakers to different attendees based on their backgrounds, interests, and the information they are seeking at the LAU.

Figure 3 also shows the number of registrations at each LAU. The 2017 and 2018 numbers reflect the novel nature of the LAU, with lower numbers than in future years. The 2019 numbers reflect the decision to incorporate concurrent sessions into the event and utilise a larger venue, as well as widen the attendee target market to include red meat producers. The 2020 and 2021 LAUs were held online, reducing barriers to attendance such as distance from the event and time commitment to travel, resulting in higher attendance numbers than in previous years. Returning to an in-person event in 2022, the registration numbers indicate the reputation that the LAU has built over the years, and the enthusiasm in the advisory sector to meet in person after two years of online events due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent travel and gathering restrictions.

**Figure 2. Role of respondents (2017-2022) in the livestock industry**

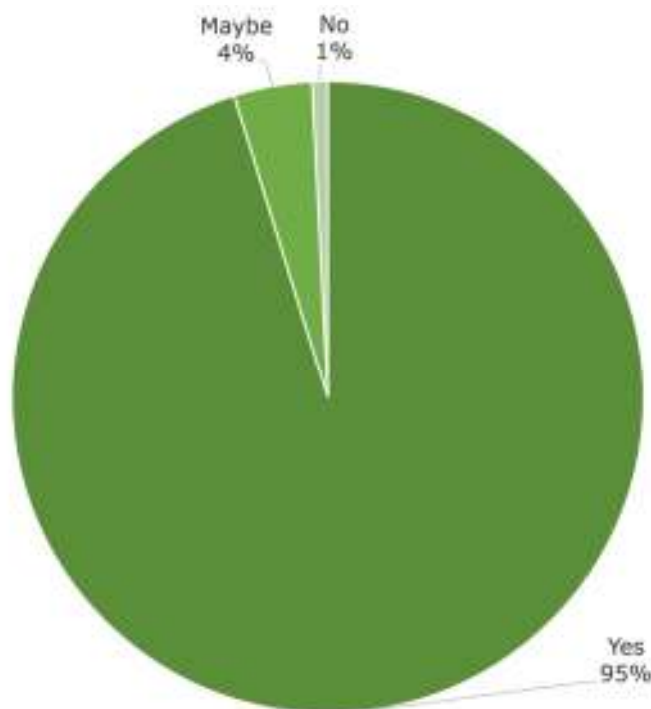


**Figure 3. Average satisfaction, speaker content, and speaker presentation ratings of the SA LAU from 2017-2022**



As shown in Figure 4, LAU respondents overwhelmingly indicated that they would attend another event in future. This feedback has given SALC the confidence to continue delivering the LAU. Comments accompanying the feedback have consistently indicated that attendees valued the networking opportunities and the content.

**Figure 4. Percentage of respondents who indicated they would attend another LAU (2017-2022)**



Qualitative feedback has been encouraged and provided by participants at each LAU. Examples of the feedback received includes:

A high-quality event that was worth attending.

Amazing range of topics-something for everyone. All very practical presentations, best update I have attended. Love to see MLA and AWI and collaboration across private, government and corporate sectors.

Well done SALC on holding such a great informative event.

Networking was one of the major benefits of the update.

Positive feedback, along with constructive criticism from attendees, shapes the format that LAUs take in future years. This is reflected in the changing programs from year-to-year that attempt to ensure the LAU meets the needs of most attendees.

### Summary

The SA LAU has become a successful event, and a mainstay on the South Australian livestock sector's calendar since 2017. The support of SALC has ensured that the LAU is able to be held and delivered consistently to a high standard, with the reputation and quality of the LAU increasing year-on-year. The paid LAU Coordinator and the volunteer committee ensure that each LAU is executed and delivered to a professional standard. Value is provided to attendees through peer-designed programming and opportunities for networking, creating an atmosphere of collaboration and camaraderie. Though the format and method of funding of the LAUs have varied over the years, consistently high satisfaction and value ratings, along with registration numbers, indicate that the SA LAU is a valued event that is highly supported by the SA livestock industry.

### Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge SALC, and in particular, SALC members Sean Miller and Bruce Hancock for their support, editing skills, and encouragement to produce this paper.

### Reference List

Miller SM, Prance T & Hancock, BL 2021, 'South Australian Livestock Consultants (SALC) successfully supports independent, commercially-focused service providers as state-funded agricultural extension services transition to 'user pays' models', *Animal Production in Australia*, vol. 33, p ciii.