

Fostering early-career professional growth: Lessons from project delivery in the New South Wales flower industry

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Introduction

Early-career graduates bring enthusiasm, fresh perspectives and a willingness to learn to extension projects. These projects not only provide opportunities to deliver valuable outcomes for industry but also offer an important platform for developing professional skills and gaining experience in project delivery under the guidance of more experienced colleagues and mentors.

This paper explores the experiences of two graduates involved in the delivery of an extension project in the New South Wales (NSW) flower industry. Rather than focusing on extension outputs and industry outcomes, it explores key reflections and learning from the project implementation. The paper also considers the implications for both early-career extension professionals and organisations, providing an example of how to support capability development and professional growth among junior staff.

Industry context

Whilst Australia is a net importer of flowers, domestic flower production occurs across multiple regions, with a mix of small-scale boutique growers and larger commercial operations contributing to the market. In NSW, production is concentrated in major river basins, with high densities of growers around Sydney and the North Coast.

The industry is characterised by a broad diversity of flower types and production approaches. Production systems range from low-input, small-scale operations to high-intensity, controlled-environment systems such as polyhouses. Many farms combine elements of both systems to suit the types of flowers grown and the resources available. Most commercially produced flowers pass through the Sydney Flower Market in Flemington, which serves as the central hub for distribution. Smaller-scale and micro-growers in regional areas often supply local florists or sell directly to customers.

Unlike other horticultural sectors, the flower industry does not benefit from a dedicated levy, resulting in limited funding for research, development and extension (RD&E). As a consequence, industry support has been fragmented and ad hoc, with very little RD&E specifically tailored towards Australian flower production, restricting growers' access to the knowledge and support needed to advance the industry.

Project background

In 2021, severe storms and widespread flooding across the Sydney Basin and Mid North Coast led to uncontrolled leakage of plastics and chemicals into waterways. A portion of this pollution was linked to the flower industry, highlighting vulnerabilities in waste and chemical management and flood preparedness.

In response, industry representatives approached the NSW Government, recognising a need for greater support to help growers adopt more sustainable and environmentally responsible practices. RM Consulting Group (RMCG) was engaged by AgriFutures Australia to deliver two projects for the NSW cut flower industry focusing on:

- Reducing the use of single-use and other plastic materials in the flower industry.
- Minimising the risk of harmful chemical exposure and pest and diseases in the production of flowers with a focus on Integrated Pest and Disease Management (IPDM).

The objectives of the projects were to improve the sustainability of the cut flower industry by identifying and addressing options for reducing on-farm consumption of single-use plastics, minimising chemical use, and pest and disease risk and developing extension material to support industry-wide practice change.

Extension delivery

The extension component represented the fourth and final stage of this project, its delivery aligned with the commencement of two graduate consultants at RMCG. The graduates were brought into the project to support the coordination and delivery of extension activities, gaining experience in resource development, event delivery and industry communication.

Consultation with industry stakeholders, combined with a comprehensive desktop review, informed the identification of project priorities and guided the design of the extension package which focused on:

- Delivery of events and workshops
- Collaboration with the floristry industry
- Production of high-quality video and podcast content
- Development of resources such as factsheets, case studies and webinars.

An overview of the key outputs, summarised in Table 1, illustrates the scope and impact of the project. Ensuring a lasting legacy was a central consideration in designing the extension program. Recognising the diverse learning preferences of growers and stakeholders, the project employed multiple engagement methods and developed a suite of high-quality, accessible resources.

Table 1. Key extension outputs delivered for the New South Wales flower industry

Format	Quantity	Description
Factsheets	22	Covering chemicals, plastics, and pest and disease management
Webinars	6	One IPDM webinar, a three-part series on on-farm plastic use, and access to two existing Protected Cropping Australia webinars
Workshops / training events	8	Five regional IPDM workshops, one ChemCert training, one biological control workshop, one floristry event delivered with NSW TAFE and the Flower Growers Group of NSW
Online course	1	Sustainability Fundamentals for Flower Farmers course, including two modules on plastics and IPDM
Video modules	4	Four-part series on pest and disease monitoring
Podcast episodes	3	Three-part series on common diseases

Internal team structure

The extension delivery was coordinated by a core team of four internal RMCG staff, including two graduates, with additional expertise engaged as needed. Each graduate was assigned a clear scope of responsibility: one focused on project management and plastic-related extension activities, while the other led work on IPDM. The team held fortnightly meetings to ensure awareness across different activities and to keep track of progress. Graduates also stayed in close contact with the senior staff leading their component, who provided advice, guidance and feedback as they navigated their responsibilities.

This team structure supported both effective project delivery and staff development. Graduates took responsibility for key components of the project while working closely with senior staff, building their skills and confidence. Involving junior staff also enabled day-to-day administrative and operational tasks to be managed efficiently, with senior staff providing ongoing strategic direction.

Industry partnerships

To support effective extension delivery, RMCG engaged a range of organisations and technical experts, with a strong emphasis on collaboration. This approach fostered trust and strengthened relationships among stakeholders, ensuring that project activities were informed by diverse perspectives and aligned with industry needs.

Engagement with key industry associations provided critical insights into sector priorities and enabled direct communication with growers and producers. These included the Flower Growers Group of NSW (FGGSNSW), Protected Cropping Australia (PCA), and WildFlowers Australia (WFA). Specialist technical expertise was engaged to support specific project activities, particularly in integrated pest and disease management, and chemical use. In addition, industry-specific sustainability and education expertise was sought through partnership with the Sustainable Floristry Network, who supported the development of educational video content for the project.

Graduate reflections and key learnings

This section outlines key learnings gained by graduate team members throughout the project and reflects on how these experiences contributed to their professional development. It explores three core areas of learning:

1. Project management and professional responsibility
2. Collaboration and relationship management
3. Industry engagement and communication.

Practical examples from project delivery are used to share insights and lessons learnt.

Project management and professional responsibility

Upskilling in project management

Participation in the project provided graduates with valuable opportunities to develop practical project management skills and professional accountability. Through involvement in contract management, budgeting and project reporting graduates gained firsthand experience in coordinating complex activities and meeting organisational and funding requirements. Further insights were gained through participation in monthly meetings with delivery partners and quarterly Project Reference Group meetings.

In particular, managing and tracking a substantial project budget was a key responsibility assigned to one graduate. This role enabled the development of familiarity with internal financial systems and strengthened understanding of broader financial considerations, including the relationship between budgeting, risk management and activity delivery. A key learning outcome was the recognition that budgets play a central role in guiding decision-making and mitigating risk, highlighting the importance of accurate financial management and forward planning in future project work.

Developing autonomy and ownership

Responsibility provides a sense of purpose and motivation for graduates. Often, early-career staff are excluded from strategic discussions and confined to menial tasks, such as note-taking or minor logistical support. In this project, graduates were given ownership of substantive project components, including the delivery of a three-part plastics webinar series and coordination of five regional IPDM workshops.

This level of autonomy was enabled through a shared process of trust-building across the project team. Graduates were progressively afforded greater responsibility as they demonstrated competence in their roles. This approach was further supported by a strong commitment from the investor around supporting personal and professional development, reinforcing a culture of learning and inclusion.

Importantly, increasing autonomy was balanced with supportive oversight, enabling graduates to take on responsibility without undue overwhelm. For example, over the course of the project, one graduate incrementally took on responsibility for managing milestone reporting from sub contractual partners, including tracking progress, ensuring timely provision of reports, and communicating outcomes to the broader project team. Experiences like this helped graduates develop professional confidence and fostered a strong sense of ownership over overall project outcomes.

Monitoring and evaluation

During the initial stages of the project, a program logic framework was established as part of the project plan. Although this framework was developed prior to the involvement of the graduate team members, it provided a strong foundation for understanding the principles of monitoring and evaluation, as well as insight into how project activities and outputs were interconnected with intended outcomes.

A key learning was the importance of establishing robust monitoring and evaluation systems early in the project lifecycle and considering these systems when designing and delivering activities. For example, feedback was sought from growers who attended IPDM workshops using a feedback form; however, on reflection, it would have been useful to adopt a structured evaluation framework to guide data collection (e.g. the KASA framework). In addition, developing clearer methods to measure and track participant engagement and program reach would have strengthened the evaluation process.

Collaboration and relationship management

Working with experts

Working alongside industry experts and researchers provided graduates with opportunities to observe and learn from individuals' expertise and experience, capturing key insights and practical "nuggets of wisdom."

A critical skill developed was managing these relationships to achieve the intended project outcomes. For example, when producing video modules and podcast materials, it was evident that the role, as an extension professional, is to help guide experts to ensure content is accessible, engaging, and relevant to growers. One key learning was to keep it simple: asking fewer, broader questions allows experts to lead the conversation, with clarifying questions used as needed.

Engaging with industry partners

Engagement with industry associations was a central aspect of the project. The approach to these relationships was individualistic, dependent on the organisation, with transparent communication and flexibility as key principles. The aim was to ensure that associations were supported to deliver desired activities, providing value to their grower networks in alignment with the project.

Importantly, there was a significant effort in the early stages of the project to gain the trust and buy-in of the industry associations. As a result, a guiding principle for interactions with the organisations was to build and maintain trust to ensure a continued productive working relationship and industry ownership of project outputs. Successful relationships with the associations were essential to gaining an 'in' with the industry and provided an introduction to industry leaders, facilitating many of the on-farm activities.

In this instance, two of the associations operated largely on a voluntary basis and faced resource constraints, so offering practical support and being flexible were critical to maintaining productive and positive relationships. A key learning was the need to be accommodating, open and responsive when working collaboratively. For example, associations were leveraged to promote project activities and outputs through social media and member communication channels. Graduates developed communication packs, including social media tiles and suggested messaging, to make it easier for associations to share content effectively.

Industry engagement and communication

Engaging with growers

A number of growers generously contributed their time and resources throughout the project, providing access to their farms for the delivery of IPDM workshops and assisting with content development, such as video recordings. This direct engagement was instrumental in ensuring that in-person extension activities were practical, relevant and grounded in real-world farm practices.

Upon reflection, the project may have relied too heavily on a small group of key growers, highlighting the need to avoid overburdening participants. While these individuals became comfortable and willing contributors as rapport developed, a degree of reluctance emerged toward the project's conclusion. This experience emphasised the importance of reciprocity within working relationships, respecting growers' time and capacity, and engaging a diverse range of participants. Moving forward, careful management of reliance on individual growers and actively minimising undue burden will be essential considerations in any future extension work.

Leveraging digital skills

Throughout the project, graduates developed and enhanced skills in a range of digital tools and delivery platforms. They used platforms such as Canva, MailChimp and Zoom to create professional communication materials, manage participant engagement and deliver content virtually. They also undertook practical tasks such as generating QR codes, editing webinar recordings, and producing visually engaging resources (e.g. flyers, promotional materials, presentations).

A key insight from this experience was how familiarity with digital technologies enabled graduates to apply these skills confidently. Their comfort as digital natives allowed them to experiment with new tools, troubleshoot issues independently and complete tasks efficiently. Beyond technical proficiency, this experience highlighted the broader value of digital literacy in extension practice. Conversely, it also reinforced the importance of considering the needs and preferences of the audience and stakeholders to ensure that digital tools enhance accessibility and engagement rather than creating barriers, an essential consideration for effective extension delivery.

Bringing strategy to communication approaches

To communicate with industry about project resources and activities, a range of methods was employed, including engagement with industry associations, social media marketing, and the distribution of physical flyers at the Sydney Flower Markets. Using multiple channels helped ensure that information reached a diverse audience and accommodated different preferences for receiving project updates.

A key lesson from this experience was the importance of early and proactive communication. In some cases, information about upcoming events or workshops could have been shared earlier with growers. While the flexibility to adapt plans had some advantages, having a comprehensive events calendar with set dates from the outset may have increased levels of engagement. Additionally, being more strategic in planning events and the timelines for delivery was another key learning. For future projects, conducting a desktop scan of industry and regional events at the beginning is recommended. This can help avoid conflicts with other initiatives and identify opportunities to leverage existing events and networks, maximising both reach and impact.

Conclusion and implications for extension practice

This case study highlights how structured involvement in extension delivery can provide meaningful professional development opportunities for early-career practitioners while strengthening organisational capacity. The real-world lessons and successes of the project enhanced graduates' understanding of their professional roles and the broader impact of their work. At the same time, RMCG benefited from the enthusiasm and contributions of two graduates, who played a key role in driving project delivery while developing their capabilities as extension professionals.

Collectively, these experiences contributed to increased professional confidence, strengthened reflective practice and fostered a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of extension work. From an organisational perspective, investing in graduate development within substantial projects represents a long-term strategy for building a skilled and adaptable extension workforce.

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