



Webinar - 25 years of social science for agricultural innovation

KEY THEME: Working together for
change: Agricultural extension
capacity and capability

November 25, 2025

25-YEARS
RURAL INNOVATION
RESEARCH GROUP
Working together for change

Your MC - Vivienne McCollom



A recognised AgInnovator and advocate for rural and regional Australia, with more than 35 years of experience driving technology adoption, sustainability, and leadership across the agrifood sector.

Viv has a long association with the Rural Innovation Research Group, contributing to the national initiative *'Stimulating Private Sector Extension in Australian Agriculture to Increase Returns from R&D'*. This experience deepened her passion for connecting research excellence with practical, commercial, and community outcomes—a theme that continues to underpin her work across Australia's agricultural innovation system.

25-YEAR JOURNEY OF THE RURAL INNOVATION RESEARCH GROUP



Working together for change

We **FOCUS** on research questions
CO-DEVELOPED with rural industries
and communities

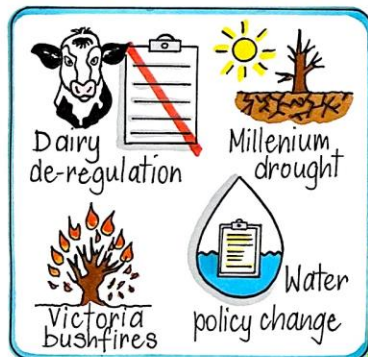
OUR
150 PUBLICATIONS
250 PRESENTATIONS
100 PROJECTS
\$25M
Review & Editor

2016 - 2020

We **GENERATE** new knowledge on
effective actions for **MANAGING**
CHANGE through research
development and practice

**TRANSITIONS in FARMING
SYSTEMS & RURAL COMMUNITIES**

2000 - 2010



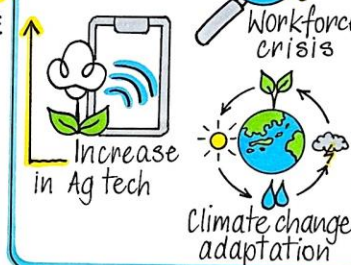
OUR TEACHING
MULTI-DISCIPLINARY
SYSTEMS thinking
12 PhDs
50 Masters projects
12 Subjects

OUR AWARDS
ENGAGED
research

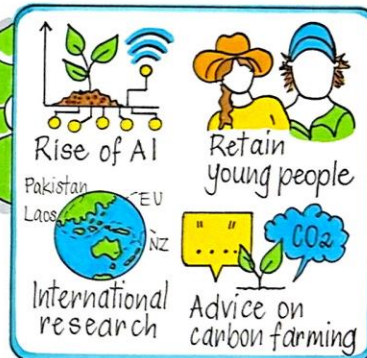
2011 - 2015



KNOWLEDGE & INNOVATION SYSTEMS



2021 - 2025



**AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION
& CHANGE MANAGEMENT**

OUR SOCIAL RESEARCH
Builds SOCIAL CAPITAL
PARTICIPATORY processes
20 Researchers
50 new products & services

**WORK & CHANGE in
AGRI-FOOD**



OUR IMPACT

LEADERSHIP
Research ADOPTED
Industry ACKNOWLEDGEMENT
STRATEGIC contribution

INDIGENOUS LAND & SEA MANAGEMENT

Industry development
Program/policy design

@ The University of Melbourne

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Key theme: Working together for change: Agricultural extension capacity and capability

Focus 1: Extension roles, crisis & resilience in agriculture

Focus 2: Extension capacity and capability as a workforce issue

Focus 3: Advisory services as a capacity in innovation systems

Focus 4: The importance of formal extension education

**Special guest: Prof Laurens Klerkx
International perspectives**

Finish with RIRG snapshots



Focus 1: The changing context: extension roles, crisis and resilience

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Speakers



Jess Bell

NSW Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development
(FDF Farm Business Resilience program)



Nicole Reichelt

Rural Innovation Research Group

Supporting farmers and communities in natural disasters

- **Changing context:** becoming a norm to provide services and support in natural disaster contexts with more workdays dedicated to this area
- **Extension role:** across all phases - preparation, response and recovery, as well as resilience building



Image source: <https://www.qra.qld.gov.au/news-case-studies/case-studies/planning-purpose-grows-disaster-resilience-agriculture-sector>

STORM AND FLOOD INDUSTRY RECOVERY PROGRAM (SFIRP) - \$80M

Significant knowledge gap in:

Australian dairy industry service provider involvement in natural disaster response and recovery efforts

Understanding challenges for achieving service excellence more broadly

Research question:

What are the barriers and challenges to dairy service provision in NSW, and what actions or solutions can be taken by the NSW dairy industry?



1 Better response and short-term recovery in dairy

- a Industry leadership and industry response
- b Farmer emergency response



2 Better preparedness, lower risk and higher resilience in dairy

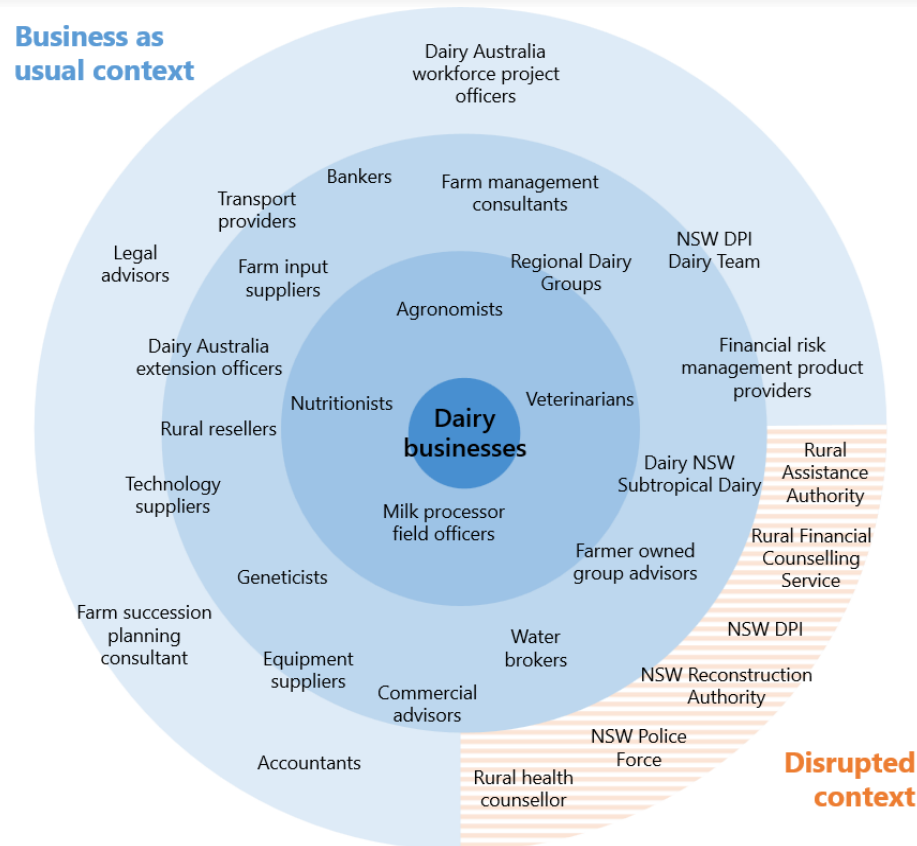
- a Natural disaster vulnerability and risk assessment
- b Risk factors and mitigation strategies
- c Infrastructure, utilities and housing
- d Animal and feedbase resilience



3 Supporting industry development in dairy

- a Leadership development
- b Workforce attraction and retention
- c New entrant support and succession planning
- d Supporting excellence in service provision
- e Supporting farm business feeding system decision making
- f Promote the ongoing value of the dairy industry

Who did we focus on in our research?



Interviewee profiles:

- n=22 service providers
- slightly more men, then women
- highly educated
- late career/highly experienced
- unique career histories

Figure 1. Service providers for dairy businesses in NSW.

Finding 1: dairy service providers are actors in a complex social system of natural disaster support

LAYER 1: FORMAL ROLE

Example: public providing contracting private providers to roll-out recovery programs

LAYER 2: EMERGENT ROLE

Example: public service role emerges from natural disaster situation independent of a program

LAYER 3: INFORMAL ROLE

Example: informal involvement of private providers who support dairy farmers beyond their standard service

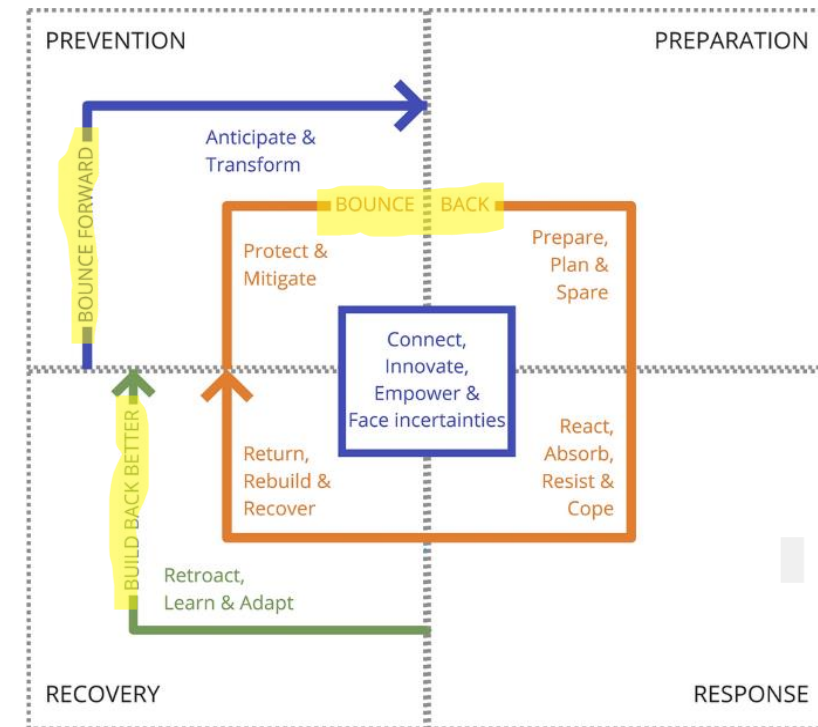


Finding 2: Service providers support different types of resilience on dairy farms

Supporting different aspects of farm resilience:

- **Human** - understanding farmer capability and capacity to respond and recover
- **Financial** - establish a robust financial foundation for the dairy business, ensuring it is strongly performing before any natural disaster occurs.
- **Biophysical** - animal improvements to adapt to new environmental conditions
- **Farm system** - encourage dairy farmers to undertake a risk register or checklist to consider risks across people, environment, animals, feed base
- **Ongoing change management** - helping dairy farmers recover to a different point and constantly managing change as a norm

Supporting different forms of disaster resilience



Disaster resilience - (Graveline & Germain, 2022, p. 336)

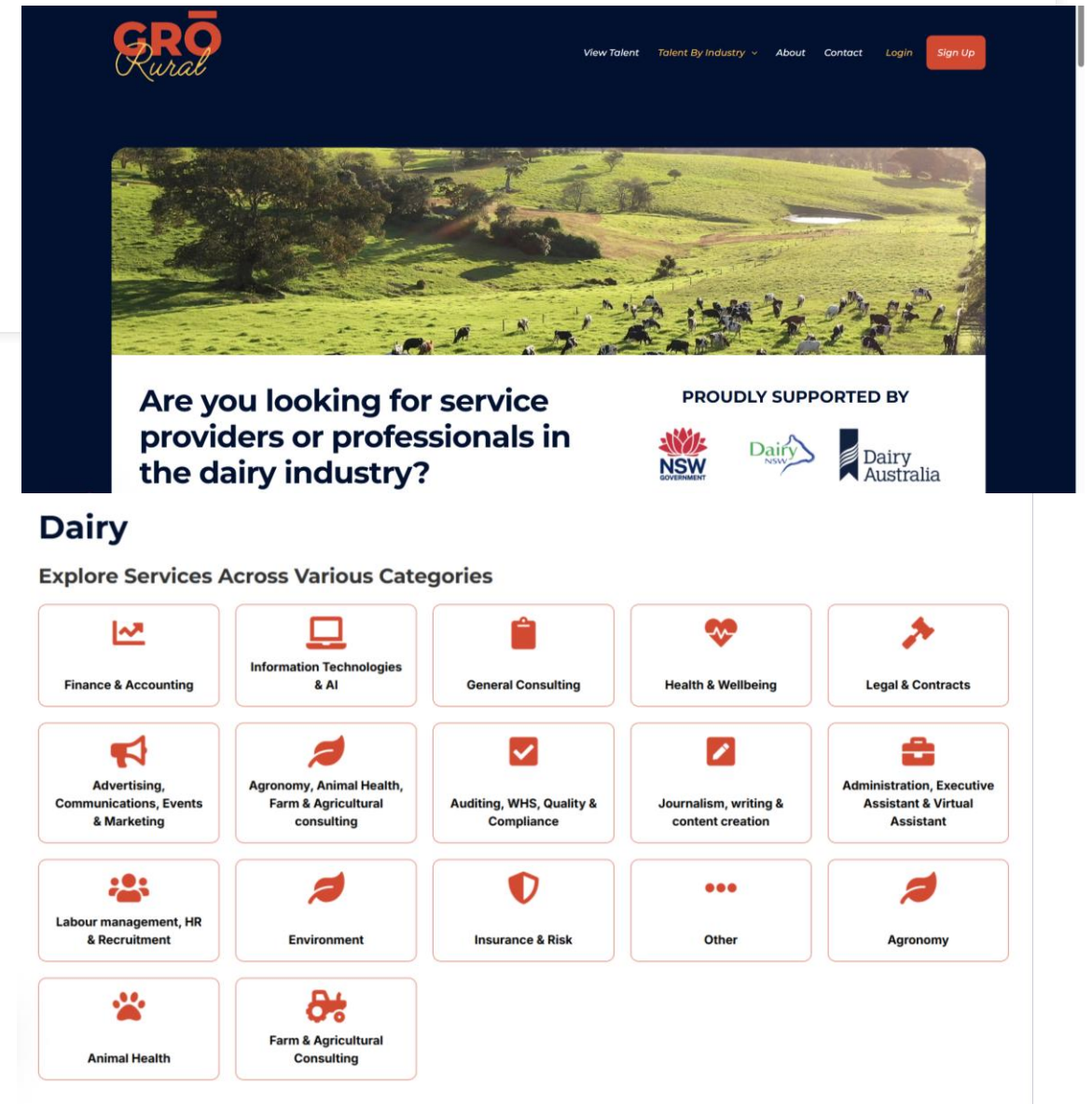
Recommendations and action taken

Better networking and access to dairy service providers:

Develop an accessible and current register of NSW dairy service providers - to overcome both system and market failures. (Dairy Industry Service Provider Registry Launched on June 2024)

Need for a trauma informed dairy service:

Review/develop training for dairy service providers involved in ND response/recovery to include knowledge/skills in providing a trauma informed service.



The screenshot displays the GROR Rural website's Dairy Industry Service Provider Registry. The header features the GROR Rural logo and navigation links: View Talent, Talent By Industry, About, Contact, Login, and a Sign Up button. A large image of a green field with cows is shown. Below the image, the text asks, "Are you looking for service providers or professionals in the dairy industry?" and states "PROUDLY SUPPORTED BY" with logos for NSW Government, Dairy NSW, and Dairy Australia. The main section is titled "Dairy" and "Explore Services Across Various Categories". It lists 15 service categories in a grid:

- Finance & Accounting
- Information Technologies & AI
- General Consulting
- Health & Wellbeing
- Legal & Contracts
- Advertising, Communications, Events & Marketing
- Agronomy, Animal Health, Farm & Agricultural consulting
- Auditing, WHS, Quality & Compliance
- Journalism, writing & content creation
- Administration, Executive Assistant & Virtual Assistant
- Labour management, HR & Recruitment
- Environment
- Insurance & Risk
- Other
- Agronomy
- Animal Health
- Farm & Agricultural Consulting

Dairy Industry Service Provider Registry -
<https://grorural.com.au/dairy/>



Resources

- Nettle, R., Waters, W., Kenny, S., & Love, S. (2012). Crisis as an opportunity for change?: A case study of applying resilience thinking to extension responses in dairy industry crisis. *Extension Farming Systems Journal*, 8(1), 21-31.
- Reichelt, N., Nettle, R. and Height, K. (2024) Supporting excellence in service provision – Project 3d. Final Report. Research report prepared for the NSW Department of Primary Industries dairy team, Rural Innovation Research Group, University of Melbourne. (email reichelt@unimelb.edu.au for a report copy)



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Focus 2: Extension capacity and capability as a workforce development issue

Following the advisers: insights into processes of extension capacity and capability building in the vegetable sector.

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Speakers



Olive Hood

Hort Innovation Australia



Elizabeth Koech

PhD candidate, Rural Innovation Research Group

Supervisors: Dr Michael Santhanam-Martin and Prof Ruth Nettle

PhD Project VG21002

**Demonstrating the benefits of building capability in
extension delivery in the Australian vegetable industry**

The case of advisors working in a multi actor project - VegNET

**Horticulture
Innovation**

Process owner



AUSVEG

Contract holder



**10 delivery partners : RDO
employing organizations**



10 RDOs

RMCG

Supporting RDO's to collect,
report and analyze regional
data



**Professional development
initiatives for RDOs and NC**



PhD research

(VG21002)

Demonstrating the benefits of
building capacity and capability of
extension in Australia's vegetable
Industry

VegNET – Implementation of National vegetable extension strategy in 10 regions across Australia



Challenges in extension capacity and capability the agriculture sector (Enablers of Change 2024)

- Erosion of workforce numbers and poor retention
- A dual crisis of attracting and retaining quality extension agents
- Inadequate PD development and career pathway development support
- Fragmentation of extension models

VegNET's PD investment strategy

Provides support to extension staff through investments in:

- Annual professional development plans
- Annual recurring budget for training
- Opportunities for networking through attendance of conferences
- Opportunities for mentoring

PhD Research questions

1. To what extent does **professional development lead to increase in agricultural extensionists' capability** in implementing the Agricultural Innovation Systems approach to agricultural extension?
2. How do **different modes and types** of professional development contribute to agricultural extensionists' capability?
3. How do **governance and institutional arrangements** enable or hinder capability building, and implementation of an innovation systems approach to extension?
4. What are the **implications** of this research for capability building in **national extension programs**?

Data collection summary

Research participants	Round 1 - 2023	Round 2 - 2024
Case study RDOs	4 field visits	4 field visits
All RDOs	9 reflective interviews	8 reflective interviews
All RDOs	18 surveys	16 surveys
VegNET project management and delivery partners	Key informant interviews with (3) VegNET project managers (5) delivery partners	(1) KII with delivery partner

RDOs' in action: Soil OM trial



Zucchini trials



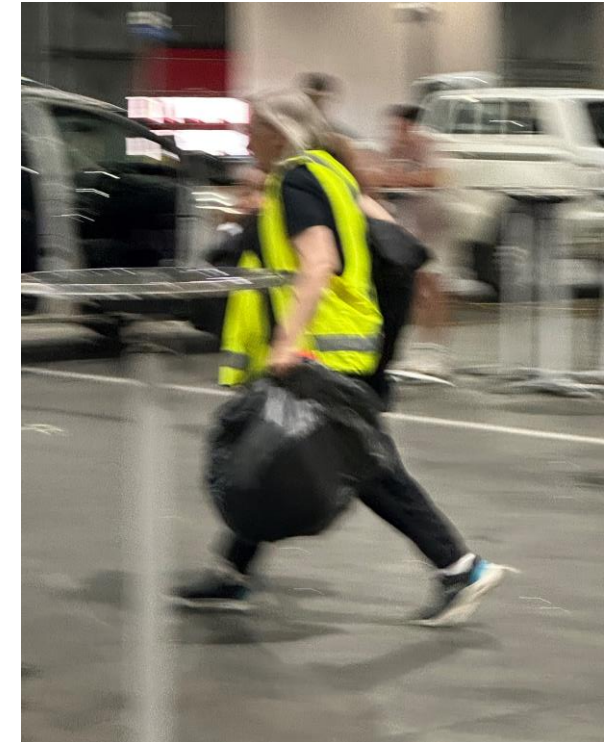
Biominerall fertilizer trial



NSW Innovation day



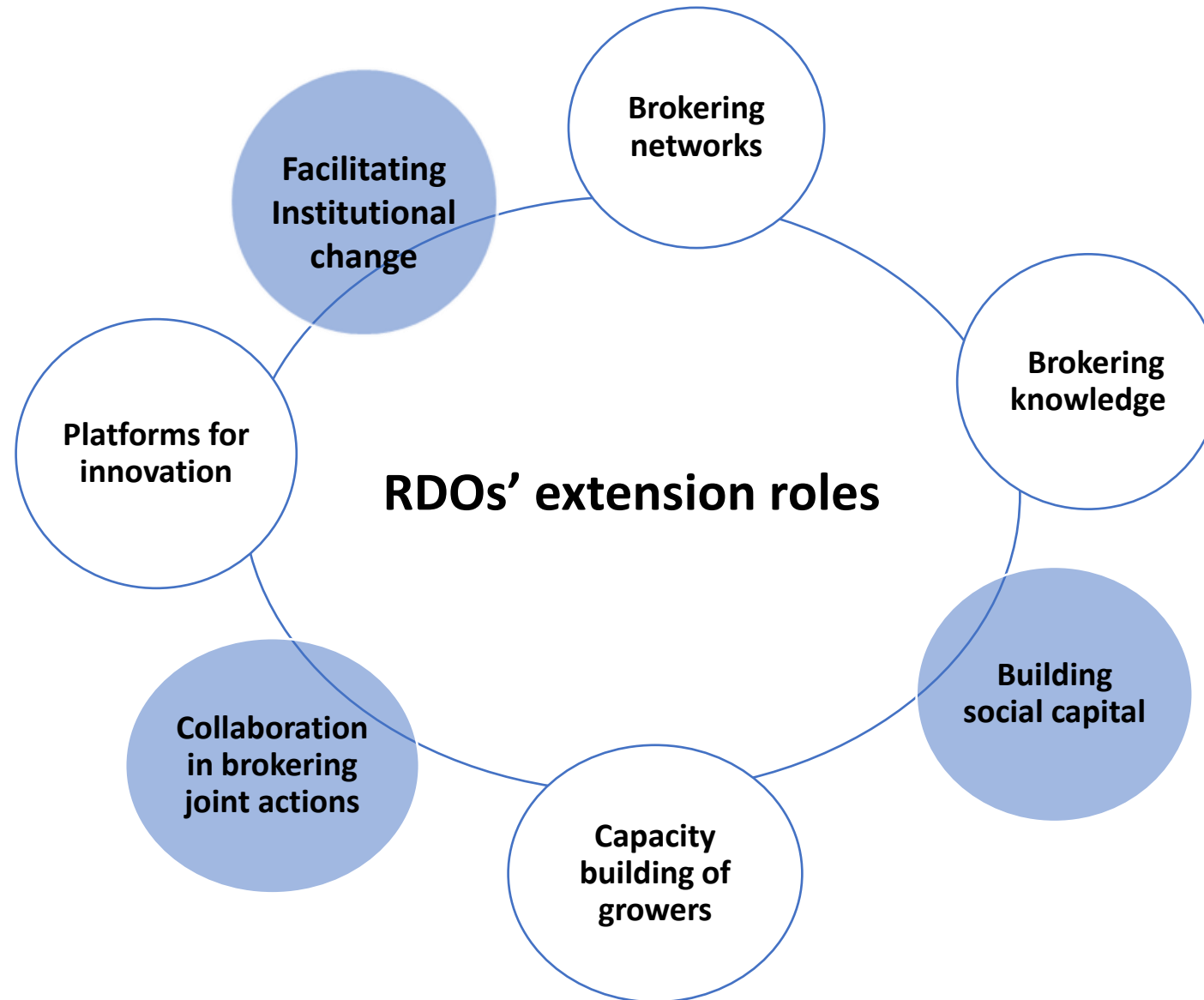
Cleaning up after an expo event



Facilitation at a conference



RDOs functioning in an agriculture extension system (Klerkx and Kilelu, 2011)



Findings regarding professional development Initiatives

Professional development plans

- Opportunity to reflect on current capability, Identify and fill gaps and Plan career pathway

Training

- Sought on a need-to-know basis
- Builds technical, extension and generic competencies.

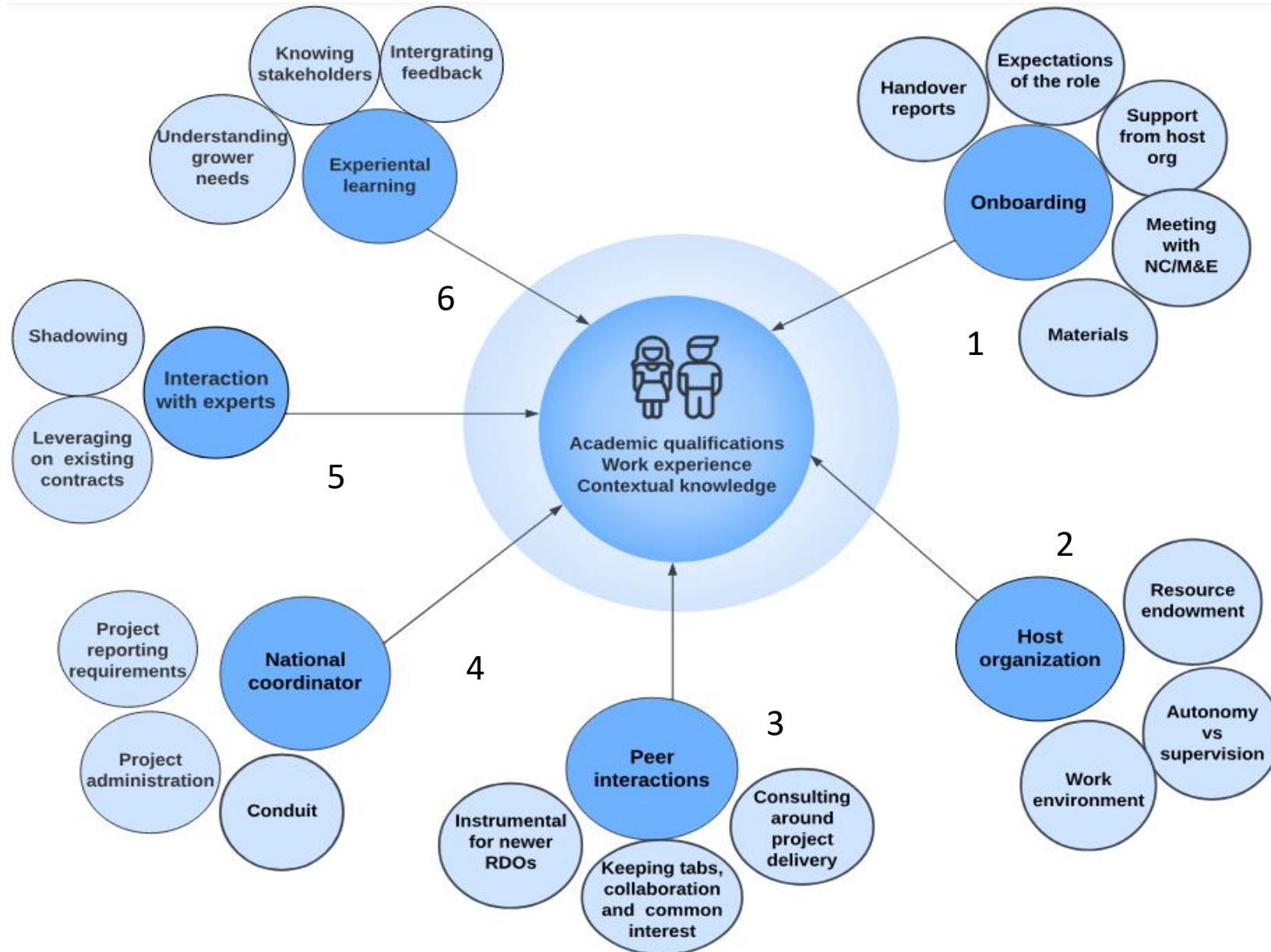
Mentoring

- Stage of career may impact perceived utility
- Builds operational capabilities

Networking through conferences

- Networking with other industry members and brokering functions
- Team building and bonding
- APEN membership and PD component

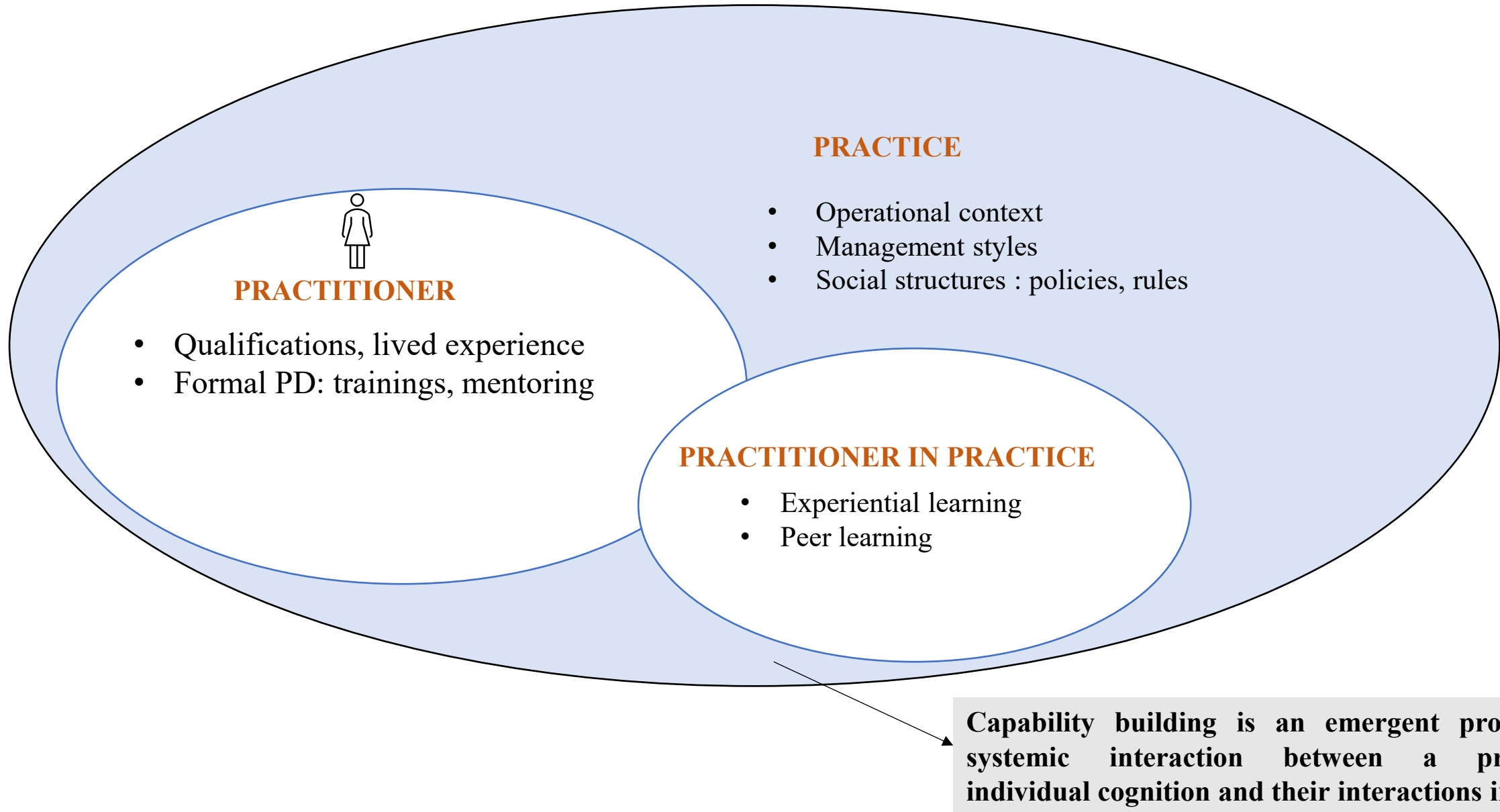
Capability building processes **outside** of PD Initiatives



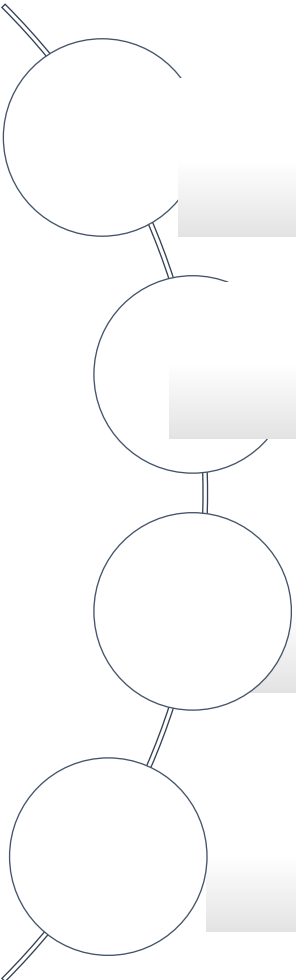
Key capability building processes revealed from data.



A Systems thinking perspective on capability building in practice



Implications for Industry



An enabling working environment including management styles that lend to autonomy and mentorship enables practitioners thrive in practice

Industry should consider investing in PD as part of workforce development

Practitioner centred approaches are better suited in establishment of professional identities, individual awareness of capability and self efficacy.

Systemic barriers to attending formal PD e.g. accessibility, schedule conflicts, funding should be addressed



Focus 3: Advisory services as a capacity in innovation systems

Dr Callum Eastwood



Callum completed his PhD with RIRG in 2008 then worked with the team until 2013 on a variety of topics related to technology adoption and innovation systems.

He currently is a senior scientist at DairyNZ researching workplace, technology, adaptation and practice change topics.



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Focus 4: The importance of formal agricultural extension education

Agricultural extension education at the University of Melbourne



Speakers



Prof Ruth Nettle, Coordinator - Master of Agriculture Specialisation: Agricultural extension and innovation



Dr Michael Santhanam-Martin - Senior Lecturer - Bachelor of Agriculture degree



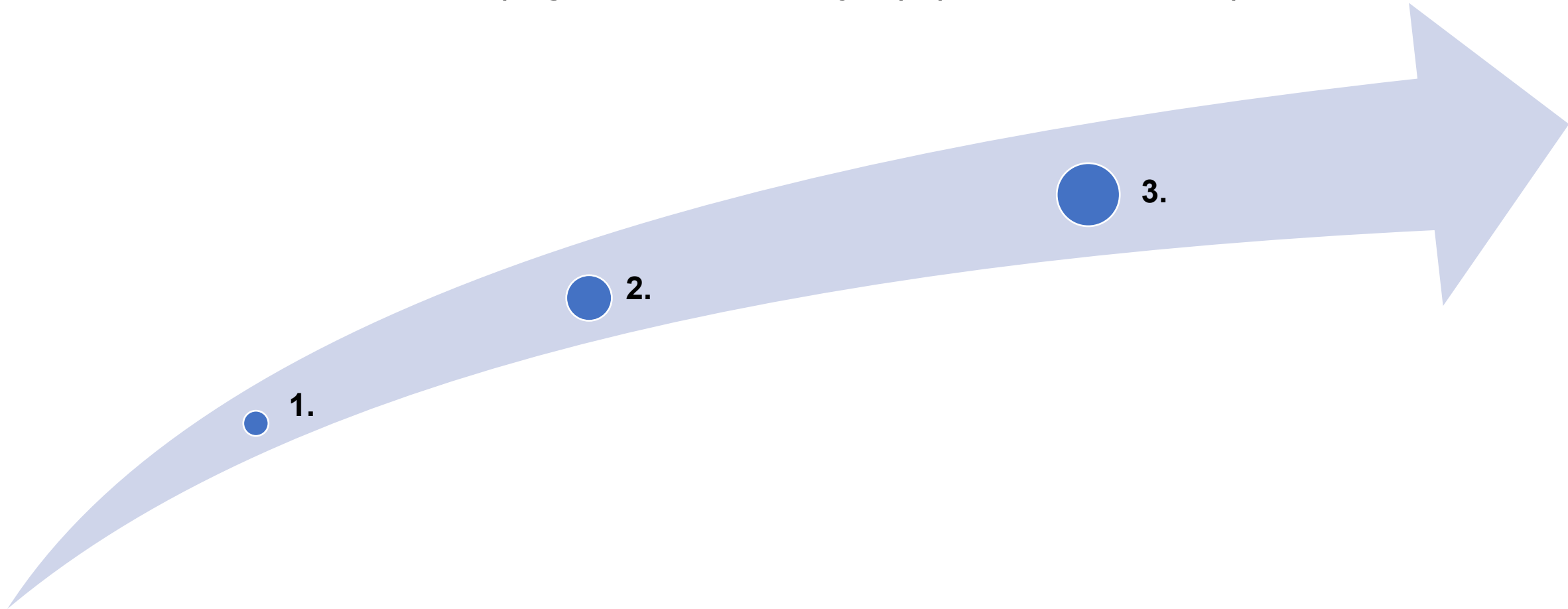
Dr Wycliffe Oyunga - Lecturer – Agricultural Advisory Practice and Agricultural Extension

Formal extension education – the ‘why’

- Pluralism in extension
- Agricultural innovation systems
- Renewed interest in extension in Australia: but concerns re: capability
- Extension education in decline across Australia and New Zealand
- Taking a leadership role: a strategic pathway from undergraduate to postgraduate and micro-credentials
- Research-informed teaching

Our aim today: A sneak-peak at this program and to emphasise the importance of industry involvement

Undergraduate – Bachelor of Agriculture (150-180 students)
& BSc (Ag Science major) (~20 students)

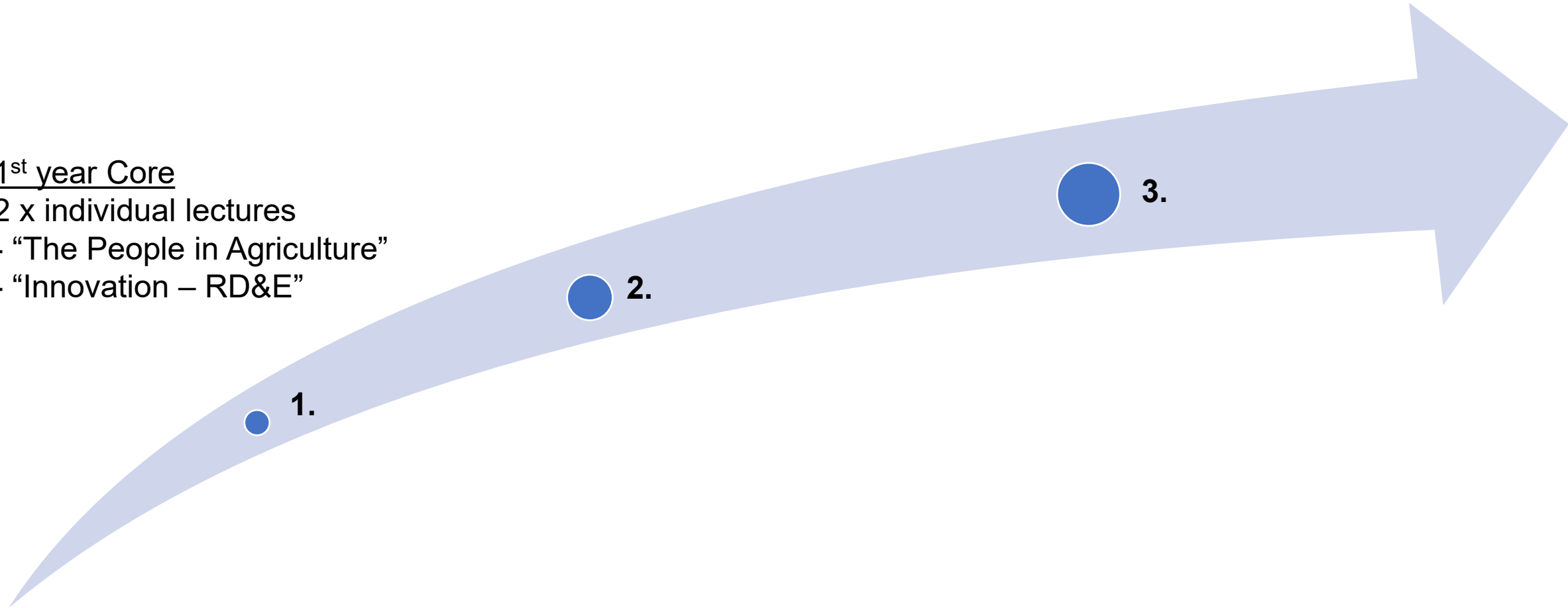


Undergraduate – Bachelor of Agriculture (150-180 students) & BSc (Ag Science major) (~20 students)

1st year Core

2 x individual lectures

- “The People in Agriculture”
- “Innovation – RD&E”



Undergraduate – Bachelor of Agriculture (150-180 students) & BSc (Ag Science major) (~20 students)

1st year Core

2 x individual lectures

- “The People in Agriculture”
- “Innovation – RD&E”

1.

2nd year elective (40 – 60 students)

“Principles of Farm Practice Change”

....introduces students to the principles of farm practice change and how change can be supported by effective advisory practices.

2.

3.

3rd year elective (~20 students)

“Innovation, Change and Knowledge Transfer”

... provides students with an understanding of how and why people take up knowledge and information as well as the impediments to adoption.

Undergraduate – Bachelor of Agriculture (150-180 students) & BSc (Ag Science major) (~20 students)

3rd year core - “Professional Practice for Agriculture”
... provides students with the opportunity to apply the theoretical and practical knowledge acquired during their degree to analysis of large-scale challenges confronting agricultural industries.

1st year Core
2 x individual lectures
- “The People in Agriculture”
- “Innovation – RD&E”

1.

2nd year elective
“Principles of Farm Practice Change”
....introduces students to the principles of farm practice change and how change can be supported by effective advisory practices.

2.

3rd year elective
“Innovation, Change and Knowledge Transfer”
... provides students with an understanding of how and why people take up knowledge and information as well as the impediments to adoption.

3.

Postgraduate (Master of Agricultural Science)

Specialisation in agricultural extension and innovation

Agricultural
Advisory
Practice
and Theory

Agricultural
Extension

Managing
Innovation
and Change

Leading
workforce
change in
agri-food

- **Advisor-farmer (client) relationships; design extension programs;**
- **innovation systems/Living laboratories and innovation brokering;**
- **Workforce planning, leading teams/managing people**

**PLUS
Melbourne MicroCerts**

**1 People and Change in
Agriculture**

**2. Supporting Farm
Practice Change**

**3. Segmentation
approaches for
agriculture**

**4. Evaluation in
agricultural innovation**

Extension Education Research: The value of students shadowing advisers

Students

- Exposure, critically assess practical aspects of advisory work
- Establish links with industry - employment opportunities or future collaboration

Advisors

- Reflection on the theory
- Assess students /gain information for future staff planning

RIRG

- Continuous improvement in learning activities





Industry engagement is vital

1. Collaborate to articulate the demand/needs from University education in extension
2. Co-develop and support standardised learning outcomes across Australia
3. Provide student experiences in extension (internships, placements, projects, shadowing opportunities)

We share your interest in graduate capabilities

Professor Laurens Klerkx



Professor at the University of Talca in Chile and Emeritus Professor at Wageningen University in the Netherlands.

Research focus: agricultural innovation, food systems, and digital transformation.



Rural Innovation Research Group - Snapshots

<https://safes.unimelb.edu.au/research/rirg#home>

November 25, 2025

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Meet the RIRG team

(From L-R)

Dr Wycliffe Oyunga

Nicole Reichelt

Dr Michael Santhanam-Martin

Professor Ruth Nettle

Dr Catherine Waite

Dr Kaitlyn Height

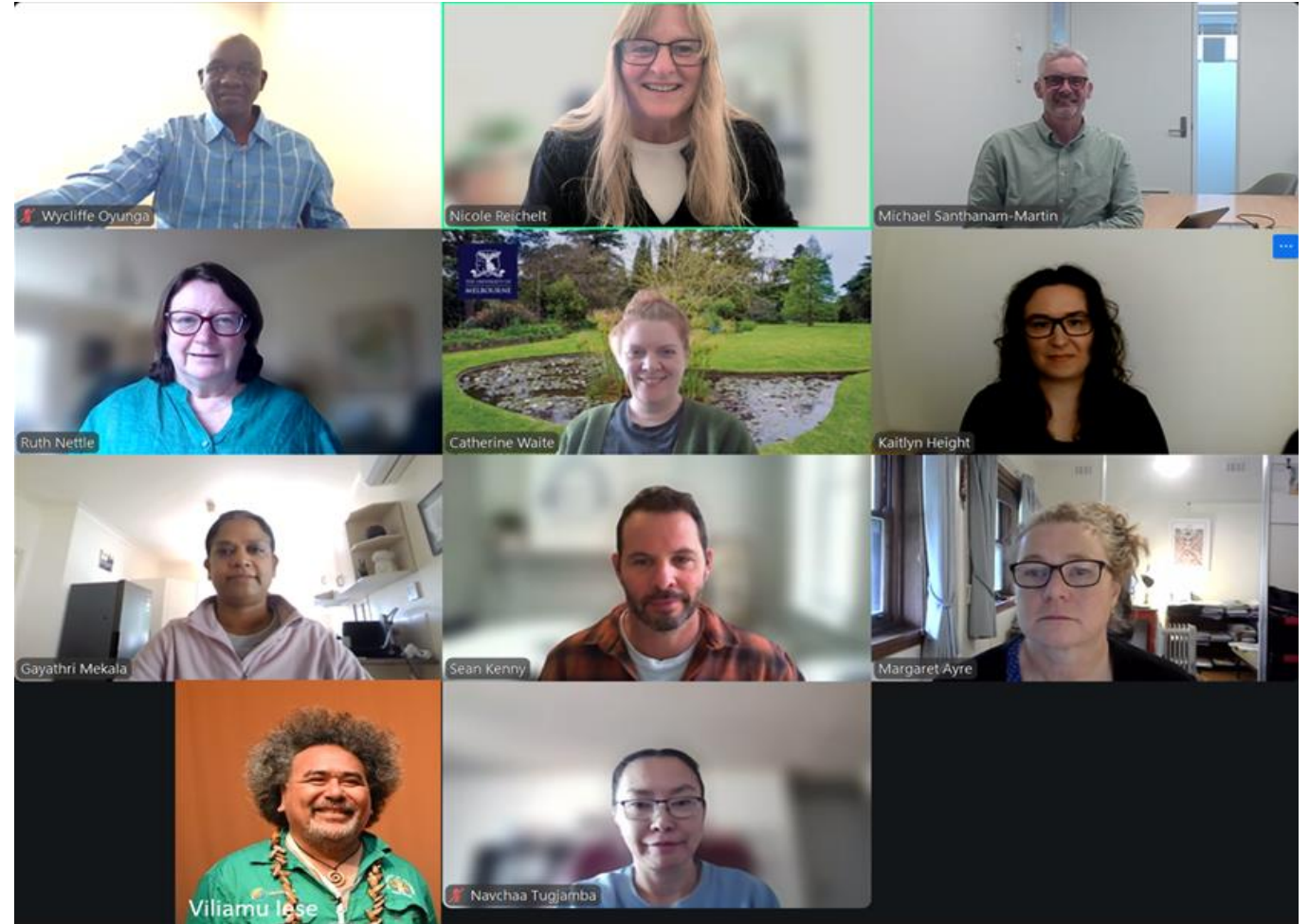
Dr Gayathri Mekala

Dr Sean Kenny

Associate Professor Margaret Ayre

Dr Vili Iese

Dr Navchaa Tugjamba



Completed projects 2024/5

Funded by:



Delivered by:



Best practice ‘people management’ practices in Australian agriculture (Employer of Choice)

Contact: Prof Ruth Nettle

Planning for sustainable development and biodiversity on Indigenous lands (ARC Linkage Project)

Contact: Assoc Prof Margaret Ayre

Evidencing healthy Djandak (Djaara Country) and healthy people for climate resilience (Melbourne Climate Futures)

Contact: Assoc Prof Margaret Ayre

Current projects

1. **Securing the next generation in food and farming careers, ARC Linkage**, in partnership with Murray Dairy, Gardiner Foundation, Birchip Cropping Group, Wimmer Southern Mallee Development, AusVeg, Veg Education and VicLLENs.
2. **Improving the experience of agriculture jobs and careers for culturally diverse communities** – in partnership with Agriculture Victoria and Gardiner Foundation.
3. **Djäkami Wänjau (Yolŋu Ranger) Work: practices and processes for managing healthy Yolngu Country** in partnership with Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation and Yirralka Rangers
4. **Digital Irrigation Advisory Systems: Supporting Extension and Advisory Services for Agriculture's Transition to Digital Irrigation** (One Basin CRC)
5. **Long-term economic, environmental, and social outcomes of drought resilience practices in mixed farming: Codesigning extension through a Living Lab (Long term trials)** (Future Drought Fund)



project websites



Dr Catherine Waite



Associate Professor
Margaret Ayre



Dr Navchaa Tugjamba



Nicole Reichelt



Dr Sean Kenny

Current projects (Continued)

6. Integration of biodiversity management into agriculture subjects using Dookie campus living laboratories for experiential learning, UoM Teaching Learning Grant

7. Quantifying the impacts of nitrogen use and developing sustainable agricultural nitrogen management strategies in Laos rice-based farming systems, www.aciar.gov.au/project/slam-2022-102

8. Sustainable Agricultural Intensification Systems for Climate Resilient Development in Pacific Island Countries, www.aciar.gov.au/project/clim-2020-186

9. Assessing the Social and Economic Implications of Changing to Low-input and Organic Rice Production in Lao PDR, <https://www.aciar.gov.au/project/sss-2023-137>

10. Evaluating service provision approaches and value-chain interventions to support milk cooperatives to grow the smallholder dairy sector of Indonesia (IndoDairy 2), <https://www.aciar.gov.au/project/agb-2021-124>

11. Agricultural Extension Education Research



**Dr Gayathri
Mekala**

<https://findanexpert.unimelb.edu.au/profile/352>



Dr Kaitlyn Height

<https://findanexpert.unimelb.edu.au/profile/778622-kaitlyn-height>



**Dr Wycliffe
Oyunga**

<https://findanexpert.unimelb.edu.au/profile/810444-wycliffe>

Meet our PhD students



Xinyue Tang

PhD Research Project: Applying the concept of job quality to the agricultural sector in Australia: a useful concept for facing agricultural workforce challenges? Supervisors: Ruth Nettle, Michael Santhanam-Martin



Yuchen Miao

PhD Research Project: Exploring the effects of smart farming technologies on youths' perceptions towards agri-food careers in Australia. Supervisors: Catherine Waite, Ruth Nettle



Tim Hart

PhD Research Project: Trust & Collaboration in Australia's Agricultural Innovation System – A Case Study Addressing Novel Feed Inputs to Mitigate Climate Change. Supervisors: Ruth Nettle, Margaret Ayre



Elizabeth Koech

PhD Research Project: Demonstrating the benefits of building capability and capacity in extension delivery in the vegetable industry. Supervisors: Michael Santhanam-Martin, Ruth Nettle



Lynda Hoare

PhD Research Project: Making space for agroecology in Australia: the counter politics of market gardening. Supervisors: Gyorgy Scrinis, Michael Santhanam-Martin



Angela Hammond

PhD Research Project: Co-developing new services and programs in agricultural land management for sustainability outcomes and environmental market access in remote Australia.

What's coming up?



Zero net emissions Ag CRC

Project 4010: Strengthening the enabling environment for adoption and scaling of low emissions on-farm solutions



Publications to read/catch up on

Changes to work/technology

Nettle, R., Vikas, A., Lin, P. & Santhanam-Martin, M. (2025). Review: Attracting and retaining a farm workforce for the pork industry, *animal*, 2025, 101670, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.animal.2025.101670>.

Nettle, R. & Ingram, J. (2025). Smart farming technologies and changes to farm work: New insights into on-farm experiences, *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, Volume 218, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2025.124227>.

Nettle, R., Ingram, J., Ayre, M. (2025), Digiwork: How Agriculture 4.0 is changing work for farm advisers, *Frontiers in Sustainable Food systems* Front. Sustain. Food Syst., <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsufs.2025.1542007>

Eastwood, C.R., Edwards, J.P., Ingram, J., **Ayre, M.**, Fielke, S. and Renwick, A., **(2025).** On-farm implementation of transformative technologies and practices for sustainability transitions in agriculture. *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, 9, p.1616512. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsufs.2025.1616512>

Contzen, S., **Santhanam-Martin, M.**, Beecher, M. Hostiou, N. & **Nettle, R.** (2025) Revisiting the concept of ‘decent work’ for agriculture, *Journal of Rural Studies*, Volume 120, 2025, 103872, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2025.103872>.

Santhanam-Martin M., Wilkinson R., Cowan L., **Nettle R. (2024)** Elaborating decent work for agriculture: Job experiences and workforce retention in the Australian orchard industry, *Journal of Rural Studies*, Volume 111, 2024, 103330, ISSN 0743-0167, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2024.103333>

Climate change adaptation

Nettle, R.A., Ayre, M., Reichelt, N., Santhanam-Martin, M., Vikas, A. (2025), Farm transformation in the context of climate change: Beyond the incremental-transformational divide. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 116, 103628, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2025.103628>

Bilotto, F., Christie-Whitehead, K.M., Malcolm, B., Barnes, N., Cullen, B., **Ayre, M.** and Harrison, M.T., **(2025).** Costs of transitioning the livestock sector to net-zero emissions under future climates. *Nature Communications*, 16(1), p.3810. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-025-59203-5>

Innovation systems

Warriach, H. M., Ayre, M., Nettle, R., Height, K., Iqbal, H., Aziz, A., ... & McGill, D. M. (2024). Strengthening the role of innovation brokers in the livestock advisory services system of Pakistan. *Animal Production Science*, 64(8). <https://doi.org/10.1071/AN23398>

Animal welfare

Fiedler, J.M., Ayre, M.L., Rosanowski, S. and Slater, J.D., 2025. Horses are worthy of care: Horse sector participants’ attitudes towards animal sentience, welfare, and well-being. *Animal Welfare*, 34, p.e6. , 1–12 <https://doi.org/10.1017/awf.2024.69>

Fiedler, J.M., Rosanowski, S., **Ayre, M.L.** and Slater, J.D., **2025.** Horse Activity Participants’ Perceptions About Practices Undertaken at Activity Venues, and Horse Welfare and Wellbeing. *Animals*, 15(15), p.2182. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani15152182>

Indigenous knowledge

Ayre, M., Yunupingu, D., Wearne, J., Maymuru, R., Marika, M. and Mununggurr, G. 2024. Celebrating Galth Rom Workshops, a Yolngu-led Knowledge Production Methodology in Land and Sea Management, in Langton, M., Corn, A. and Curkpatrick, S. (eds). *Indigenous Knowledge: Australian Perspectives*, The Miegunyah Press, Carlton, pp. 155-168.

Ayre, M., Yunupingu, D., Wearne, J., Marika, M. And Maymuru, R. **2025** Understanding and Valuing Yolngu Ranger Work: A Story of Doing Collaboration in Research in Jones, R., Waghorne, J. and Langton, M. (eds) *Dhoombak Goobgoowana, A History of Indigenous Australia and the University of Melbourne*, Volume 2: Voice, pp. 426-434. Melbourne University Press, Carlton.

Kerinaia, M., Brekelmans, A., Spencer, M., **Ayre, M.**, Jones, M., Young, A.R., Kerinaia, F., Kurupuwu, A., Kantilla, C., Alimankinni, J. and Orsto, F., **2025**. Composing, decomposing, and recomposing engagement in Indigenous-led research for land and sea management, Tiwi Islands, Australia. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*
<https://doi.org/10.1177/11771801251334917>

Young, A.R., Davies, H.F., **Ayre, M.L.**, Brekelmans, A., Bryan, B.A., Elith, J., Hadden, K., Kerinaia, M., Keith, D.A., Lewis, D.L. and Munkara-Murray, K.M., **2025**. Applying the IUCN Global Ecosystem Typology to classify, describe, and map ecosystems based on regional data and Indigenous knowledge. *Conservation Biology*, p.e70099. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cobi.70099>

Thankyou for attending and celebrating our 25th anniversary. Keep in touch! The recording will be sent.

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25-YEAR JOURNEY OF THE RURAL INNOVATION RESEARCH GROUP

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