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TIA program preparing next generation of ag professionals

A partnership program for the development of early-career agricultural extension professionals has left its participants not only better prepared to work within the agriculture industry, but better prepared for life.

Developed as an action in response to the needs identified in the Tasmanian Government's white paper *Competitiveness of Tasmanian Agriculture for 2050*, the highly successful Extension Accelerator Program has fast-tracked the development of young Tasmanian agricultural professionals.

Created in partnership with the Tasmanian Government, which funded the program, and industry employers, the Tasmanian Institute of Agriculture (TIA) coordinated delivery of the pilot program.

The program's co-coordinators Elya Steel - who is also a PhD candidate with TIA - and Dr Saideepa Kumar, Lecturer in Agricultural Systems, delivered the 14-month program to nine participants.

"The Extension Accelerator Program was developed to build the skills and capabilities of early career ag graduates working in extension," Elya Steel said.

"Throughout the program we have included elements of personal development to build their skills and capabilities, not only for them personally, but for the ag industry as a whole."

Participants learned and refined a variety of agriculture skills including project management, evaluation, written communication, and mental health awareness.

When asked on her thoughts after the completion of the program, participant Hannah Allwright, Junior Research and Production Agronomist with South Pacific Seeds, said she developed skills for work and life.

"I can be a leader; I never thought that was something that I could do," Hannah said.

"I feel more confident – which was a big thing I wanted to achieve. But the biggest value for me has been that we have learnt a lot of skills that we are not only going to use professionally but in everyday life, such as conflict resolution, conscious leadership and communication."

Mark Raspin, Pyrethrum Production Manager with Botanical Resources Australia, recognised the program's value in helping recent graduates transition into the industry, including Olivia Cripps, who joined Botanical Resources Australia as an agronomist/field officer almost two years ago.

“It’s a useful tool for someone from our business, like Olivia - who hasn’t got a great deal of experience in agriculture but has very good marks out of university - to learn more about agriculture, extensions, herself, and other people,” Mark said.

“I think it is great for anyone entering the industry to have the opportunity to fast-track and learn more about agriculture.”

Participants learned from facilitators such as leadership coach Steve Willing, from Growth in Mind; and Kath Wilson, from WilsonBlue - a project and change management specialist with more than 20 years’ experience.

“It has completely changed the way that I approach my job and the growers that I work with,” said program participant Sara Nour, an agronomist with Driscolls Australia.

Co-coordinator Elya has started working toward securing funds in the hope of offering the Extension Accelerator Program again.

“TIA is looking to develop a new shorter version of the program for 2022,” Elya said.

“It is likely to be predominantly face to face, but we are exploring other models of delivery.

“But, as with many of these programs, it relies on funding. We will know more as the year progresses.”

TIA is a joint venture of the University of Tasmania and the Tasmanian Government.

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