

Farms and learning partnerships in farming systems projects: a response to the challenges of complexity in agricultural innovation

Anne Crawford*, Ruth Nettle, Mark Paine, Carolyn Kabore
Faculty of Land and Food Resources, University of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

*** Corresponding author**

Address: Department of Agriculture and Food Systems,
Faculty of Land and Food Resources,
University of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia 3820
Phone: +61 3 5622 6029
Fax: +61 3 5623 4671
Email: acra@unimelb.edu.au

Abstract

Managing the competing interests of productivity growth, environmental concerns, landscape change and societal expectations presents challenges for agricultural industries. Innovation projects supporting knowledge development to address these challenges often involve partnerships with commercial farms, a methodology which promises much but has inherent challenges as well. This paper will examine the requirements of learning partnerships between farmers, research and extension (as members of innovation projects) to address conditions of complexity. We review designs for the involvement of commercial farms in innovation projects and explore the conditions for effective learning partnerships using two case studies from the Australian dairy industry. Learning partnerships with commercial farms can contribute to addressing the conditions of complexity faced by agricultural industries. Our analysis suggests that the conditions for effective learning partnerships involve the active negotiation of learning roles between farmers, researchers and advisors. This requires a unique form of facilitation to support the learning environment and use of learning tools, assisting project teams to act on complex issues. As learning partners, commercial farms in innovation projects are an effective response to the challenges of complexity in agricultural innovation.

Keywords

Commercial farms in research, learning, partnership, extension practice, innovation projects