

# ISOLATED FARMERS MAKE GOOD LEARNERS— DISTANCE EDUCATION LEAVES ITS MARK

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## INTRODUCTION

Since 1970, farmers in NSW and beyond have been participating in an easy-access Home Study Program for farmers, land and business managers in rural areas. In the late sixties, the Rural Youth Organisation of New South Wales had been looking for an effective way of preparing its members for a business career on the land. With the backing of the Department of Education and the active support of farm management specialists at the University of New England, the *Farm Management Correspondence Course* was launched. Within a few years, responsibility for the Program passed to the NSW Department of Agriculture, where it has remained ever since. Since 1980, the Program has operated out of C B Alexander Agricultural College, 'Tocal', Paterson near Newcastle.

Over 10,000 people have been involved in these courses. Today the *Farm Management Home Study Program* prepares for its twenty-fifth anniversary in 1995. How does the Program make further study so easy for farmers to access?

## ONE PROGRAM, MANY SHOPFRONTS

As a general rule, adults will only take on study if it will help them get to where they want to go. This is especially true of busy farmers. Their desire for further study will only be kindled if the course provider can offer them something relevant to their particular needs and interests at the time. A home study program for farmers therefore needs to have a number of entry points, or shopfronts, and these must be visible from a distance. This is partly a marketing issue, but just as importantly, the areas offered for study need to allow the self-directed adult learner, regardless of entry point, to move from one area to the next in such way that understanding and skills build on each other.

Here is an outline of the shopfronts offered to rural Australians through the NSW Agriculture Home Study Program:

## COURSES OF STUDY

<i>Farm Management</i>	a two year program of home studies and face-to-face group and field work; covers business and resource management skills and production performance
<i>Farm Office Management</i>	a one year course to help farmers operate in a business-like way—setting up records and using the right information to achieve sustainable profits

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## OPEN LEARNING PACKAGES

### Land Management Series

Your Farm's Future - How to measure its sustainability  
Tree on Farms  
Soils and their Management  
Pastures\*  
Organic Farming\*  
Farm Chemical Users Course

### Business Management Series

Cash Management  
Farm Management  
Agricultural Marketing  
Taxation in Farm Management  
Law and the Primary Producer  
Machinery Economics  
Computers in Agriculture

### Production Series

Beef Production Guide  
Sheep Production Guide  
Goat Milk Production  
Animal Health  
Livestock Breeding for Profit  
Commercial Hydroponic Production  
Beekeeping for Business & Pleasure

### Miscellaneous

Farm Cashbook  
Glossary of Agricultural Terms  
Through Deep Waters - A resource book on grief & loss for country families  
Rural Ways - Handling of cattle (video)  
Agskills (instruction sheets on manual tasks; booklets include Beef, Sheep, Dairy, Goats, Pastures, Fencing, and Knots).

\* available soon

Open learning packages are promoted as stand-alone items. Learning activities are included, and model answers are given where needed. The range of subjects covered in the Home Study Program is continuously being expanded.

### DEFINING THE NEEDS OF THE TARGET AUDIENCE

In recent times, the Commonwealth Government and providers of vocational education have embraced a new national training agenda, based on a *competency-based* approach to curriculum. The vocational training offered through the Home Study Program, like the other courses offered through C B Alexander Agricultural College (Tocal), follows the competency-based model.

In a competency-based curriculum, the content of a course is determined by what a learner will need to know to successfully perform his or her job in the workforce. Within the Home Study Program, learning materials try to cultivate a range of skills needed by farmers and others to be successful farm production managers, physical and human resource managers, and business managers.

*How do course developers decide which knowledge and skills provide a good grounding for management in agriculture?*

The content of these materials is determined through discussions with groups of competent practitioners; after all, a successful farm business manager knows better than anyone else what it takes to be successful as a farm business manager. Before the Farm Management Home Study Course was revised in 1991, The Rural Development Centre of the University of New England was commissioned to survey groups of livestock, crop and mixed farmers in several locations<sup>1</sup>.

Out of this work came a consensus on the skills needed to manage a farm through all the problems that put pressure on profits and threaten the viability of the farm.

As a result of this primary research, the learning materials offered through the Home Study Program today are down-to-earth—they deal with the issues that farmers work through from day to day. More recently, a national working party has done extensive work to identify 'national' competencies in farm management. Thanks to the methods used by The Rural Development Centre, the competency framework that supports the Farm Management Courses is fully compatible with the new national competencies.

### **'VOCATIONAL' EDUCATION**

In the Home Study Program, materials aim to be vocational in the richest sense of the word. We know that primary producers must deal with complexity, and with risk, to stay in business. Education for farmers is only truly vocational if the teaching-learning process cultivates the capacity to handle complexity and risk.

Learners don't achieve this by accumulating facts. To handle complexity and risk, the farm manager needs *deep skills*—what the literature calls 'core competencies'<sup>2</sup>. Learners develop this competence as they understand the connections between things (the 'relatedness' of forces in the farm production-marketing system), and learn to *go with the flow*, rather than against it.

### **LEARNING BY SIMULATION**

A feature of learning materials in the Home Study Program is the frequent use of case studies. Case studies give the learner a chance to do some problem-solving on 'real'—concrete—examples. (A concrete example can be from real life, or be a fictitious but typical simulation.) A strong feature of *problem-based learning* is that it is done 'in the round'—the case study storyline is not distorted by being reduced to a single dimension, and therefore problem analysis can be holistic and realistic.

*Whenever we size-up someone else's problem  
we get practice in sizing-up our own  
current or future challenges.*

Even where there is a strong dose of technical information, learners come to realise that this 'instruction' is eventually to be applied to the most important case study of all—their own farm business. In practice, many learning activities are carried out on the student's own farm operation. (Where possible, students use their own farm figures in budgeting and analysis activities.)

*...a course in farm management that allows the learner  
to practise decision-making before any  
gamble with money is involved.*

### **DEALING WITH THE PROBLEM OF DISTANCE**

Distance education programs often rely heavily on the printed word. In the Farm Management Courses, learners meet subject specialists and fellow learners at residential schools; and telephone support is also available. But much of the learning takes place at a distance, and although audio and video materials are now being included, most instruction is delivered through the printed page.

Course developers are very conscious of the barriers this can place between themselves and their learners. Often adult learners haven't done formal studies for many years. Often farmers are more comfortable thinking and planning out on the tractor than at a desk.

Materials offered through the Home Study Program are carefully prepared with the needs of the distance learner in mind...

People study more effectively if they are comfortable with the task; yet they also need to be challenged. In this program, writers work hard to find a balance between making the learner comfortable and stimulated.

We learn more effectively if we are able to see the emerging patterns and connections within an area of study. Course writers try to encourage learners to be aware of the fine detail and the big picture—to see the trees and the forest—throughout the study process.

Course writers also write in *Plain English*. Whether an idea is concrete or abstract, it is explained in a no-frills, uncluttered way.

Course writers are experienced teachers, so they know how to actively engage the student in the learning process. Each unit or open learning package is the result of collaboration between instructional designer and graphic designer. Clients of the Home Study Program keep giving feedback that course materials are easy to work with.

## ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

There is no minimum entry level into the Farm Management Home Study Courses.

## DO COURSES LEAD TO A QUALIFICATION?

The Farm Management Course is an accredited, certificate-level vocational study course. Graduates who want to go further can use their Farm Management Certificate to obtain advanced standing in the Associate Diploma in Farm Management at Orange Agricultural College, The University of Sydney. Advanced standing into other tertiary courses may be negotiable.

## WHAT ABOUT PEOPLE WHO ALREADY HAVE FINANCIAL SKILLS?

In some industries, RPL, or *recognition of prior learning*, is already having a major effect. Adults who have acquired their knowledge and skill in the workplace over many years can now have their abilities recognised.

In the Farm Management Courses, for example, a primary producer who already keeps a farm cashbook and carries out a monthly bank reconciliation can be given credit for a major assessable activity of the first year course. This is arranged through the College's 'RPL' course entry option.

An applicant for RPL is given help in preparing evidence of current skill for the RPL interview, and may receive total or partial credit for parts of a course. (A fee is charged for this option.)

## CONCLUSION

These are exciting times for those who manage to stay in the race. That motto is equally true for those in the farming sector, and those whose business is vocational education.

*We move forward, or we start to look like the ones  
who look like going under." Anon.*

The course development team of the Home Study Program continues to refine teaching and presentation methods that have worked in the past. The challenge to remain vocationally relevant is a goal that gives our various styles and approaches a common focus.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> This study is described in Lees and Reeve (1991).

<sup>2</sup> One useful breakdown of these competencies is given in Lees and Reeve (1991)—*conceptual competence, technical competence, integrative competence, contextual competence, and adaptive competence.*

#### REFERENCE

Lees, J W and Reeve, I J (1991), *Competencies for Farming: a Compendium of Profiles*. Rural Development Centre, University of New England: Armidale, New South Wales

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