

The National Partners in Grain Project – raising the skills of grain growing farmers

Jeanette Long, Sharon Honner and Patricia Hamilton

Abstract

This paper reports on the outputs of a national participatory on-going learning project, Partners in Grain (PinG). The GRDC funded project engages farm families by using a variety of learning approaches and resources, including both on and off-farm education, to ensure the future of family farming enterprises. The paper highlights the context and the project's core business, and focuses on building capacity for change by identifying PinG's achievements. The activities described offer opportunities for farm managers to learn new technology and address business and management issues to meet changing market and community expectations.

Background to the National Partners in Grains Project

PinG was created in 2001 by a group of women on grain growing farms to increase the recognition and participation of women as decision-makers and leaders in the Australian grains industry. The women argued their different perspective and life experience would enhance partnerships and help sustain family farming businesses.

PinG operates as a national project with the six grain growing States of Australia involved. The project comprises of five State Reference Groups made up of farmer and industry representatives and a part time paid Coordinator (Victoria and Tasmania are combined).? Each state is represented on the National Reference Group by the Chair and State Coordinator. Overall project management is carried out by the National Project Coordinator. All State co-ordinators have links with key grower groups which provide the projects operation with an extensive network of farmers.

Partners in Grain: training and education for the farming community

PinG has developed partnerships with industry bodies ie AWB Ltd, to organise workshops and training in regional areas. By focusing on the needs of the people who make up the industry, PinG acts as a learning broker for grain growers.

PinG's delivery of innovative and effective learning is highlighted by its many achievements such as:

- Comprehensive and diverse workshops and activities eg: Farm Family Communication, Company Directors Course, Marketing and Business Decision Making, Young Grain Grower Conference, Spray Technology and risk awareness workshops, and beer appreciation dinners where the whole supply chain is represented
- Effective partnerships and networks with industry and training organisations have been developed nationally and in each state, including significant national sponsorship by AWB Ltd over the last seven years
- Over 10,000 hours of training has been facilitated nationally in each year of the project
- An increase in women's representation in industry leadership positions
- Assistance in the development of communication technology using VOIP, skype conferencing and webinars, to help farming families' access interactive information from remote locations.
- A significant contribution through in-kind support is provided to the project each year; nearly \$200,000 nationally over the last twelve months.
- Research of the training needs of members of the grains industry has been conducted through Farmbis Targeted Initiative Projects in SA, Vic and WA.
- Dr Patricia Hamilton completed her PhD *Building and nurturing a learning community in the Australian grains industry: a study of the national Partners in Grain project.*
- In SA three facilitated learning groups participate in on-going learning.

- SA PinG received an Honourable Mention at the SA Fambis Awards for Risk Awareness Workshops for farming partners.

Farmers undertake planned learning activities that are directly relevant to their farm, either through one day activities, or short, modular courses which encourage participation and develop competencies. PinG activities raise awareness, give information and knowledge, and provide skills and training through facilitation and support.

Running the family farm as a business requires all members of the farming family to contribute to strategic planning, based on hands on experience as well as sound business acumen. These needs have led to an increase in the number of women and young adults attending farming groups, education and training seminars, marketing field days, information technology updates and investment and succession planning sessions.

Benefits to the individual, the family farming business and the grains industry

Developing the skills of grain growers has led to improved business practices and given people the confidence to take on new roles within the industry and within their communities. Examples of this include Reference Group members taking on roles as councillors in local government, becoming involved in GRDC's Panels and Chairing industry committees.

Examples of reference group members taking on leadership roles in the industry include:

- Merna Curnow, Vic, was the inaugural national chair of PinG, she is now a member of the GRDC Southern Panel.
- Pam Krieg NSW Coordinator has also been a member of AWB Ltd's Consultative Committee and participated in the National Rural Summit in Canberra in June this year.
- Sharon Honner SA Chair is now a member of the SA Ag Excellence Alliance.

Conclusion

Farming is constantly changing and is becoming more and more complex. To effectively and efficiently manage the family farm business, farmers in the 21st century require new skills and knowledge in business management and technology in order to adopt innovative management practices and production methods.

By producing more confident, more aware, and more skilled women and men grain growers, the PinG project highlights the importance of social and cultural diversity in creating a stronger grains industry.

Partners in Grain are keen to foster partnership in all areas of agriculture and are looking to work cooperatively and collaboratively at a state and national level.