

The importance of farmer education in South Australia



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ABSTRACT

There is a significant challenge involved with balancing food security at local and global levels whilst mitigating the environmental and social consequences of the historically productivist agri-food system. This work will address the importance of education in the South Australian agricultural sector as a tool to maximise beneficial outcomes. The results of a blended method research project, which involved farmers and governance stakeholders in South Australia, are presented as empirical evidence highlighting the positive roles that formal education, in particular university education, have in regard to increasing sustainability. It was found that higher levels of formal education contributed to farmers being more likely to prioritise the socio-environmental outcomes of their agricultural land use. There was also a dramatic reduction in farmer concerns with government support mechanisms as education levels went from secondary or less, through to vocational qualifications, and finally university degrees. Interviews with agricultural governance stakeholders emphasised the role of education in building the adaptive capacity of farmers, and the subsequent positive outcomes for the future development of the South Australian agricultural industry. These results suggest that further education provides farmers with the capacity to compete effectively in a liberalised economy.

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Introduction: socio-environmental costs of neoliberal productivism

In the last 40 years political economy analyses of rural communities have sought to describe the marginalisation of people in rural regions and address resulting inequity (Alston, 2005; Botterill, 2000; Bryant, 1999; Buttel and Newby, 1980; Cocklin and Dibden, 2005; Lawrence, 1987). Research specific to South Australia has also attempted to address the political and economic plight of agricultural areas of the State (Fielke and Bardsley, 2013; Smailes, 2002, 2006; Smailes and Hugo, 2003). Despite this, in South Australia, and Australia more generally, neoliberal productivism has dominated rural governance for the past 30 years (Dibden et al., 2009). The government support that has survived in Australia focuses heavily on research and development to increase the productivity of Australian agriculture in terms of produce quantity and quality, and the subsequent marketing of these products (ABARE, 2006; Australian Government, 2011, 2013; Government of South Australia, 2010).

This *laissez-faire* attitude to agricultural support aims to reward the efficient and productive producers, whilst those unable to

absorb the various risks involved with agricultural aspirations on the driest inhabited continent in the world are largely left to fend for themselves with minimal welfare assistance available. Analysis of agricultural census data shows that there were 15,816 farms in South Australia in 2006–2007 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008a), the following agricultural census revealed the number of farms in South Australia decreased to 14,043 in 2010–2011 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012a), a loss of over 11% of farms in 5 years. This study investigates the impacts of education on farmer priorities and perceptions of risk and government support. Fig. 1 shows the spatial location of this study and in particular the mail-out survey case study regions.

The social and environmental consequences of this neoliberal economic focus, and subsequent reduction in government support, need to be considered. As many have recognised, there are serious natural resource management concerns relating to agriculture in South Australia (Crossman and Bryan, 2009; Government of South Australia, 2006; Wilson and Whitehead, 2012; Wilson et al., 2009). Neoliberal productivism has had negative implications for biodiversity, soils, and water management.

Simultaneously, while the number of farmers with further education is increasing, the percentage of Australian primary producers with any form of non-school education is still approximately 15 percentage points lower than *all* other industries combined (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012b). Farmers are much less

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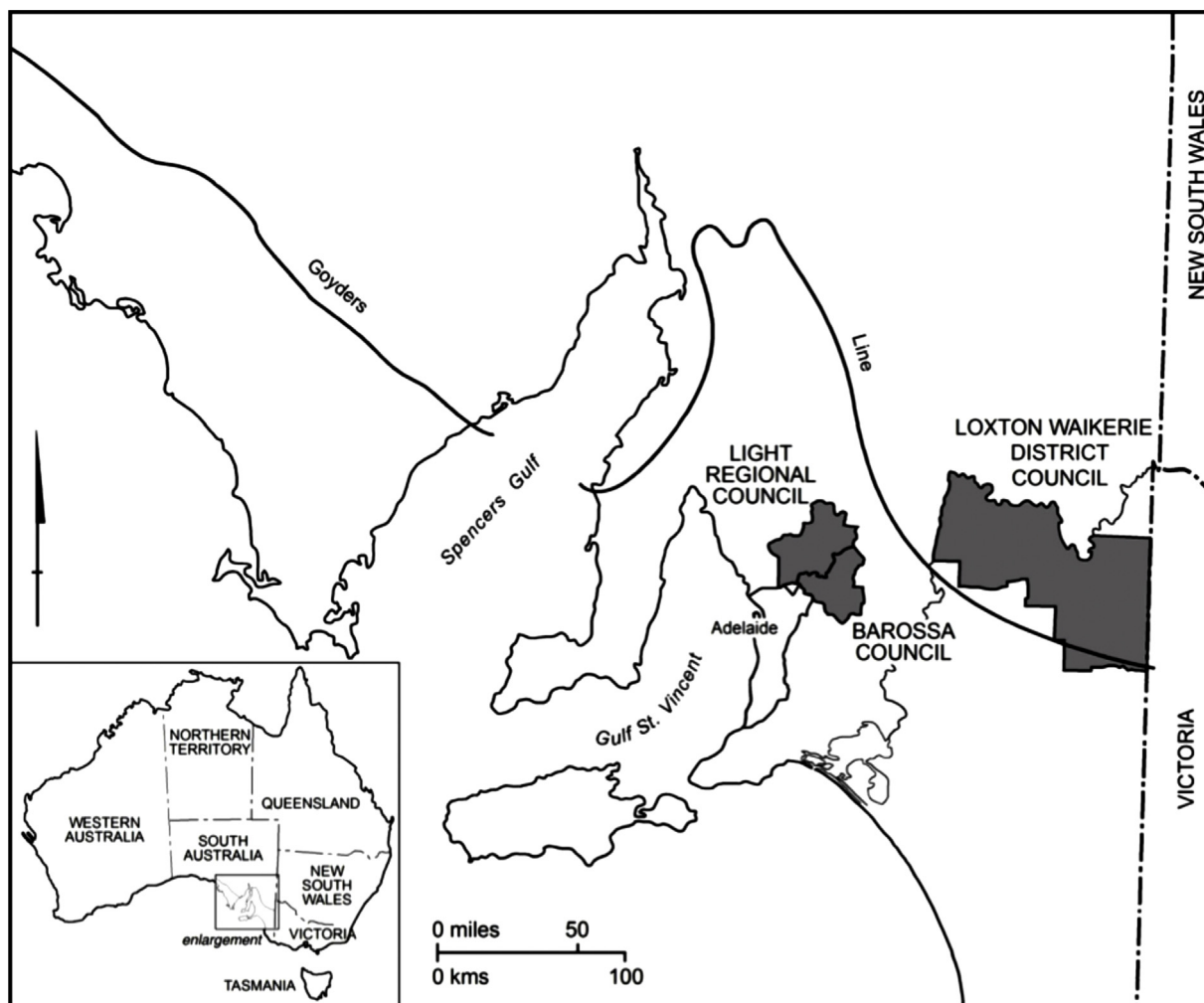


Fig. 1. Map of South Australian including two mail-out survey case study regions.

likely to have a university degree than the general population and a TAFE certificate is the primary form of further education that South Australian farmers obtain, with approximately 55% having reached this milestone, compared to just over 20% for both the categories of some form of diploma and a 'bachelors degree or higher' (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008b, 2012b).

This paper critically examines the role of education to influence farmer decision-making in South Australia, with a focus on opportunities to guide farmers through an ecocentric education to rapidly alter perceptions of sustainability within rural areas of Australia. Since the introduction of the concept of 'sustainable agriculture', different agricultural stakeholders have given a variety of meanings to the term. Variations espouse the importance of certain specific aspects of sustainability such as: addressing environmental impacts (Altieri, 1995; Barr and Cary, 1992; Bowler, 1992; Reganold et al., 1992; Reijntjes et al., 1992; Roberts, 1992); political equality (Fish et al., 2006; Gang et al., 2007; Walker, 2008); social/community outcomes (Cocklin and Alston, 2003; Haldane, 1996; Hinrichs et al., 2004; Roling and Wagemakers, 2000); economic rationality (Feagan, 2008; Jordan and Warner, 2010; Sullivan, 2009; Tilman et al., 2011); and, more holistic approaches to an assortment of these interrelated consequences (Amekawa et al., 2010; Bates et al., 2011; Robinson, 2009). In the subsequent work the concept of 'sustainable agriculture' will refer to agriculture that considers and integrates the range of environmental, economic and social processes involved with agricultural land use (Lichtfouse et al., 2009).

Firstly, ecocentric education is introduced and the benefits of farmer education are discussed, before the social learning blended method applied to this research project is described. Quantitative survey and qualitative interview results are then presented to support the research method and, most importantly, provide evidence that formal education encourages social and environmental values and significantly reduces anxieties amongst South Australian farmers.

An ecocentric inclination for Australian farmers

What is ecocentric education and why is it important?

Essentially, the primary aim of ecocentric education is to encourage all scholars to think about the effects their actions have on the ecosystem in which they live, which will encourage environmental and social respect in an effort to avoid tragedies of the commons (Hardin, 1968). By making citizens think about, and take an interest in the world around them, harmful practices can be altered and collective action mobilised (Goodin, 1994). Ecocentric education also has the potential to further enforce the precautionary principle in managing the current risk society, which Beck (1992b) argues is framing the second modernity. By building buffers into the foundations of social, political, environmental and economic systems, there is an increased ability to adapt to change, enhancing the resilience of society (Alario, 1993; Bardsley, 2007; Beck, 1992a). By encouraging an environmental ethic, issues

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