

Final Report

Attracting new entrants into Australian horticulture

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LP15006

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Attracting new entrants into Australian horticulture (LP15006)

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Public summary

As part of their strategic goals Hort Innovation identified a need to build capacity in people in the horticultural industry to ensure the development of leaders for the industry in the future. In response to Hort Innovation's EOI, Rimfire Resources worked with Hort Innovation and industry to develop a tailored program designed specifically to deliver into the sector high quality young professionals, committed to a career in the horticultural industry.

The Graduate Engagement and Leadership program, supported by Hort Innovation's strategic co-investment funding pool, was designed to address some of the challenges of building future leaders and promoting careers in horticulture, as set out in the proposal Leadership and People Development – Attracting new entrants into Australian horticulture. This unique two-phase program set out to first find and attract the right people, then train them in leadership skills and launch them into their careers in Australian Horticulture.

Over the life of the program, Rimfire Resources successfully placed a total of 43 university candidates at 33 individual horticultural businesses across the full supply chain encompassing horticultural producers, input suppliers, marketing and distribution, research and consultancy. The students originated from 9 different universities across 5 states and 22 different degree types. 42 out of 43 candidates completed phase 1 (10 week internship), 30 went on to complete phase 2 (12 months graduate position) with the same or a replacement business. 25 graduates completed the ARLF Introduction to Leadership training course. Of the original 43 candidates, 30 have remained in the horticultural sector with a further 3 remaining in the broader agricultural sector and 6 unknown.

Host companies participating in the program generally reported that the funding support, particularly in the search and selection of students, support in developing internal graduate program frameworks and leadership development training for the graduate once employed were the most attractive features. Many companies returned for additional placements in subsequent years, and several are continuing to source graduates into their businesses even with the funding no longer available. All of the host companies surveyed said they would look at hiring a graduate again after their experience with the program.

Students that participated in the program came from a variety of backgrounds, some had already considered horticulture as a career and others had not. The program gave a good platform to promote careers in horticulture to university students and demonstrate a wide range of opportunities in a variety of disciplines. With 70% of graduates remaining in the horticultural sector beyond the first year of employment and at least 65% after more than 2 years.

The program utilized existing commercially available platforms and as such a commercial paid option for host companies to continue to utilize these services and to continue to hire graduates is available. Some companies have already demonstrated this intention and are accessing paid services to facilitate hiring graduates into their businesses.

There are recommendations in this report on how to leverage on the success of the program and continue to add value to the industry in a practical way supporting the building of young leaders capacity in the industry.

Keywords

Graduates, Leadership, people capacity, sustainable future

Introduction

As part of their strategic goals Hort Innovation identified a need to build capacity in people in the horticultural industry to ensure the development of leaders for the industry in the future. In response to Hort Innovation's EOI, Rimfire Resources worked with Hort Innovation and industry to develop a tailored program designed specifically to deliver into the sector high quality young professionals, committed to a career in the horticultural industry.

The Graduate Engagement and Leadership program, supported by Hort Innovation's strategic co-investment funding pool, was designed to address some of the challenges of building future leaders and promoting careers in horticulture, as set out in the EOI Leadership and People Development – Attracting new entrants into Australian horticulture. This unique two-phase program set out to first find and attract the right people, then train them in leadership skills and launch them into their careers in Australian Horticulture.

Rimfire resources set out to leverage their outstanding industry connections to secure industry funding through host companies, to support the development and training of suitable university students through their final year internship and their first year of employment within the horticultural industry. Rimfire Resources partnered with the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation to deliver highly effective leadership education and supporting mentorship. Delivery of the program involved engagement of industry and students, accurate and timely dissemination of information and funds, high level promotion of the program throughout the various stages, and high-quality leadership education.

The two key objectives of the program were designed to support Horticulture Innovation to:

1. Increase graduate interest in careers across the Australian horticulture sector
2. Build a new pool of industry leaders and create networks of young professionals

In achieving these objectives, the aim of the program was to help Hort Innovation:

- Be seen as an industry leading organisation
- Support the horticulture industry to achieve a sustainable future
- Encourage innovation and fresh thinking
- Help the Australian sector to remain competitive

Methodology

The program was developed using a two phase approach, designed to find and attract the right people then keep them engaged and support their development.

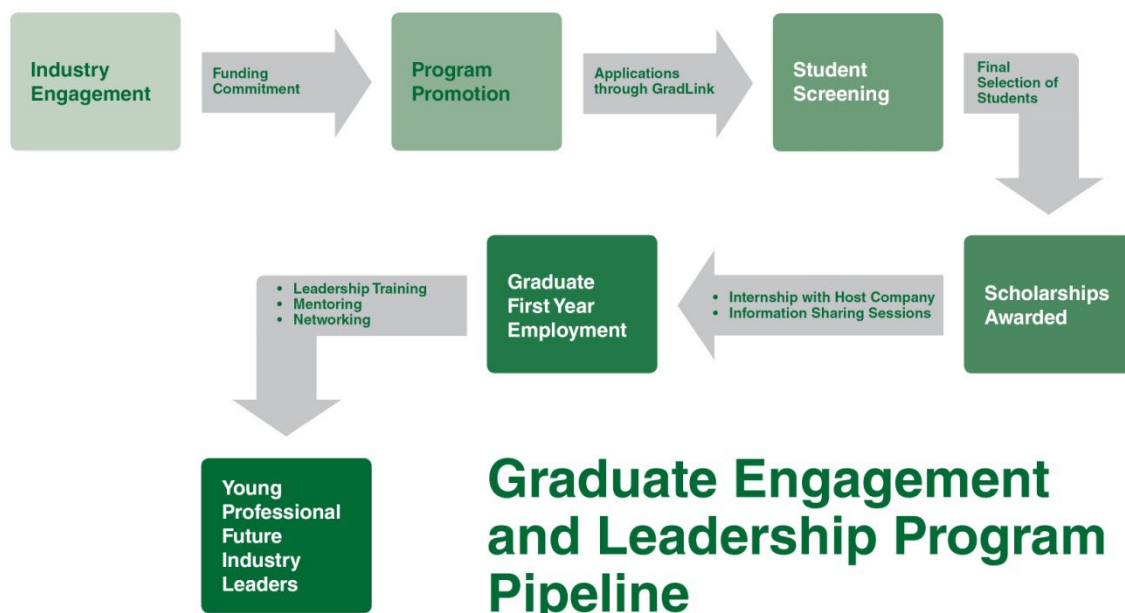
The two program phases are:

1. A final year scholarship and internship phase during the student last year of study
2. A supported first year of employment within the horticulture sector, including high quality, multi modal specialist leadership education

The phases ran concurrently with new candidates selected annually. The intention of the scholarship was to allow students to target internships in the horticulture industry that may otherwise be constrained by financial cost and to encourage those who hadn't considered horticulture as a career with a financial reward. The internship was provided through a host company operating in any area of the horticultural industry both production and aligned service businesses. The internship requirement was that it was horticulture focussed and relevant to the module of university study where applicable.

Phase 2 provided financial support to the host company for the first-year salary to encourage the uptake of graduates by the industry. In addition, the funding support provided industry leadership training to encourage the development of future leaders.

Below shows a flow chart of the process.



The engagement of host companies as well as the search and selection of suitable candidates was facilitated by Rimfire Resources who engaged with the parties throughout the tenure of the program. The leadership program was delivered by Australian Rural Leadership Foundation through a mix of in person and online delivery of content titled "An Introduction to Leadership".

More details of the methodology can be found in Appendix 1.1

Results and discussion

Of a possible revised total of 46 positions available, Rimfire Resources successfully placed a total of 43 university candidates at 33 individual horticultural businesses across the full supply chain encompassing horticultural producers, input suppliers, marketing and distribution, research and consultancy. The students originated from 9 different universities across 5 states and 22 different degrees.

42 out of 43 candidates completed phase 1 (10-week internship), 30 went on to complete phase 2 (12 months graduate position) with the same or a replacement business (where the original business was no longer able to support the graduate. 25 graduates completed the ARLF Introduction to Leadership training course. Of the original 43 candidates, 30 have remained in the horticultural sector with a further 3 remaining in the broader agricultural sector and 6 unknown.

Specific details of placements and candidates sourced are available in the outputs and appendix

Outputs

Table 1.2 Output summary

Output	Description	Detail
Graduate candidates employed across the Australian Horticultural industry through the program	43 university candidates placed at 33 individual horticultural businesses	Appendix 1.2 details the individual graduates and host companies of all placements, including their universities, degree types and current status. 30 of these graduates have remained employed in the horticultural sector beyond 12 months.
Feedback from Host companies and Graduates	Feedback surveys collected from graduates and host companies throughout the lifecycle of the program	Feedback surveys were sought from graduates and host companies. Later surveys were completed anonymously on survey monkey, summary included in appendix 1.3
Case Study media releases	Media articles based on case studies of individual graduates and businesses regarding their participation in the program.	Various media outlets released articles regarding case studies of graduates and host companies participating in the program. These were both promotional and general new articles. Attached in appendix 1.4
Feedback from ARLF Introduction to Leadership Course	Feedback surveys from participants were collated and reported by ARLF	Responses from all participants of the three cohorts were sought. Compiled responses are reported in Appendix 1.5

Outcomes

The anticipated outcomes for participants of the program were to:

1. Develop greater understanding of the diversity of opportunities and people within horticulture and related industries
2. Build relationships and networks with industry participants, leaders and the broader Hort Innovation, Rimfire and ARLF networks
3. Build a greater understanding of self and 'people' capabilities to engage in a range of diverse industry contexts

Table 1.2 Outcome summary

Outcome	Alignment to fund outcome, strategy and KPI	Description	Evidence
Increased awareness of the diversity of opportunities for university students from a range of backgrounds.	Develop greater understanding of the diversity of opportunities and people within horticulture and related industries	The program allowed the promotion of a broad range of skilled graduate opportunities to be promoted through universities throughout Australia increasing the awareness of the opportunities in the sector to young professionals.	43 graduate level positions in horticultural businesses were promoted through GradLink networks attracting applicants from 5 states and 9 universities from 22 different degrees.
Improved networks for young professionals entering the horticultural sector.	Build relationships and networks with industry participants, leaders and the broader Hort Innovation, Rimfire and ARLF networks	Participants of the Graduate Engagement program were presented with various networking opportunities including through the in-person and virtual events held as part of the ARLF Introduction to Leadership course.	ARLF course scopes from the 3 cohorts describes the in person and virtual networking opportunities presented by the ARLF Introduction to leadership course, these are detailed in Appendix 1.6
Development of additional leadership potential skills within the cohorts of graduates in the program.	Build a greater understanding of self and 'people' capabilities to engage in a range of diverse industry contexts	The ARLF leadership course provided significant opportunity for the participants to active learn and develop leadership skills and opportunity to self-reflect on their experiences.	ARLF program feedback as illustrated in Appendix 1.5

Monitoring and evaluation

There was no M & E plan attached to this program, however the project was monitored against a number of feedback criteria. Regular communication between Rimfire and the various stakeholders formed a crucial part of the program feedback and monitoring.

Anecdotal feedback from candidates and host companies has formed a significant part of the monitoring along with the completion of surveys from both candidates and host companies.

Table 1.3 Key Evaluation Questions

Key Evaluation Question	Project performance	Continuous improvement opportunities
Do Australian Horticultural Companies benefit from support to hire graduates into their businesses.	The feedback from host companies has been overwhelmingly positive about bring graduates into their businesses. All participants said they would consider hiring a graduate again. Six companies have revisited the program and accessed an additional position through the program. Several companies have approached Rimfire Resources since the closing of new applications and would be keen to be considered should the program be run again in the future. Several of the engaged host companies have since sought the support of GradLink to source additional graduates for their business following the success of a placement on a fee for service basis.	To encourage companies to continue to welcome graduates into their businesses the feedback included that the value was predominately perceived to be mostly in the search and selection process and in the support provided in designing a program for the graduate that suited both the business structure and processes on an individual level. A simpler funding model that showed clear value for the employer could encourage more uptake and a less administration heavy process could increase the companies accessing this support.
What increased the retention of new entrants to Australian Horticulture.	Out of the 43 placements 30 are confirmed to be retained in the horticultural sector after 12 months of employment. Feedback suggests company culture, clear development opportunities and industry support and networking supports the retention of new entrants.	Targeted support to Australian Horticultural companies has had a positive effect on small-medium sized companies hiring graduates they had not considered previously. Support in developing graduate program frameworks, search and selection of university graduands and professional development training for young professionals for these businesses appears to support the retention of young professionals in the industry.

Recommendations

Overall, the project satisfied the objectives of raising the profile of professional opportunities within the horticultural sector to university students/graduates. There were some barriers to seeking candidates from non-traditional backgrounds stemming predominantly from an industry reluctance to consider candidates (students) that didn't have prior exposure or interest in horticulture. Despite Rimfire Resources encouraging host companies to consider using the program to look for filling positions within the company that were not related to a horticultural or agricultural science background the predominance of the roles sought were of an agronomic or production nature. To address this barrier, it could be beneficial to equip employers with access to information or training programs to allow them to support non-horticultural or agricultural graduates entering the industry.

The program had its greatest success with small to medium sized enterprises that didn't have pre-existing structured graduate pathways into their businesses. Larger businesses struggled to integrate the program with their processes and adopt the funding arrangements into their operations. Very small businesses often didn't have the scope or budget to support a graduate from a training and development perspective. Small to medium sized businesses could be targeted in the future to maximise impact.

Common factors within the businesses that were most successful in retaining graduates were engagement in the graduate program from a senior management perspective, some structure to the graduate experience in the business or a close individual mentor contact and clear opportunity for progression for the graduate. Anecdotal feedback suggests that the graduates who had the most positive experiences had a strong mentor within the business. This could be extended by providing an industry relevant mentor through the Hort Innovation network for future programs to support those smaller businesses who might not be able to provide such resources internally.

The feedback surveys from graduates suggested that there was a general level of dissatisfaction for graduates where induction processes were not strong and more positive feedback was seen from those where induction processes were clearer. A recommendation to create stronger success would be to support companies in developing strong induction processes when onboarding graduate level candidates. Support in developing the structure of a graduate program within the business was commonly requested by companies wanting to participate in the program. A graduate framework toolkit and consultant support would be recommended to extend the current program to new businesses.

Overall, the feedback suggests that graduates found value in the ARLF Introduction to Leadership course and felt the soft skills they learned were a beneficial skillset to their roles. Anecdotally host companies seemed to feel that those that attended the course later in the program (after at least 12 months in their roles) which happened due to covid delays stood more to gain and were in a better position to adopt the information they were provided. Most host companies reported they saw positive changes in their employees after participation in the program and would use the program again. Some felt the time away from the business was too much (4-5 days) at the early stage of their career and but felt that the content was still valuable. Both graduates and host companies saw the leadership program as a key benefit of the program.

The most challenging part of the program from the perspective of the host companies, Rimfire Resources and Hort Innovation was the complex funding model required for the disbursement of funding. This required significant commitment from Rimfire Resources and detailed explanation to host companies to support their understanding of the processes required. In the second year of the program Rimfire Resources raised this with Hort Innovation and a more streamlined model was adopted and approved by the investment committee. This was a significant improvement; however the model remains complex from an administrative perspective both for Rimfire Resources and Hort Innovation. The recommendation for any future program would be to simplify the funding mechanisms and inbuilt flexibility and agility for changing industry requirements.

Another opportunity for improvement in future programs would be additional engagement opportunities for businesses and graduates with Hort Innovation as a leader of the industry. A higher level of engagement from Hort Innovation both with host companies and graduates gives the opportunity to raise the profile of the organisation in the industry and demonstrate clearer understanding of the source of funding.

Refereed scientific publications

N/A

References

N/A

Intellectual property

No project IP or commercialisation to report.

Appendices

Appendix 1.1 – Methodology detail

Appendix 1.2 – Summary of placements

Appendix 1.3 – Feedback Surveys

Appendix 1.4 – Media Articles

Appendix 1.5 – ARLF Feedback summary

Appendix 1.6 – ARLF Course Scope