



Developing next generation beef leaders to impact and influence within the rangelands

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Abstract

The Australian northern beef industry faces significant challenges in environmental stewardship, economic sustainability, and human resilience. The next generation of industry leaders must understand, develop, advocate for, and implement solutions to these issues. To support this process, Advancing Beef Leaders (ABL) was launched in 2020, as a joint initiative led by the Queensland Department of Primary Industries (DPI), and supported by private sector collaborators. A capacity building program, ABL aims to develop groups of emerging producer and community leaders who are skilled and enthused to pursue positive change in their industry, regions, and personal businesses. The focus of the program is to overlay relevant beef industry technical content with appropriate personal development, governance, and communication skills; encouraging participants to build stronger peer and mentor networks and spark the confidence needed to influence effectively in their businesses, community, and industry. By mid-2023, from 53 past participants there were 22 appointments to community and industry committees within two years of finishing their ABL programs. Also from the 53 participants were 45 examples of leadership progress such as applying for a higher-level leadership program, progressing careers, and getting directly involved as a co-operator in industry RD&E. Graduates have reported applying ABL learnings to their beef businesses, including adoption of on-property improved practices, better financial literacy, focus on drought resilience and business planning, earlier attention to family succession, and improved communications. Recently, another 22 new participants were selected for the 2024/2025 cohort. Advancing Beef Leaders has proved to be a program that opens pathways to leadership, enhances industry impact and adoption, and develops influence for graduates. With a growing interest from across Australia, the ABL program is excited to begin expansion nationally.

Introduction

Australian family beef businesses face a complex mix of biophysical, productivity, financial and family (people) challenges (Rolfe et. al. 2016). Better business management involves balancing these facets for long term success. Equally, the broader beef industry faces similar challenges at a larger scale beyond the farm gate. As these challenges grow, so does the need for technical and economic training. Agriculturalists the world over, regardless of the size of the enterprise, are motivated by the need for knowledge (Larard, 2022). In response to this, Governments and Natural Resource Management groups are investing significant resources to restore landscape health and productivity. Fundamental community expectations also include the beef industry achieving broader environmental outcomes such as reducing industry greenhouse gas emissions

(Rolfe et. al. 2016). Due to these social licence and economic pressures, it is no longer enough for family beef businesses to only be good at the basics of beef production. Appropriate resource management, savvy cattle marketing decisions, and managing the business's finances are management skills currently required to succeed in a multimillion-dollar beef business. Australia's beef producers need to move from thinking they are 'just' cattleman, to learning the market-centric approaches required of significant commodity suppliers (Larard, 2022).

Currently there are several leadership programs, scholarships and bursaries available to people in Australian agriculture. These include but are not limited to: The Nuffield Scholarship, Australian Rural Leadership Program, Rising Champions and the Zanda McDonald Award. All provide training for participants in increasing practical skills, industry knowledge, management skills and techniques through tailored mentoring programs, where graduates are well documented to progress on to significant industry roles or build family or corporate businesses. The Queensland Department of Primary Industries (DPI) identified an opportunity to develop a leadership program specifically for the northern beef industry, with a focus on family businesses as well as placing ABL as a pathways program for higher-level leadership programs.

In 2020 Advancing Beef Leaders (ABL) was launched with a small pilot group of beef producers and industry professionals in the Charters Towers district of North Queensland. The program aims to develop groups of emerging leaders who are skilled and motivated to pursue positive change in their industry, communities, and personal businesses. The program has now been delivered to seven peer cohort groups and this paper outlines the design of the program and its impact in the Queensland beef industry.

Methods

Participant selection

Participants for each cohort are selected by a rigorous and transparent selection process including a written application and interview with a selection panel. Selection criteria include qualities that indicate focus and passion for the beef industry, willingness to address industry challenges by being involved in community and industry leadership roles, and ability to work within a group. Peer groups are put together with eight beef producers, two agribusiness personnel, and one extension officer. Each cohort of participants is facilitated and coordinated by an experienced industry professional facilitator and a DPI extension officer.

Program components

The ABL program is delivered over 12-months mostly through online meetings for 2 hours once a week for about 22 weeks of the year. The online sessions deliver content from six training modules: Understanding self and others; Governance; Business planning and financial fundamentals; Industry technical foundations; Industry spheres of influence; and Communication skills. Each module is presented by a mix of experts and other beef producers who practice the skills in their business.

There are three face-to-face meetings throughout the year including an introduction to the first module (Understanding self and others), a two-day supply chain tour and the final two-day communications module and graduation event.

In the second half of the year, participants work in a smaller group on an action learning project. Projects are designed by the group to deliver something that will benefit their community or the broader beef industry. The learning objectives of the group project include: understanding the importance of good group governance and function, application of program learnings from all modules, and learning how to collaborate with all relevant stakeholders and contribute appropriately to a community or industry topic of interest.

Participants are paired with a mentor of their choosing that they believe will help them address their goals and skill development targets. Mentor and mentee pairs meet regularly throughout the year in a private capacity.

Alumni

Graduates of ABL join the alumni network that fosters continuous improvement and peer learning through scheduled activities, training opportunities and other program events. Alumni are encouraged to take opportunities to become ABL mentors, guest speakers or hosts of activities for face-to-face events. In 2024 The Connection Table was launched for alumni as a “What next” platform providing leadership pathways to amplify their impact beyond completing the program.

Governance

ABL continues to be developed and delivered under a collaborative private and public sector partnership model. Each regional cohort is delivered by a private sector lead facilitator and a DAF coordinator. Each participating staff member receives substantial skills development, as well as significantly enhancing their industry networks. DPI co-ordinators are also able substitutes for the lead facilitators and program manager when required, giving them the opportunity to hone valuable facilitation and project management skills fostering professional development. There are also opportunities for all alumni to further their skills by going on to be mentors of future participants of the program, as well as be involved in program committees, planning and delivery. This structure of re-engaging alumni to lead within the program ensures the foundational values and culture remain as the program continues to expand.

Results

Since 2020, 53 participants have graduated from 7 cohorts. 22 graduates (41.5%) have been appointed to community and industry committees within two years of finishing their ABL programs. There are 45 examples of leadership progress such as applying for a higher-level leadership program, career progression, and becoming directly involved as a co-operator in industry RD&E. Graduates have reported applying ABL learnings to their beef businesses, including adopting improved practices on-property such as better financial literacy, focusing on drought resilience and business planning, earlier attention to family succession, and improved communication. The current 53 alumni remain connected to the program through social media platforms, attending a biannual forum and most recently, through partnering with The Connection Table.

During the 2024/2025 mid-point reflection step, the current 22 participants have already recognised improved confidence in their approach to new opportunities for personal and professional growth as well as gratitude for a new level of awareness and understanding of the beef industry supply chain.

Monitoring & evaluation (M&E) of past ABL cohorts recorded a consistently excellent participant satisfaction rating >85% for all online learning modules, and >90% rating for in-person events. The mid-point reflections of the first three modules of the 2024-2025 program has similarly documented exceptional results. Participants answer four questions using a rating between 1 and 7. The averages of the results of these questions are expressed as percentages in *Table 1*. ABL modules are designed as ‘tasters’, including skills and knowledge important to leadership and beef industry professional development. This program, Modules 1-3 have shown significant before-after knowledge improvement, are averaging >90% score for the value of the information to the individual’s business, and average >85% for the likelihood of making change/s.

Table 2. ABL participant feedback scores, modules 1-3 (2024/2025).

	How would you rate your knowledge and understanding BEFORE this module?	How would you rate your knowledge and understanding AFTER this module?	How valuable was the information you have been provided in the module in assisting you to conduct your business?	How likely are you to make this change/changes?
Module 1 Understanding Self and Others	47%	80%	97%	92%
Module 2 Governance	40%	77%	88%	84%
Module 3 Financial fundamentals	53%	79%	89%	82%
Average	47%	79%	91%	86%

Discussion

ABL has been developed as a tailored leadership program that overlays relevant technical skills with self-development that fosters attitudinal change and enables participants to build stronger networks and develop the confidence to contribute and influence. This is demonstrated through the large number of participants who have moved from the program into community and industry roles. The program builds capacity to create awareness of the significant challenges the beef industry faces throughout the supply chain that are specific to environmental stewardship, economic sustainability, and human resilience and participants reporting leadership progress are better placed to help address these challenges. There have been numerous occasions where participants have acknowledged that the skills and confidence developed through ABL have allowed for improved communication and conversations on property, which has resulted in better relationships and positive impacts on succession within family businesses.

Nettle et al (2022) reports that extension strategies that most facilitate practice change are peer-to-peer groups and one-on-one advice and they are most impactful when stacked together. This is consistent with the results ABL has achieved in participants adopting new practices that include better financial literacy, focusing on drought resilience and business planning, earlier attention to family succession, and improved communication. ABL participants were selected based on application criteria that also considered their likelihood to contribute to group culture such that learning from other group members was possible. Group engagement through face-to-face events was critical in building relationships necessary for successful online engagement. Creating groups with a balance of beef producers, industry professionals and service providers meant a range of personalities, technical skills and industry experience needed to be navigated with skills learned in the program. One-on-one advice was provided by mentors with whom participants met with on a regular basis.

The ABL Alumni recognise the program as being pivotal in their personal and professional development, often referring to the program as “life changing”. The alumni have developed a sense of ownership of the program with a culture of support for each other, further increasing the cohesiveness of Alumni peer to peer learning and relationships. They have continued to expand their networks and the recent launch of The Connection Table has enabled further pathways to leadership development (The Connection Table, 2023). ABL fits comfortably into the landscape of agricultural leadership programs as a first steps program. ABL provides a pathway to more advanced or specific programs such as The Nuffield Scholarship, Australian Rural Leadership Program, Rising Champions and the Zanda McDonald Award.

ABL has positioned itself as a critical change agent, increasing the capacity of individuals for meaningful contribution and addressing challenges across all beef industry sectors. The successful delivery model of topical modules, mentoring partnerships, and group action learning projects facilitated by trained extension and adult learning practitioners, has proven ABL to be a leadership development program unique amongst the beef industry.

The ABL program has built a respected reputation within the beef industry due also to the high calibre of ABL alumni . As a result, the ABL program is now in demand across other states and territories of Australia. There is much to gain for the beef industry in Australia through slowly expanding the footprint of the ABL program beyond Queensland. Improving the knowledge and capacity of the next generation of beef leaders will only benefit the beef industry further.

As of 2025/2026, ABL will endeavour to meet interstate demand for the program and begin to expand across the Northern Australia and New South Wales.

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