



## Sheep CRC Practical Wisdom Notes

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## Postgraduate training—careers and contribution to industry

By **Graham Gardner, Murdoch University**

### What is the Sheep CRC postgraduate program about?

Both the first and second Sheep CRCs had an extensive postgraduate training program supporting research students enrolled in PhD and Masters degrees. Recruitment was based upon academic potential, and commitment to industry, but also involved the careful alignment of student research projects with the CRC's priority research areas. This involved extensive facilitation between prospective students and supervisors, and the CRC research program leaders, ensuring the industry relevance of student projects that optimised the likelihood of success.

### What additional training does the Sheep CRC offer these postgraduate students?

The postgraduate project involved an annual training event structured around a postgraduate student conference, and a professional development workshop. The conference has been run jointly, initially with Beef CRC postgraduate students, and in recent years also with postgraduate students from Meat and Livestock Australia, Australian Meat Processor Corporation, the Pork CRC, and Australian Pork Limited.

CRC postgraduate students attend this event three times over the duration of their studies and are given the opportunity to present a component of their work as a one-page conference abstract (compiled into a conference proceedings) and as a seminar delivered in a formal conference setting.

Extensive verbal and written feedback is then provided by a panel of 10 senior scientists including the CEOs of the Beef and Sheep CRCs, and CRC research program leaders, with the make-up of this panel changing every year. This process stimulates the analysis and write-up of data on an annual basis and also hones the students' writing and presentation skills.

After the conference the students attend a professional development workshop targeting a range of topics rotated on a year-to-year basis. These topics have included scientific writing skills (hosted by Emeritus Prof David Lindsay), delivering to an industry audience (hosted by Jenni Metcalfe, eConnect), science to optimise adoption (hosted by Russell Barnett), and people management skills (hosted by Hugh Wakefield).

A major outcome of this event is the facilitation of a national student network, enhancing ties between students and senior research scientists—many of whom become future employers.

In addition to attending the conference and professional development workshop, the CRC has also supported the attendance of postgraduates at key industry conferences including the CRCs own national conference in Adelaide 2010, and LambEx in Bendigo 2012. Students were encouraged to present at these events, enhancing their connection to industry and developing their skill at presenting to an industry audience.

### What contribution has the postgraduate program made to the sheep industry?

In recent years, there has been a growing concern raised by industry funding bodies questioning the value of their investment in postgraduate research and training. Initially, the rewards of their financial support can be easily identified with valuable research being conducted within the CRC research programs, contributing directly to the achievement of key experimental milestones. In fact, it has been estimated that postgraduate researchers deliver a considerable proportion of the CRC's entire research output. However, a question has been raised regarding the retention rate of these highly-trained postgraduate specialists within the beef and sheep industries.

To measure the success of this program for delivering trained scientists to industry, the CRC has undertaken a graduate tracking survey of all past Sheep and Beef CRC students. This task was completed in 2009, 2011, and 2013, and demonstrated that 70% of postgraduates had found employment directly within the sheep and cattle industries, and that 90% had been retained more broadly within agriculture. Furthermore, the bulk of graduates have been employed directly within senior research scientist or academic positions, emphasising the demand for highly trained research scientists within the sheep industry.