

La Trobe University response to the Agricultural Competitiveness Green Paper

La Trobe University is committed boosting agricultural competitiveness and contributing to local, regional and national communities, by transferring knowledge to useful outcomes. We are pleased to have the opportunity to discuss extension and co-investment in RD&E further.

Extension

It is clear in the *Green Paper* that the extension part of RD&E is critical to the adoption of innovation by primary producers and resulting productivity gains. Historically, Australia has seen huge benefits from its extension services, which has been provided mainly by professional and well-resourced government agents at or close to the farm gate. Recently, as the *Green Paper* states, extension services have been provided to a greater extent by industry and private business, and so have become less impartial.

One solution suggested by stakeholders in the Green Paper is:

...amending research block grants under the Government's research performance funding, arguing that the balance of incentives had not encouraged universities to undertake some activities, such as providing extension services.

However, researchers are not professional extension service providers and amending block grants in this way will not make them so. In addition, extension agents need to draw on a wide range of research outputs and on-the-ground experience to cater for differences in soil types, pest prevalence, climate, varieties grown and so on.

A different solution might be to provide a system of extension services that can be provided by public and private agents as appropriate. All agents would have access to a common pool of knowledge and local experience. Some proportion of extension could be provided online, some proportion by primary producer organisations, or the Rural Financial Counselling Service.

Co-investment in RD&E

At La Trobe University, we are committed to interdisciplinary research and have focused our research efforts in specific areas, such as 'Securing Food, Water and the Environment'. As noted in the *Green Paper*, however, long-term, cross-industry RD&E that benefits all sectors is not well supported in the current RD&E system of funding.

Some areas show promise, such as the Industrial Transformation Research Program, funded by the Australian Research Council, with a 2014 to 2015 priorities including 'food and agriculture'. However, Australian research support is currently under review and we will not know what the Cooperative Research Centres, for example, will look like until this process is finished.

It would be welcome for the review process to address the sometimes unrealistic timeframes on applying for and receiving support for agricultural research.

The University endorses the four key areas for RD&E investment identified by Government: advanced technology; biosecurity; soil, water and natural resource management; and adoption of R&D, and would like to see more cross-sectoral investment so that we can link primary producers with manufacturers.