



# Final report

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## Elders-MLA Co-innovation and Adoption Pilot

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## Abstract

The private sector is becoming the primary deliverer of research outcomes in Australian agriculture. Historically private sector engagement has been through consultants or individual advisors (eg. agronomists) from commercial companies. To date, no formal attempts have been made for a large rural agribusiness such as Elders to formally engage with an industry body to scope opportunities for broad-scale collaboration.

This project was a three-year pilot in Queensland with Elders to establish, develop, and evaluate a co-innovation and adoption model. The objectives of this project were addressed by working with Elders' agents and advisors to engage with their clients to identify current activities, needs and future requirements. This would then guide requirements for training activities or applied research and development work that would need to be conducted to address the identified needs.

The Elders-MLA co-innovation project did not achieve all of the original objectives, yet the project activities undertaken have provided some valuable insight into how a Rural Agribusiness can partner with MLA across a region to act as a vector of information to and from producers. Future collaborations should focus on establishing a clear protocol for project communication, contingency plans for staff turnover and appropriate processes for the development of initiatives from concept to action.

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## Executive summary

### Background

This project came about following discussion between Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA) Program managers and Senior Elders Livestock Agency staff in 2018. With MLA staff looking for alternative pathways to disseminate research outcomes, and Elders Livestock Agency looking to upskill staff and provide an additional point of difference to the service provided to clients.

With numbers of research extension staff reducing across the country, the private sector is becoming a primary deliverer of research outcomes. Historically private sector engagement has been through private consultants, or individual advisors (agronomists, consultants) from commercial companies. To date, no formal attempts have been made for a large rural agribusiness such as Elders to formally engage with an industry body to scope models for broad-scale collaboration.

This project was a three-year pilot with Elders Qld based agents and Elders senior managers to establish, develop, and evaluate a co-innovation and adoption model. The focus of activity was to solicit producer's needs, RD&A priorities, develop case studies of innovative producers and extend R&D outcomes to producers. Outcomes will inform how MLA and businesses such as Elders may collaborate in the future to drive development of the Australian Red Meat Industry.

### Objectives

1. Elders Insiders online portal updated to offer the functionality of an Innovation portal. Includes creation of a new sub-portal specifically for the Elders/MLA Co-innovation Project, plus ongoing support for the portal.
2. Elders field agents collecting (and recording) producers' ideas, needs and case studies and disseminating innovative ideas and solutions.
3. Elders Innovation Manager collating field ideas/insights into value added insights for input into MLA (and Elders) R&D/Innovation activities (KPI = 5 submissions within year 1, 10 within year 2, and 20 within year 3).
4. Elders disseminate MLA's R&D outcomes that are specific to Qld producers being engaged.
5. up to 4 'Major Studies' per annum which would involve engaging the portal supplier (Vision Critical) researchers where they would assist with end-to-end process of briefing, research design through to reporting.
6. Consultancy on all Elders/MLA developed and issued studies, with an initial estimate is 20 studies p.a.
7. Elders-MLA Producer Innovation awards operational and valued by producers and Elders agents.

Despite the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, most objectives were achieved throughout this project. Where specifics of delivery may have changed, the primary objectives around identification of innovative ideas and R&D priorities were achieved.

## Methodology

The objectives of this project were achieved by working with Elders' agents and advisors to engage with their clients to identify current activities, needs and future requirements. As trusted advisors engaging with their staff on a regular basis, the Elders network has a broad footprint and can facilitate regular communication. Outcomes of this client engagement can then inform Research, Development and Extension activities for Elders and MLA to participate in.

## Results/key findings

Rural service providers such as Elders have a broad reach and impact on farm businesses at multiple levels. Services provided include but are not limited to finance, insurance, real estate, livestock marketing, agronomic advice, livestock production advice and the supply of farm inputs. Having multiple touch points with clientele leads to the development of strong trusted relationships.

The Elders-MLA co-innovation project has been partially successful in achieving the initial project objectives. The outcomes have provided some valuable insight into demonstrating how a Rural Agribusiness can partner with MLA across a region to act as a vector of information to-and-from primary producers. Both partner entities have had to navigate how to optimise communication to ensure that activities progress in a timely fashion.

The key findings of the project relate to the logistics of how these large institutions can efficiently collaborate to bring innovation and producer needs together to increase the uptake of known research and technology. Over the course of this project, the following findings have been confirmed:

- Utilising the Elders client base provides access to many innovative producers adopting new ideas and technology
- Many livestock agents, production advisors and agronomists are keen to develop their skills to innovate and provide their clients with a point of difference service
- In-person activities are key to engaging staff and clients to full effect
- Greater engagement on case studies and innovation concepts is achieved when some key topics of interest are identified and pursued.
- A formal process flow and regular meetings is required to maintain consistent communication of project outcomes between large entities such as Elders and MLA. Communication needs to be clear and transparent.
- It is critical to have buy-in from operational staff that hold the local relationships with producers in order to engage producers and achieve a two-way flow of information.
- Wherever possible, there should be an alignment between the commercial priorities of operational staff members delivering project content and the objectives of the collaboration.

- Staff retention and consistency of project managers is highly desirable when delivering long term collaborative projects. In managing the realities of staff turnover, it is important to have comprehensive handovers and sustained company priority given to the project.
- In a collaborative project it is important that both parties actively contribute to the development of initiatives. While primary roles of funding provider and delivery body are maintained, both need to be responsible for ensuring the project is a success.
- Clear project objectives and desired outcomes need to be developed upon project initiation to ensure expectations are understood by all parties.
- Communication delivered to industry on topical or seasonal issues needs to be delivered in a timely manner to maintain relevance
- A focus on delivery and value adding of key pieces of work may be more impactful than development of numerous possible initiatives.

### **Benefits to industry**

The primary benefits to the Industry that result from a collaboration between MLA and Elders are:

- a. The partnership between Elders and MLA is viewed favourably by primary producers, who see the engagement as a positive step towards identifying practical priorities for levy expenditure.
- b. Upskilling of agribusiness advisors at all levels (sales, agency, agronomy, livestock production, consultancy) enabling greater servicing of primary producers needs.
- c. Accelerated roll-out of research outcomes through collaboration between research staff, MLA, Elders and the Elders client base

### **Future research and recommendations**

Based on the findings of this pilot, there is considerable potential for commercial agribusiness and MLA to formally partner to deliver existing initiatives to industry and identify priorities for development of new initiatives. However, it is critical that this is approached with clear expectations of delivery, consistent staff resourcing and demonstrated engagement of local agribusiness staff.

There is still a considerable need for the existing information packages to be disseminated to industry, and networks such as Elders are able to facilitate this through their Livestock Production Advice and Thomas Elder Consultancy networks.

Recommended key points for a second stage of collaboration between Elders and MLA are:

- Development of process to take new initiatives from idea to activity
- Engage a broader geographic range (National approach or North and South)
- Training of staff to innovate and “think outside the box”
- Focus on staff training and client workshops
- Identify priority topics to engage staff and clients to drive innovation
- Formally engage with state red meat advisory councils to identify priorities

This second stage collaboration could potentially be achieved via the development of a head agreement between MLA and Elders that outlines a strategic partnership under a co-investment model. Under this head agreement, individual initiatives/projects/activities would be agreed upon

and run as sole projects. Initiatives may be those existing within MLA or new ones developed through consultation with clients and staff. Treating projects individually as sub-units under the head agreement would ensure each project is resourced appropriately, enable greater control of project progress, and ensure more definable outcomes.

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# 1. Background

## 1.1 Extension and adoption in the Australian red meat industry

The Australian Red Meat Industry is faced with challenges of increased cost of production, greater requirements for environmental accountability and market competition from other animal and plant protein sources. Despite increased production efficiency requirements, the rate of productivity growth across the Australian Agricultural industry has declined from 3.6 to 0.6% per year between the 1989-2004 and 2005-20 period (Department of Agriculture, Water and Energy 2022). To face these challenges, the industry must focus on driving production efficiency, measuring and demonstrating environmental impacts and differentiating the quality and sustainability of product in the marketplace.

Meat and Livestock Australia invests a considerable (\$170 million in 2018-19) amount of money on Research and Development, driving innovative technologies and management practices. This work is conducted by Universities, Government research agencies and the private sector (consultants, producer groups, independent business). Achieving commercial adoption of this research is an area of the industry that requires increased and ongoing support. Historically, Government extension services were the main vector for information to be disseminated to producers, and adoption supported on farm. Across Australia, Government extension resourcing has declined, and the private sector is playing an increasing role in information exchange.

Rural Agribusiness providers such as Elders Rural Services Limited have always played a role in the extension of research, although typically in an *ad hoc* fashion through support of events and individual employees with a specific interest in a topic of relevance to their clients working with Universities and Government to undertake activities.

Over the last decade, the Elders business has developed considerably, with the technical services provided by agronomy, livestock production and agribusiness consultants becoming a core component of the business, supporting the targeted provision of rural products and farm supplies. Elders has a broad footprint across Australia, with an extensive network of staff (2200 total, including 190 agronomists, 25 Livestock Production Advisors and 5 Agribusiness consultants) servicing 35000 clients out of 232 retail store locations.

With the need for the red meat industry to drive growth, the increase in private engagement for extension, and Elders focus on the differentiation of its technical services offering, this project sought to investigate how a large rural agribusiness could engage with Meat and Livestock Australia to serve Australia's red meat producers.

This project was established as a pilot focusing on Elders "Northern Zone", covering from north of Dubbo NSW, through Queensland and the Northern half of the Northern Territory. Covering Sheep meat, goat and beef cattle production systems, the project sought to engage with Elders staff and clients to evaluate methods to upskill staff, disseminate information and gather feedback to identify new case studies and areas of future investment within the industry.

The project underwent a re-evaluation and some adjustments to milestones half-way through the contract period, due to a combination of COVID-19 induced restrictions and management change within both MLA and Elders.

The results of this project sought to provide insight on strategies and inform future investment into how MLA is best served to engage rural agribusiness engagement in research, development and extension activities

## 2. Objectives

Primary Objectives set at the commencement of the project were as follows:

- 2.1 Elders Insiders online portal updated to offer the functionality of an Innovation portal. Includes creation of a new sub-portal specifically for the Elders/MLA Co-innovation Project, plus ongoing support for the portal.**

Partially achieved

- 2.2 Elders field agents collecting (and recording) producers' ideas, needs and case studies and disseminating innovative ideas and solutions**

Achieved

- 2.3 Elders Innovation Manager collating field ideas/insights into value added insights for input into MLA (and Elders) R&D/Innovation activities (KPI = 5 submissions within year 1, 10 within year 2, and 20 within year 3).**

Partially achieved

- 2.4 Elders disseminate MLA's R&D outcomes that are specific to Qld producers being engaged**

Partially achieved

- 2.5 Up to 4 'Major Studies' per annum which would involve engaging the portal supplier (Vision Critical) researchers where they would assist with end-to-end process of briefing, research design through to reporting.**

Not achieved

**2.6 Consultancy on all Elders/MLA developed and issued studies, with an initial estimate is 20 studies p.a.**

Partially achieved

**2.7 Elders-MLA Producer Innovation awards operational and valued by producers and Elders agents.**

Partially achieved

**2.8 The Elders Innovation Manager will also develop submissions/updates to MLA categorised under the following headings: Proven Solutions (that would make good case studies), Summary of producer needs and situational insights (updated quarterly), Good ideas (for MLA to develop RD&A activities), Innovation Project Submissions (to be co-funded by Elders and/or Producers, with MLA)**

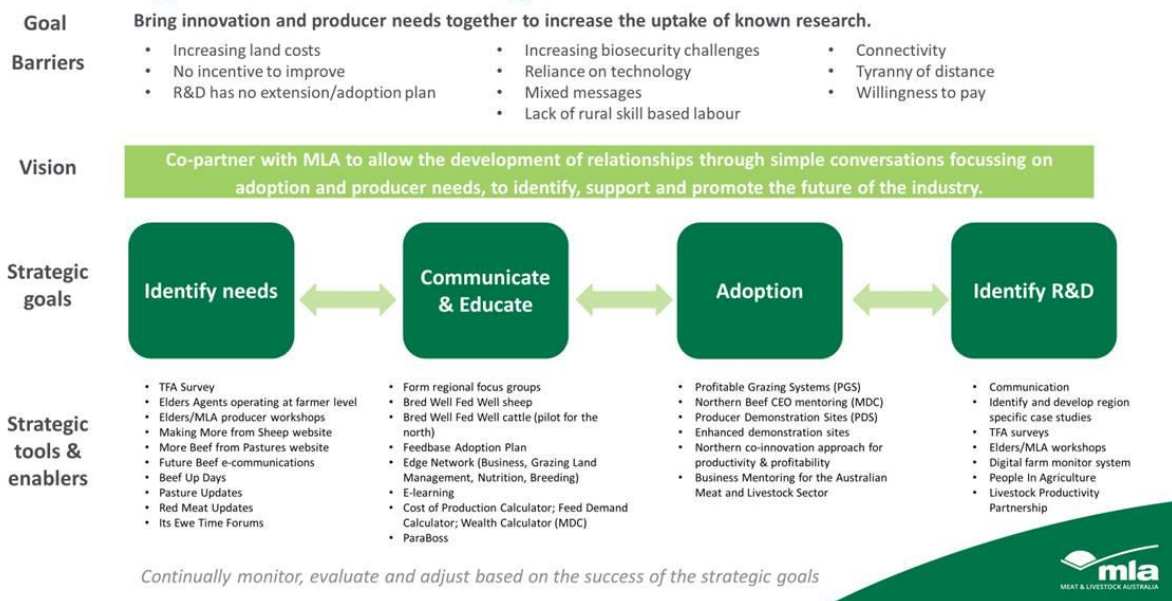
Partially achieved.

**3. Methodology**

**3.1 Strategic Plan**

Below is the schematic of the original Strategic plan that was drawn up at project inception.

**Strategic Plan on a Page 2018/19**



## 4. Results

### 4.1 Elders Insiders online portal updated to offer the functionality of an Innovation portal. Includes creation of a new sub-portal specifically for the Elders/MLA Co-innovation Project, plus ongoing support for the portal.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the increase in online engagement, Elders clients rapidly became overwhelmed with surveys and webinars. Structural change within the Elders business also saw the Elders Insiders platform discontinued and replaced with alternative surveying tools such as SurveyMonkey in mid-2020.

Feedback from staff and clients was that ideas were best submitted through Elders staff to the Coinnovation manager on a case-by-case basis. Case studies and innovation concepts were recorded on a shared file between MLA and Elders as identified and developed from there for milestone reporting purposes. As such, this model was adapted for the duration of the project post-COVID.

It is worth noting that Elders staff were faced with more and more online requirements and tools that were necessary to perform their primary roles within the business. As such, they rapidly prioritise and the platform to capture new ideas and innovation can fall to the back of their mind and not be utilised. As such, the most successful engagement and capture of ideas was achieved through face-to-face engagement between staff and clients. This reflects the traditional communication channels still favoured by the rural community in Australia.

With a return to less restricted operations, the use of online tools to engage and capture information may become more relevant but the competition with day-to-day operational responsibilities must be kept in mind. Whilst an online platform or portal may be useful to store information, it is likely that it will still require some facilitation from dedicated staff that are seeking the information.

Over the course of the project term, the Thomas Elder Institute (TEI) has been established and serves as the conduit for Research, Extension and Industry development initiatives across the Elders business. TEI is evaluating the use of an online system for documenting innovative topics, project ideas and business initiatives. However, this platform will only be used by TEI staff that are engaging with industry, staff and clients face-to-face and the face-to-face engagement with clients and staff will still be used to capture the information about possible opportunities.

## **4.2 Elders field agents collecting (and recording) producers' ideas, needs and case studies and disseminating innovative ideas and solutions.**

### **4.2.1 Case Studies**

Working with the Elders Agency and Advisory network across the project zone, 30 case studies were identified and reported on over the course of the project. Case studies were identified by the Elders staff member, reported to the Co-innovation manager and information captured from the relevant stakeholders to report the concept or study to MLA.

A broad range of topics from Agtech to pasture agronomy and livestock genetics were covered with ideas captured across a wide geographical area. These case studies have been provided to the MLA communications team to consider for inclusion in MLA communications material to industry.

Initial engagement with Elders staff saw little understanding of what would constitute a case study, and the types of activities and practices on farm that would be eligible. With the large number of clients being serviced by the Elders business, there are many eligible farm businesses implementing innovative and best management practices and technologies. As such, the number of businesses that could be showcased is vast. Communication with the Elders staff network increased the voluntary identification of case studies as the project progressed. The greatest success was seen when a range of key focus topics were identified and taken to the staff network to identify clients that may be relevant to the case study.

Whilst staff and clients can put forward their own topics and ideas for development, it is suggested that management from MLA and Elders should work together to provide a list of focus topics. For any future efforts to gather case study information, it is suggested that lists of focus topics be generated and taken to staff to identify clients that may be eligible.

Once material has been generated for distribution through MLA communication channels, it can either be re-shared directly or also published through Elders communication channels including the Elders website, social media pages and through the quarterly digital magazine "Seasons".

### **4.2.2 Innovation Concepts**

A total of 19 Innovation Concepts were reported over the project period. Topics included new forage sorghum genetics with higher soluble carbohydrate content through to Ultra high frequency RFID tags for identifying animal behaviour. Although initially open to all new and innovative ideas raised by clients or staff, it became apparent that most of the issues being raised were less "blue sky, innovative ideas" and more like case studies of the implementation of progressive best management practices. As a result, it was decided that during the last 6 months of the project greater focus was placed on four of the existing MLA programs and initiatives that required greater support or further development.

In future, if truly innovative ideas are to be captured from Elders staff and clients, then a 1:1 consultative approach needs to be adopted. The terminology initially adopted in this project

was found to confuse both staff and clients, as “innovation concept” is a broad term. Broad scale communication via email, phone and surveys does not allow clear clarification of what the project team within Elders and MLA were seeking. It is believed that individual consultation and the adoption of a “design thinking” approach will serve to identify the needs of clients and staff firstly, then tailor a solution (Innovation concept) to support solving it.

#### **4.2.2.1 Integrated Management of Cattle Tick in the North**

Integrated management of cattle tick in the north remains a key focus for MLA. For Elders, we recognise that tick management is a key focus area to optimise productivity of northern beef enterprises.

Currently, training of staff in the Elders network is undertaken by senior livestock production staff and technical staff from our major animal health suppliers (eg. Elanco, Zoetis). Whilst there is a considerable amount of other extension material available, we recognise that much of this information is not well known or used by industry. During the process of this project, extensive discussions were undertaken with the Paraboss team and a subset of Elders advisors participated in online training successfully.

The basis of this innovation concept is to develop a partnership between Elders, MLA and leading animal health suppliers to address communication, education and research priorities for managing ticks in Northern Australia. The specifics of this partnership are yet to be finalised but are likely to be focused on co-investment on timely communication material and training events for staff and clients. The Paraboss and Tickboss platforms will form an excellent base for this training.

The outcomes of the concept will be greater staff and client education regarding tick monitoring and control, with greater adoption of best management practices to control them. Engagement with producers and advisors may also identify gaps in the knowledge base and priority areas for further research.

#### **4.2.2.2 North Breeding Business (NB2)**

MLA’s Northern Breeding Business 2 program is focused on the establishment of facilitated producer groups to create more productive and profitable businesses through adoption of established practices and technologies.

Elders Livestock Production Advisor network and Thomas Elder Consulting (TEC) would be able to support the NB2 project through:

- A) Identification of suitable participant producers
- B) Development of groups of producers to participate
- C) Facilitation of groups/delivery of content
- D) Support of producers to gather information on farm

Preliminary discussions have been had with Program Manager Nigel Tomkins about the opportunity to support this program. Given that NB2 delivery is longer than the remaining term of this project, activities have been focused on producer identification, program communication, and upskilling of the Elders network to be aware of the program and the opportunities to participate.

The NB2 team have undertaken an assessment of the current NB2 producer groups and have identified that Far North Queensland and the Northern Territory are currently areas lacking coverage by the NB2 program. At this point in time, targeted communications through the Elders network and client base have been undertaken to identify a group of producers to undertake the program.

Elders would like to continue pursuing opportunities such as NB2 outside of the Coinnovation project as it provides scope for upskilling of producers and work opportunities for consultants and senior livestock production advisors.

#### **4.2.2.3 Northern Genomics Program**

MLA's Northern genomics program is focused on making genetic analysis cheaper and more readily available. Significant opportunity exists going forward for northern producers to have genomic testing undertaken and breeding values developed for their herd.

Elders offers a commercial genomic test for ranking of crossbred bos taurus cattle in collaboration with Neogen Australasia. Since the launch of this offering in late 2020, there has been a considerable level of interest from Northern Australian producers, particularly with composite cattle with a large Bos indicus content.

After initial discussions during the last 6 months of the Coinnovation project, we have been notified by Dr Ben Hayes, lead of the UQ genetics team, that they are ready to trial/demonstrate the commercial genomics tool with some additional commercial herds. Having consulted with the Elders team, the consensus is that clients will be interested in both herd average and individual ranking offerings, and as such any commercial offering should cater to both of those needs.

The intention is to continue to develop a communication plan to provide to the Elders advisor and client network to identify four commercial herds to test and demonstrate this genetic offering with producer groups formed for each herd based on geographical relevance (4 separate groups). These groups will meet on 3 separate occasions to go through the entire process and outcomes of the genetic testing. This initiative will continue on outside of the coinovation project as a pilot. Further expansion of the initiative may be subject to funding for support of resources.

#### **4.2.2.4 Profitable Grazing Systems: Pasture Dieback, Carbon Farming**

Considerable interest consistently arises from Elders clients around managing pasture based grazing systems throughout Queensland, with a major focus on managing soil health, pasture dieback and opportunities presented by Carbon Farming.



Thomas Elder Consultant Peter Spies has been approved to deliver the PayDirt North package in Nthn Qld on behalf on MLA. The major focus of the Profitable grazing Systems package is on soil health and managing pastures. The intention is to deliver the Feedbase package to 12 groups across 18 months at the following locations:

- Tablelands & Far north (i.e. Mareeba)
- Gilbert/Einasleigh Uplands/northern Gulf group (Mt Surprise/Georgetown) Maranoa (Roma/Mitchell)
- Northern Highlands (Clermont/Kilcummin)
- Central Highlands (Emerald/Springsure)
- Burdekin (Charters Towers)
- Flinders (Richmond/Julia Creek/Hughenden)
- Coastal Dry Tropics (Bowen/Collinsville/Home Hill)
- Dawson-Callide (Biloela/Taroom/Theodore/Moura)
- Northern Brigalow belt, Connors-Isaac (Nebo/Mackay)
- Central West (Barcaldine/Blackall)
- Fitzroy (Rockhampton)

The recent development of the Elders Carbon farming service, focused on supporting clients to engage in registered carbon farming projects through the Emissions Reduction Fund, will support broader activities focused on carbon farming across the Elders client base. We envisage that with the goals of CN30 and NFF's CN50 impending, the role of sustainable agricultural practices and emission reduction will require considerable on-ground technical support. Elders seeks to continue discussions with MLA around how best to deliver information and support to red meat producers across the country in this area.

#### **4.3 Elders Innovation Manager collating field ideas/insights into value added insights for input into MLA (and Elders) R&D/Innovation activities (KPI = 5 submissions within year 1, 10 within year 2, and 20 within year 3).**

Although a number of concepts were identified throughout the project term, the number of them actually converted to activities was low, and thus the overall number of activities targeted in the objective was not achieved by the project.

Despite ideas being collated during the project term, they were not synthesised into MLA R&D priorities. This was largely due to staff from both Elders and MLA failing to discuss ideas together and develop them further into the R&D/Innovation activities. Future success converting innovative ideas to Research and Development opportunities would best be managed through a formal process by which key Elders and MLA staff engage to discuss the topics and identify the relevant research institutions to engage to progress their development. The MLA Donor Company funding mechanism provides an existing pathway for this and is available for application at all times. By reaching out to appropriate program managers, Elders

will consider this option going forward as project concepts present themselves. This may include adoption specific activities.

### **4.3 Elders disseminate MLA's R&D outcomes that are specific to Qld producers being engaged.**

Elders communications team worked closely with the Co-innovation manager during the course of the project to share relevant MLA communication initiatives across Elders website and social media platforms.

Whilst a number of Elders staff (in sales, support and advisory) roles were exposed to this information, and responsible for disseminating it to producers, it has not been possible to determine the number or extent of engagement during the project term.

Over the last 6 months, Elders Technical Services team has developed an internal newsletter to disseminate across the Elders business. This has been used to profile the Co-innovation project and call out for case studies and innovation concepts.

It is suggested that any further collaboration between Elders and MLA would include formal engagement between the two entities communication teams, and the development of a process for sharing of targeted information through Elders communication platforms. This may be well achieved through the development of a co-branded technical service/R&D newsletter that is disseminated to the Elders client base. This could be developed as a national service or split into 3-4 regions with content tailored to regional needs.

In addition, a framework could be established with senior livestock agency, sales and advisory staff to record when they are engaging with producers and providing them information relating to MLA research outcomes. This would provide MLA with a gauge on locations and topics of greatest significance.

### **4.4 up to 4 'Major Studies' per annum which would involve engaging the portal supplier (Vision Critical) researchers where they would assist with end-to-end process of briefing, research design through to reporting.**

The Elders Insider portal was decommissioned early in the project term (late 2019), and as such Vision critical were no longer engaged by the Elders business to deliver on this objective. As this was early in the project term, no project development was commenced by vision critical. As per 4.3, a number of innovative concepts were collated during the term of the project, but none were fully developed through to a research design stage. With the subsequent occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic, engagement with clients via online means was rationalised and a greater focus placed on extending current initiatives and celebrating existing case studies and innovation as detailed in 4.2.

No new major studies were commissioned as part of this project. In future it would be possible to facilitate the development of innovative concepts through to major studies by adopting the closer consultation and design thinking approach outlined in 4.2.2.

#### **4.5 Consultancy on all Elders/MLA developed and issued studies, with an initial estimate is 20 studies p.a.**

As the “innovation concepts” raised were more akin to case studies of best practice management (As per 4.2.2), no new studies were commissioned that required consultancy. In future, alteration of the way that MLA and Elders technical services staff engage with Elders network staff and clients will enable specific issues to be identified, and solution/s developed that can be evaluated via the various project/study pathways offered through MLA.

#### **4.6 Elders-MLA Producer Innovation awards operational and valued by producers and Elders agents.**

December 2019 saw the first of the Elders-MLA Producer Innovation awards, held in Tamworth, NSW alongside the MLA conference. The awards were conducted by the Hargraves Institute, and focused on the people and how they contribute to driving innovation and adoption in the Australian Red meat Industry.

Hargraves Institute staff conducted an interview process with Elders employees to understand their beliefs, mindset and actions as they relate to assessing and adopting innovation. Questions also sought to understand how these staff members connect and influence their clients. Twelve employees were interviewed, and certificates presented by senior MLA and Elders staff.

In addition to employees, Elders also recognised the outstanding efforts of certain clients who had been identified as contributing to innovation and adoption in livestock production. Producers were interviewed by the Hargraves Institute as per the Elders staff interviews, and five producers were presented with Awards at the Tamworth event.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic the innovation awards were put on hold. Based on staff feedback it was deemed that the greatest value is derived when awards can be presented in person, in the presence of clients and peers. With the return to normal operations and in-person events, Elders sees value in continuing to celebrate the efforts of staff and clients through the innovation awards.

In order to continue to develop an innovative thinking approach whilst under restrictions, the Elders Co-innovation project team worked with the Hargraves Institute to develop an online training program for staff. Named “Connected Elders”. “Connected Elders” aims to be a training program for client facing Elders staff to deepen existing client relationships, find new clients, facilitate adoption of research and enable innovation.

This learning program aims to develop client facing staff with the skills to:

- Help clients identify problems and solutions

- Access and communicate relevant research through consultations, workshops, web portals
- Identify and communicate regional research needs so MLA and other research agencies can address them
- Help clients manage change
- Build collaborative rather than transactional relationships with clients.

Connected Elders delivery commenced online but will continue in person for 12 staff members past the term of the Co-innovation project.

## 5. Conclusion

The overall progress of the Elders-MLA co-innovation project was significantly disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and staffing changes in both partner organisations. With limited ability to conduct events in person and engage with clients in a group situation, much of peer to peer and collaborative learning opportunities initially planned were not able to be conducted. Staffing changes caused communication to falter at times and momentum to slow. In addition, the initial project set out by MLA and Elders was ambitious and very broad in scope. As a result, many objectives were not achieved and the overall project could not be deemed successful as measured by the project objectives. Despite several limitations, this project has identified a number of key findings that outline how MLA and Elders can look to work together more efficiently in the quest for driving practice change and adoption on farm.

### 5.1 Key findings

The Elders-MLA Co-innovation project has commenced an understanding of how a Rural Agribusiness can partner with MLA across a region to act as a vector of information to and from primary producers.

The key findings of the project relate to the logistics of how these large institutions can efficiently collaborate to achieve the desired outcome of bringing innovation and producer needs together to increase the uptake of known research. Over the course of this project, the following findings have been confirmed:

- Utilising the Elders client base provides access to many innovative producers adopting new ideas and technology
- Many livestock agents, production advisors and agronomists are keen to develop their skills to innovate and provide their clients with a point of difference service
- In-person activities are key to engaging staff and clients to full effect
- Greater engagement on case studies and innovation concepts is achieved when some key topics of interest are identified and pursued.

- A formal process flow and regular meetings is required to maintain consistent communication of project outcomes between large entities such as Elders and MLA. Communication needs to be clear and transparent.
- It is critical to have buy-in from operational staff that hold the local relationships with producers in order to engage producers and achieve a two-way flow of information.
- Wherever possible, there should be an alignment between the commercial priorities of operational staff members delivering project content and the objectives of the collaboration.
- Staff retention and consistency of project managers is highly desirable when delivering long term collaborative projects. In managing the realities of staff turnover, it is important to have comprehensive handovers and sustained company priority given to the project.
- In a collaborative project it is important that both parties actively contribute to the development of initiatives. While primary roles of funding provider and delivery body are maintained, both need to be responsible for ensuring the project is a success.
- Clear project objectives and desired outcomes need to be developed upon project initiation to ensure expectations are understood by all parties.
- Communication delivered to industry topical or seasonal issues needs to be delivered in a timely manner to maintain relevance
- A focus on delivery and value adding of key pieces of work may be more impactful than development of numerous possible initiatives.

## 5.2 Benefits to industry

The Elders-MLA Coinnovation project has contributed few direct benefits to industry through the generation of new innovation and the implementation of applied research, development and extension initiatives. It has however, been a valuable learning experience to understand the implications of an industry body and a large rural agribusiness working together. Co-delivered initiatives must be bigger and bolder, but more targeted and managed at a specific topic/issue level.

Rural service providers such as Elders have a broad reach and impact on farm businesses at many levels from Finance to Livestock sales, agronomy and the supply of farm inputs. Having multiple touch points with our clientele leads to the development of strong trusted relationships. Utilising the Elders network to identify producer needs, new ideas and deliver R&D outcomes enables an industry body such as MLA to have a greater reach and impact than can be achieved with their staff and program deliverers alone. Although the rural agribusiness partner relationship does not make the existing modes of extension delivery obsolete, it significantly broadens the geographic range and producer demographic (business scale, financial success, openness to adopt).

## 6. Future research and recommendations

Further development and refinement of the model by which Rural agribusiness and MLA can work together with a “bigger, bolder” approach is warranted. This needs to focus on establishing staff

roles to coordinate the initiative, and implementation of process for communication, recording of outcomes and development of new initiatives. Significant potential value exists for future collaborations, however sufficient commitment and planning is required by all parties to realise this.

Recommended key points for a second stage of collaboration between Elders and MLA are:

- Development of process to take new initiatives from idea to activity
- Engage a broader geographic range (National approach or North and South)
- Training of staff to innovate and “think outside the box”
- Focus on staff training and client workshops
- Identify priority topics to engage staff and clients to drive innovation
- Formally engage with state red meat advisory councils to identify priorities

This second stage collaboration could potentially be achieved via the development of a head agreement between MLA and Elders that outlines a strategic partnership under a co-investment model. Under this head agreement, individual initiatives/projects/activities would be agreed upon and run as sole projects. Initiatives may be those existing within MLA or new ones developed through consultation with clients and staff. Treating projects individually as sub units under the head agreement would ensure each project is resourced appropriately, enable greater control of project progress, and ensure more definable outcomes.

## 7. References

Department of Agriculture, Water and Energy (2022). “Australian Agricultural Productivity Dashboard”. Online, accessed January 2022. <https://www.awe.gov.au/abares/research-topics/productivity/agricultural-productivity-estimates>