



**The Worshipful Company of Farmers – the 66th course
Agricultural Business Management Course 2017**

22nd January to 11th February 2017

Royal Agricultural University, Cirencester, Gloucestershire UK

Report for Nuffield Australia, By Simon Mattsson, 2014 Scholar

Sponsor: Fairport Technologies, Western Australia

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Thank you

Attendance of the course and international travel would not have been possible without the support of the “Fairport Technologies Award”, Chontell Giannini of ITravel Griffith, Nuffield Australia, and the Worshipful Company of Farmers. Thankfully they all value and place importance on attending such a prestigious course, and I am forever grateful for the opportunity to attend.

SUMMARY

The course was at the beautiful Royal Agricultural University at Cirencester, which is surrounded by beautiful grounds and farms, in what is a busy part of England.

The three-week residential course, led by John Alliston and Rita Walsh kept my head spinning. With one great speaker after another, one could have been mistaken at the end of the first week that we had exhausted the list of empowering leaders in UK agriculture. But the further two weeks proved otherwise. The high regard, in which the course is held, clearly attracts great industry leaders.

There were three foreign participants on the course this year, with myself and two farmers from Germany attending. I believe most participants would agree that a small dose of foreign agriculture with a totally different perspective added to the diversity of the group providing a different outlook to UK-based agriculture.

The real strength of the program though, does not come from the speakers themselves or the course content. It comes from the comradery that is developed over the three weeks with the other course delegates. There were 18 of us in total, with a wide variety of agricultural industries represented and levels of experience with which to draw from.

Highly successful in their own right, it was interesting to draw from their knowledge when looking at my own business. We analysed other businesses and discussed the National Farmers Union (NFU), LEAF MARQUE, Brexit and many other issues. The breadth of knowledge that was evident across the group is enviable and I have no doubt that this will be useful for all of us moving forward in our businesses, professional and personal lives.

A strong message from many of the presenters was that British agriculture, or more importantly global society, will be challenged going forward especially considering the implications of Brexit, climate change on the environment, resources, food security, population and politics. These things are creating a time of instability, opportunity, and a new social agenda that is defining the way we farm. Innovation and strong leadership were identified as being essential to farmers navigating and prospering in this new environment.

WEEK ONE

The first week of the course focused on getting to know the other course delegates quickly so that the free flow of conversation and communication happens naturally. This also focuses on our own personal development and includes an in depth psychometric test which helps to identify strengths and weaknesses and leadership styles of each individual. The focus on our own business, our own time management skills, setting strategic direction and coping with stress proved useful with most delegates commenting on the difficulties of maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

I was somewhat sceptical about the process. However, after talking to my wife Sue once she had read the results, it became obvious just how accurate the assessment was.

For me, the highlight of week one was having my own business chosen as one of six to be selected as case studies by the rest of the course delegates. While this meant I needed to spend most of the first weekend putting together a more detailed business and personal plan, it was also an opportunity and an honour to have my business assessed by three other members of the delegates on the course.

Luckily, there was also time for some modern English culture as well, with a visit to the Cheltenham races, which was quite the spectacle and a new experience for this boy from the Australian bush.

WEEK TWO

The focus in the second week was largely on hearing from successful business leaders, and how they had overcome difficulties and how they navigated through the difficulty, or their leadership style within the business. We also had the opportunity to break into groups of three and analyse the six businesses that had been chosen by the delegates, at the end of week one.

The groups presented on where they saw these enterprises headed in the future, what strengths, weaknesses and opportunities they saw for the business. This was a humbling experience for both those businesses that were being analysed and those doing the analysis. Trust had to be developed quickly as sensitive information was shared openly. It was an excellent exercise to be able to break a business down, and then create a plan moving forward, working in a group with different expertise and then bringing all of that back together. It was a rewarding experience.

The second weekend saw most of the course delegates return home. However, the three international delegates (including myself) along with a couple of the UK delegates were hosted by Sam Phillips (another of this year's delegates) to visit his family's organic farming operation. We were treated to an in depth look at what it means to produce organic lamb and arable crops. We were also treated to a wonderful Sunday roast lamb lunch.



The above photo shows the delegates in front of a mountain of OSR meal on the Hawthorns Estate during our visit at the end of the second week. Chris Padfield, our host, was most generous with his time and knowledge during our visit. For me it was an eye-opening look at UK agriculture.

WEEK THREE

The highlight of the third week was working in groups on a real case study. We visited a chicken and arable farming family in the area and they allowed us into their business at a very intimate financial

and family level. They shared with us their aspirations and then left us to see what we would recommend.

John Alliston split us into three groups of six and utilizing the new skills we had acquired in the first two weeks along with own individual business strengths, we were able to put together very professional presentations. I found this an invaluable experience that will assist me in the future when analysing my own business and making recommendations.

The outstanding calibre and intellect of the speakers continued through the third week, which for me, at times was a little daunting! I was suitably humbled by the knowledge sharing and openness of the speakers. For me, the industry leaders who had succeeded in building brilliant businesses and sharing their frank accounts on how they achieved success were inspirational.

CONCLUSION

The opportunity to be part of a network of business colleagues, with whom I can bounce ideas off, is an asset to our business and me personally. I see this as the best legacy of the course.

The Worshipful Company of Farmers is a prestigious organisation of which I am honoured to be associated with. It is a charitable organisation that amongst other tasks helps to educate and mentor the next generation from starting out in farming right through to future industry leaders.

I look forward to where this new connection will take me and my fellow delegates on the course in the coming years.

Take home messages from the course:

- At consistently less than four years on average, FBTs have been too short for too long.
- The top performing farm businesses are often marginally better at **everything** rather than significantly better at **anything**.
- Boots are more important to Farm Mangers than desks.
- Ask which adjectives do my customers value, and will pay more for.

It was with a heavy heart that I left the RAU at the end of the three weeks. The combination of excellent facilities provided by the RAU, the outstanding course which was over seen by John Alliston and Rita Walsh, the friendships developed by all eighteen delegates has created a wonderful memory that will last a life time for me.

Simon Mattsson
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