



Creating champions for bush future

THE THOUGHT of further study can be daunting, especially if you are mature-aged, have little or no recent experience of tertiary education, and live in a remote area such as Australia's vast arid and semi-arid rangelands.

Australia's rangelands cover more than 75% of the continent but are home to only about 11% of the population.

They are also home to Australia's sheep and cattle grazing industries and amid a rapidly changing global economy, combined with a growing consumer demand for quality assurance in sustainable production practices, rangeland managers have a quest for innovation and a new style of land management education to ensure their future delivering sustainable production and other benefits for Australia.

Last year the Australian Government granted \$1.1 million to a new rangelands education program to help farmers manage their soil, vegetation, water and biodiversity.

The rangelands distance education initiative is the brainchild of Rangelands Australia, a national industry, community, education and government partnership committed to building capacity for a strong future for Australia's rangelands.

The University of Queensland and Meat and Livestock Australia are founding partners of the Rangelands Australia venture. While based at the UQ's Gatton Campus in the School of Natural and Rural Systems Management, they work closely with people in the rangelands to provide relevant, practical learning opportunities for people who will use and manage our rangelands.

The government's \$1.1 million under the National Landcare Program has, in the first instance, allowed Rangelands Australia to scope and refine a series of new rangeland-specific postgraduate courses first offered in 2004. The first mature-aged students graduated last year.

These postgraduate-level courses by distance represent an educational opportunity denied to people on the land who simply cannot afford time away from their properties, or work to attend conventional courses in cities or regional centres.

The courses are designed to build skills necessary for future success in the rangelands, and student evaluations have confirmed the courses are high-quality and leading-edge in content, and provide personal growth and professional development for people (students) across Australia.

About 55% of the Rangeland Management postgraduate students are owners or managers of



The Champions Network (L-R back): John Taylor, director, Rangelands Australia and University of Gatton, Qld; Elizabeth Wallis, Champions Co-ordinator and academic adviser, UQ Gatton; Dee Wilkes-Bowes, Karanga near Yass, NSW; Rachael Williams, Paika Station near Balranald, NSW; Chrissy Brown, Reola Station near Wanaaring, NSW; Michael Jeffery, Derby WA.

pastoral enterprises (half of these entered through Recognition of Prior Learning).

The balance of students include Landcare or NRM facilitators, regional body and agency staff, training providers and valuers. Student ages range from 25 to 65 years, with most in their 30s and 40s. They come from NSW, NT, Qld, SA, Vic and WA, and just over half are women. Almost all have a day job.

Now in its second phase, the training initiative has established a small national network of 'Rangeland Champions'. These are rangeland residents who have experienced the rewards of tertiary education by distance.

They are passionate about further education and the future for the rangelands, and are spreading this passion by providing after-hours advice, support and encouragement to other remote learners. There is no cost for the Champions service.

"This is a wonderful initiative that will encourage people in remote and very remote areas to further their own education," Chrissy Brown, one of the new Champions from Reola Station in north-west NSW, says.

The Champions prepared for their new roles through a week-long induction program. During the induction program, Dee Wilkes-Bowes, of Karanga near Yass, NSW, said, "This is a great initiative that recognises the specific challenges facing remote learners."

Further, Sharon Bell, of Dulkaninna Station near Maree, SA, observed "I would have loved to have had a Champion when I was doing external study, especially on the down days."

Biographies of these and other Rangeland Champions are posted on the Rangelands Australia website www.rangelands-australia.com.au.



Find out more:

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Enrolments for first semester next year close on February 1.