

## The Provision of Information, Advice and Training to the Scottish Farming Sector: a Study of the Key Organisations

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### Abstract

Like all regions in Europe, the agricultural sector in Scotland has seen major changes in the structure of farming and rural businesses, and also in the role of supporting agencies. Moreover, most European countries are in the process of reformulating aims and policies for rural areas, particularly for those that are disadvantaged or environmentally fragile. At the same time, UK and European Union organisations with responsibility for rural policy are increasingly concerned with assessment procedures<sup>1</sup>. It is in this context of change that we propose to analyse the role of knowledge and information systems in the Scottish farming sector, namely the performance and interaction of institutions that provide rural decision-makers with information, advice and training (IAT).

Three techniques were used to gather qualitative information in 1998: 1) semi-structured interviews with key people of the main providers of IAT services in Scottish Less Favoured Areas (LFAs), i.e. those parts of the country where farmers are deemed to operate under permanent natural handicaps; 2) a Rapid Rural Appraisal exercise known as “Venn diagram” to explore relationships among providers and 3) the analysis of secondary data. The Isle of Skye was used as an example of a Scottish LFA, for the selection of regional levels of national organisations. Twenty interviews were completed, at different levels of 16 organisations, taped, transcribed and analysed.

Although the deliberate selection and low number of providers contacted prevent results from being representative, and so preclude generalisation, this study highlighted interesting aspects of IAT provision in Scotland. The Venn diagram proved to be a very useful tool to explore network relationships; concentrating on the diagram allowed for a more relaxed, but still very focused conversation. Graphic illustration of relationships clarified the issues of importance and frequency of contact, with arrows indicating shifts in size and distance.

The performance of IAT providers in Scotland is frequently very good, but varies with the organisation in question, and with specific programmes or projects. Performance often remains in project mode, with output being channelled through programmes that don't always form a coherent whole. Local delivery generally produces good results, and can be even more effective given the common lack of strong planning and communication between headquarters and local offices.

However, the lack of separate planning for IAT, reduced importance of rural businesses in most organisations' remit, reactive nature of delivery methods, and rudimentary targeting and promotion activities, all increase the characteristic biases that have been described for the uptake of IAT services by these businesses<sup>2,3,4,5</sup>. Most providers realise that coverage and penetration of their services isn't uniform, but the fact that some didn't see a need for collecting information on their clients is telling of their targeting and evaluation processes. The use of poor evaluation criteria, concentration on larger

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projects and reliance on informal feedback discriminates against small-scale projects and non-financial or indirect impacts.

While at national headquarters level relationships between major players can be quite hostile, local ones are often described as very good, and frequently down to a small number of people. The range and type of bodies that figure on an organisation's "network" are very much dictated by direct need, for funding, crucial information or political credibility. Most organisations concentrate on key players in their field of interest, and their interaction is often at superficial level (eg: consultation) and rather fragmented (eg: concerning single projects only). There is also under-used potential in the different networks within organisations themselves, particularly large ones.

All providers have witnessed a growing tendency to work in collaboration with other organisations, accelerated by reductions in individual funding, opportunities for "collective" funding, and the need to enhance project credibility. Overlap, in terms of competition or duplication, isn't thought to be a major problem, especially in the Highlands and Islands, where resources are considered to be thin on the ground, and to do something significant, organisations must "pull together".

We recommend the following improvements to organisational performance: rethinking planning and evaluation, so that programmes are coherent and flow clearly from policies; carrying out qualitative planning and evaluation and adjust targeting to at least take biases into account, if not attempting to correct them; and investing more in staff training to reduce isolation and improve performance.

We also agree with Röling<sup>6</sup>, who suggests that in order to promote knowledge utilisation, it might be more effective to strengthen the capacity of intended users to form an effective user system, than to strengthen the intervention capacity of institutions involved in agricultural development. This could be achieved by fostering support among rural businesses, for example.

As to network flows, we recommend: widening the range of organisations in the network to include standard agencies such as banks, accountants and farming press; seeking synergy with other areas and organisations, such as that between the farming and tourism sector; increasing collaboration to the level of strategic planning; and establishing information flows from customers to agencies.

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