

Courses About Horses – Graduates in the Horse Industry

by Emma Morel and Dr Peter Smith

The horse industry in general isn't one that has a long history of tertiary educated graduates entering its ranks, and racing is no different. We've had plenty of apprentices and a very successful track record of skills development through workplace experience with knowledgeable and older horse operators – but not a lot of college or university trained people.

Marcus Oldham College in Victoria runs one of the better known courses for horses with its Diploma of Horse Business Management. That course provides the industry with graduates who have a sound foundation knowledge of conducting horse enterprises, but how do they make the transition into the real world of work? Answering that question is the focus of a research project Marcus Oldham's Centre for the Study of Rural Australia has embarked on recently, and will continue to work with over the next several years.

Dr Simon Livingstone, Principal at Marcus told us:

"Our horse business management course has a very good reputation in the industry and we prepare our students with sound knowledge. All the



same, we know they are moving into an industry that doesn't have a strong history of tertiary education preparation, and we know there are bridges for our graduates to cross as they engage with the workplace".

Horse enterprises employing graduates expect to get a return on their investment through improved business practices and business outcomes. Marcus Oldham is valued in the industry for its emphasis on industry experience and the exposure to industry during the course. Building theory and practice together

is an attractive and acknowledged feature of Marcus Oldham courses. As Livingstone went on to say:

"New knowledge should develop new practice; and old practice should be challenged from time to time by new knowledge. Our graduates are entering an industry where the knowledge and skills have traditionally been forged through the work. While that develops sound skills and practices it can also mean we are slow to innovate – and innovation and response to change are features of twenty-first century business life that we just can't ignore. We have to get those features operating in our businesses as a part of the everyday enterprise culture."

The Centre for the Study of Rural Australia at Marcus Oldham sees these issues of transfer of the new graduate's knowledge into the horse industry as an area of investigation not well explored so far in Australia. The Centre also sees that the College can use a better understanding of these processes to prepare graduates for the work to come; and to prepare businesses to make the most effective use that they can of new knowledge. Of course, most horse business management graduates from Marcus come from family back-



grounds that heavily involve horses as a living or as recreation, so there is a body of practical knowledge that students have to work with even before they start the course.

The College, through its Centre for the Study of Rural Australia, has conducted a series of focus groups with students who recently graduated with their Horse Business Management Diploma.

Those focus groups concentrated on expected barriers and opportunities to deploying new knowledge to the family farm, and the strategies graduates had in mind to deploy that knowledge. The focus group outcomes have been analysed by me together with Dr Peter Smith, a research leader working with the Centre for the Study of Rural Australia. The results indicate graduates see opportunities in a number of ways. One graduate summed up several of these nicely when she said:

“I’ve had a wide exposure to a whole range of issues through this course. It would have taken me years to get across all those things if I had just learned in the workplace – and some of the experiences I’ve had in the course would probably have never been available in most workplaces. So I reckon I’ve got a breadth of knowledge that will allow me to hit the ground running – but I also know that I still have a lot to learn from people in the workplace and more generally in the industry. I’ll be pretty humble in my expectations and I’ll be eager for my next lot of learning to be from experienced people at work.”

Another student drew attention to the human side of her course when she said:

“What I’ve developed is a fantastic network of people in this industry now – some like me who are young and just starting off, and some who are well established and experienced. I can bring that width of people to my work, and I can widen the workplace resources also by my understanding and knowledge of resources available to the industry through the

Table: Types of knowledge used in the workplace

Type of knowledge	Characteristics of that knowledge	Where we develop that knowledge
<i>Propositional</i>	Knowing theories and facts	Mainly in education and training
<i>Procedural</i>	Knowing processes and how to do things	Some education; a lot in the workplace
<i>Strategic</i>	How to decide what to do and when	Mainly in the workplace
<i>Attitudinal</i>	Workplace values and attitudes	Mainly in the workplace

internet.”

Cautionary remarks from graduates involved the recognition that while they have been at Marcus Oldham they have had lecturers to ask for information and knowledge and a library to access. Once out at work those resources may not be so readily accessible and they will need to spend more time themselves identifying and searching out the information resources that they need. New technology skills, particularly efficient internet use, will assist in that sense of isolation from information, as will the phone and email as they contact others in the industry. Nevertheless, graduates were aware of the more limited information base they will have, but were also valuing of their new skills in seeking that out. Indeed, they saw these skills as an important contribution they would be making to the business.

Smith is an expert in the development of workplace knowledge and he sees it as the development from being a novice to an expert through several stages. He believes that

“...a novice tends to be quite rule-driven, so the job is done according to the rules learned during training; but an expert makes complex judgements and short-cuts the rules when needed, and develops new rules out of experience”.

There are also different forms of knowledge that are important to understand as new knowledge gets used expertly in the workplace. The table above shows these forms of knowledge.

It is the procedural and the strate-

gic knowledge that graduates learn in the workplace that is really important in becoming a valuable employee, and some of the graduates in the focus groups recognised that when they said things such as:

“..it’ll be a proving time and they’ll want to see what I can do first, and getting the experience to apply the knowledge will be pretty important”.

In my own role, as Horse Business Management Course Director at Marcus Oldham, I can readily see that our graduates have a strong understanding of the need for them to establish workplace knowledge built on the foundation we have already given them. They are also quite conscious of the fact they should not be over-confident when they enter the industry as employees.

In conclusion, Simon Livingstone sees this research as ongoing and potentially adding enormous value to the knowledge stock of our graduates and the industry:

“The intention of the College is to develop this research further over the next couple of years by, firstly, following up on these graduates next year after they have been out at work for a while. Our graduates will need to develop strategies for the deployment of their knowledge to benefit the business they will work for. We will be working with students and employers to develop a range of strategies that will ensure our graduates are equipped with a set of techniques that will enable the development of the procedural, strategic and attitudinal knowledge in an efficient and effective way”.