



Australian Rural  
Leadership Foundation  
Evaluation Case Study:  
Business Staff  
Scholarship



Australian  
Rural Leadership  
Foundation



Viewed from the air, Western Australia's Kimberley region is an endless expanse of terracotta red with an overlay of eucalyptus green. Its seemingly smooth landscape sprawls over nearly 423,000 square kilometres and belies its rugged nature. One of the most sparsely populated places in the world, it is a true wilderness: the country of people who are of an existing civilisation older than any on earth. Overwhelming in its scale and majesty, it reminds people of their diminutive stature when contrasted against the enormity of nature. It is also a place where leaders convene.

The Australian Rural Leadership Program (ARLP) uses time in this timeless place as part of its flagship leadership development program. Every year, a new intake of around 30 people engages in what is described as "a series of unique, immersive experiences (delivered in real-world contexts) to develop the adaptive skills to confidently overcome future challenges and act for the 'greater good' of rural and regional Australia."

Emerging regional leaders are keen to participate in the program that has been a success for almost 30 years. Many are supported in their endeavour by connecting with corporate sponsors or scholarships. In the case of Western Australia's grain handling giant CBH Group, it sees value in offering this opportunity to its own employees as part of its leadership development.

With sessions taking place in Australia and overseas, the 15-month course transforms people's leadership approach and the contribution they can make, one which inspires others to embark on the same journey themselves.

Participants are reluctant to detail exactly what happens in the Kimberley, to ensure the experience can be as impactful for future participants, but the experience in the ochre red outback of Western Australia is a catalyst for soul-searching. Stripped of everything they know, including knowledge about themselves, they are forced to look inward through the window only such wilderness can provide. The overseas experiences also have high impact, with the sheer enormity of tasks facing community leaders in places like India and Indonesia, and the hope that exists within such populous places without all that Australia has, serving as a complementary exercise in humility.

Richard Simonaitis, Gavin Bignell, Brianna Peake and Mandy Johnston are among those who have benefitted from CBH's involvement in ARLP. All were motivated to apply by the changes they had seen in others. Each of them tells a different tale when it comes to the program's impact: but all of them speak of the Kimberley as critical in their growth as leaders.



## Richard Simonaitis

### Chief Executive Officer, AEGIC.

ARLP Course 17: 2010-2011.

Richard was working in the marketing and trading division of CBH when he started the ARLP. His working life has taken him from Western Australia's south-east to the red dirt Pilbara and south again. His family had moved to seek a new life in Australia after 600 years of farming in Lithuania, with his father working near Ravensthorpe as an underground miner in the mineral rich area that is part of a grain producing region. With mining and farming encapsulating his childhood, it is hardly surprising that he ended up working in both fields. Time spent in gold mines and at CBH receival points accepting grain led to work in sampling, quality control and logistics--- including a role with BHP at Newman, where 17 trains, carrying 180,000 tonnes of iron ore, were dispatched from the mine. Daily.

In 2010, he had transferred to Perth from his position as Albany Port Zone Manager and a colleague recommended he might benefit from the ARLP.

He was right. Richard says the ARLP gave him skills he needed to lead empathetically and effectively. Since graduating, and before assuming his current position with AEGIC, his roles included five years at the helm of CBH's National Accumulations Team.

He is also a former Chairperson of the Country High Schools Hostels Authority, an inaugural board member of the Australian Grains Institute capacity building project, a Member of the Australian Institute of Company Directors and has a Graduate Certificate in Business with the University of Western Australia. He is on the Grain Trade Australia Trade and Market Access Committee, the Wheat Quality Australia Wheat Classification Council and is part of the Grains Industry Market Access Forum.

"The program allowed us to identify what was holding us back and gave us mechanism to deal with those things" Richard said.

Like all of the graduates interviewed, Richard speaks of how the ARLP instilled in him a depth of empathy, confidence in decision making, acceptance of responsibility and trust in others--- combined with the desire to ensure that those you lead do so from a place where they feel valued and confident. But when it comes to how these skills are acquired, there is a degree of secrecy. Graduates do not want to ruin the experience for others.

For Richard, his pivotal moment, the point where his life changed, occurred in the Kimberley.

He describes an experience during which course participants were literally and figuratively stripped of their baggage: no phones, no friends, no family. Out of their depths, in a culture that was alien to them and a landscape that loomed over them. With a bunch of people they did not know. Carrying out tasks and challenges that exposed

their weaknesses and allowed them to draw on their strengths. They were vulnerable; stripped of the trappings of the world they knew and were comfortable in, but at the same time supported by people who did know where they were, and did know where they belonged, and knew the country well enough to be at ease in it.

A community elder, part of the leadership team, suggested that they could take their emotional baggage with them. Or leave it there, with him. He would take care of it for them. Richard now says that for someone who had lost his father when he was 17 years old, this was a healing experience.

"No one had ever offered to do that for me before: it was the most generous thing anyone had ever done for me," Richard said.

The combination of sharing people and a spectacularly wild landscape made the Kimberley the perfect scenario for personal growth, but the region is not the only asset used to form compassionate leaders.

"The whole program works on making you resilient, humble, authentic and forgiving," Richard said.

"In India, we saw amazing examples of leadership," he said.

He said that he felt that "if these people can affect change with limited resources" there was potential for leadership to affect change anywhere.



# Gavin Bignell

## General Manager Port Operations, Fremantle Ports.

ARLP Course 19: 2012-2013

From a family farm near Kojonup, Gavin followed the well-worn route of young people in regional Australia and headed to boarding school. After studying in Perth for years 11 and 12, he continued his academic pursuits with Agricultural Science at UWA.

Upon graduating, he worked for the Liebe Group in Dalwallinu, then for the Grain Pool, and CBH Group before becoming involved in marketing and trading via Plum Grove and then DailyGrain. He returned to the CBH fold when it bought DailyGrain, before transferring to a product and service role within CBH. While CBH's General Manager of External Relations was on 12 months maternity leave, he filled that role. On her return, he continued with a role in operations as Kwinana Zone Manager, and then in operations within the head office. Deciding it was time for a change, he teamed up with former Plum Grove/DailyGrain colleague to develop Livestock Pricing. In March 2020, just as Covid-19 barrelled into the lives of Australians, Gavin Bignell joined Fremantle Ports as General Manager Operations.

In 2012, he was accepted as CBH's candidate for the ARLP. He applied because he had seen firsthand changes in other people and heard good things about the program.

"I was in a leadership role but moving from heading a small team to more of a leader role and was

toying with the idea of doing an MBA," Gavin said. He had seen leaders he respected with many of the traits that he knew the ARLP encouraged.

As he headed for the Kimberley, he was already emotionally vulnerable. He and his partner had just had their first child, and as the father of a three-week-old baby he was subject to all the emotions that go with leaving behind a child.

"I am a planning person, and there we were: no IT, no control, out of depth, put in with a bunch of people we did not know...opinions were formed quickly and people were put "in boxes"...over time, my view on all of them became very different as I became aware of their trials and tribulations...I developed more understanding and empathy," Gavin said. "I learned that you just do not know what has happened in people's lives."

"The Kimberley landscape: it is incredible countryside that puts everything into perspective," Gavin said.

"During one experience, when I had a go at being a leader during an overnight activity, I learned that there are times when you need to lead from the front, and there are times when you need to lead from behind. You need to prepare others for success: this is a lesson I have learned forever and is not something read in a textbook," he said.

"The feedback from others was confronting, but it allowed for growth." The learning experiences offered by India were a contrast to the Kimberley...but empathy and acceptance were the outcomes again.

"This is a country facing a lot of complex issues, but I learned that with great leadership, people can make a difference despite all of that," Gavin said.

Other workshops in Australia, including those involving homeless people, reinforced and refined messages learned. "I learned a lot about situational leadership, and the effectiveness or otherwise of traditional leadership," Gavin said.

"I learned a lot about myself, and the need for empathy and hope. I have been guilty in the past of being a glass half-empty person...in terms of life: the sun will always come up! I now value the importance of a positive attitude and how to find a way to get a good outcome," he said. "The ARLP gave me trust in my own capability and knowledge of my limits, as well as my virtues."

This trust was something he needed when he started his new job at Fremantle Ports, right as the Covid 19 impact was being felt by the port, with ships and infected passengers dominating operations (and the media!). His ARLP experience came to the fore almost immediately with a decision being made as the situation changed and requiring him to trust in the ability of those around him, who had been there longer, to do their jobs.

"The empathy developed during ARLP was essential at this time, both in terms of working with staff and the situation at large." Gavin said.

"It gave me the confidence to know what role I was best to play, and what responsibilities needed to be taken up by others," he said.





## Brianna Peake

### General Manager Grower and External Relations, CBH Group

ARLP Course 21: 2014-2015.

Brianna Peake grew up on a farm in Dalwallinu and headed to Perth for her last three years of high school, before studying Natural Resource Management at UWA. After a year on the road travelling Australia, she headed back to Dalwallinu and worked as executive officer with a grassroots grower group, the Liebe Group (2004-2008). Her itchy feet took her abroad again, and she travelled around Europe for 18 months, a stint which included work with a grain handling organisation in the UK. When she returned to WA, she worked with CBH Grower Service Centre during the 2009-2010 harvest. Time working with DailyGrain gave her further experience with stakeholders in the grain industry. Then it was back to CBH in 2011, this time managing the Grower Service Centre, before shifting her career path into the corporate affairs area.

Brianna's ARLP experience occurred at the same time that she took on a new role at CBH in government relations, and it was the ARLP that gave her the confidence to spring from that role to the CBH executive team, heading up her division in February 2016.

"The ARLP grew my confidence as I took on challenging roles and ultimately gave me the boost I needed to take on the head of division role: even though I was terrified, I knew I could back myself to do it," Brianna said.

The program worked: but as the first female from CBH to embark on the training, why did she participate in the first place?

"Gavin Bignell, a long-term colleague and friend had done it, he said it was amazing," Brianna said.

"Those who had done the ARLP were a little bit guarded about the experience, but said it was "life changing," she said.

Even though participation in the ARLP had not been a burning ambition, she now says it should have been.

Brianna reiterated the fact that the Kimberley was hugely influential in changing people's mindset.

"I gained a greater insight into the local indigenous community and their connection to country. I was humbled by the landscape, the history, and the generosity of the people," Brianna said.

"I grew up in regional WA but I was embarrassed by my lack of knowledge about the detailed history of indigenous Australia and understanding of the issues that stem from this history: the ARLP showed the need to think about this differently, and have the confidence to engage in this conversation more broadly and seek to have influence where I can," she said.

She said that the level of engagement with community in the Kimberley was unique and heartfelt.

"The whole Kimberley experience is one of the most exceptional things I have ever done: the feeling of freedom will stay with me for a long time," Brianna said.

"You don't use the lessons and skills gained all at once, but you tuck them all away to use later...you can refer to the experiences and learnings years afterwards," she said.

Brianna said that the ability to listen with empathy gained during ARLP has come in handy in her role in working with many stakeholders across the industry and in seeking to have influence in positive outcomes for regional WA.

"We have learned to be sensitive to each person's story," Brianna said.

“In the Kimberley, our facilitator let situations play out...and come to a resolution... it was a safe place where we could allow ourselves to let go, but I learned that you cannot be a great leader without trusting people.”



## Mandy Johnston

### Accumulations Products and Services Manager, CBH Group

ARLP Course 24: 2017-2018.

Mandy grew up on a wheat and sheep farm about 40km from Gnowangerup, near the Mindarabin siding. As a farm child, she was adept at entertaining herself. Though she loved the farm and being a "solo kid", she also enjoyed the activities and benefits of town and attended Gnowangerup District High School before heading to Perth for four years at boarding school. She was accepted to study journalism at Curtin University in 2001, right at a time when the print media's demise seemed imminent and reporting did not seem to be a wise career choice.

At her father's suggestion, (he said she was the best grain sampler he had ever seen) she deferred and pursued a career in agriculture, with a non-CBH company. Eventually she side-stepped back to CBH, having worked as a grain sampler with the company when younger. Starting in the grower services centre in 2011, she has played various roles within the organisation. From October 2015 to March 2018 she was the Accumulations Products and Services Manager, and from March 2018 – September 2019 she worked as Head of Accumulations, responsible for a team of 24. She returned to her previous role as Accumulations and Product Service manager in May 2020 so that she could enjoy parenting and work part-time.

It was the change she saw in ARLP graduates around her that encouraged her to apply to take part in the course herself.

"I had seen colleagues I respected going through the program...I saw them change over the 18 months. I saw the change in people I worked with closely," Mandy said.

"CBH was focused on driving personal development and setting your own goals...I wanted to be a part of it," she said.

"I spoke to people about the program, they had been challenged, it was a massive commitment but worthwhile. I have not looked back."

Throwing herself whole-heartedly into the experience, she helped to organise activities, and found she had to use "guts and practise the process of managing people in difficult situations."

Mandy said that she felt that the ARLP created some leaders, but just as importantly, it took people who were already leaders and made them more empathetic and effective.

The program gave her confidence to realise her own abilities, and those of others.

"Self-doubts prevented me from taking on opportunities. The ARLP gave me the confidence to feel comfortable with my achievements," Mandy said.

"The Kimberley revealed some clear things about my personality. I had trust issues due to my earlier independence, having found it easier to "do things yourself," she said.

"In the Kimberley, our facilitator let situations play out...and come to a resolution...it was a safe place where we could allow ourselves to let go, but I learned that you cannot be a great leader without trusting people."

Soulmates were created in the Kimberley, but away from the north of WA, back in the work environment, communication skills acquired during the program allowed for knowledge of what people needed and what is needed to achieve goals.

"As a people manager, I am attracted by the ability to mentor," Mandy said.



## As a collective

Richard, Gavin, Brianna and Mandy were not in the same ARLP cohort, but they share a bond that is great due to the shared CBH provided ARLP experience. They spoke of the fact that they were connected by the knowledge that the others had completed the same program, had a similar outlook and “take” on leadership, and that even if they hadn’t experienced exactly the same program, they knew how vulnerable they had felt at different stages and how humility had allowed personal growth and made them more empathetic at the same time as improving their level of confidence in their own abilities.

As Richard pointed out, validation in a cohort of potential leaders boosted self-assurance.

And then there is the long-term impact of a shared experience, with a definite and instant connection between graduates of the program.

For ARLP graduates, identifying others who had experienced the same program is reassuring, with an underlying faith in what is a known quantity. Graduates understand about negotiation, compassion; there are shared interests, values and skills.

“It’s like seeing the wings on a pilot’s shirt – you know they are not going to crash the plane,” Richard said.

“If you look around the bios in the industry, so many people in leadership roles are fellows of the ARLP,” he said.

“It is hard to measure the value of the program, but the proof is where people end up contributing to the industry, with a cohort of people with a shared experience sitting in leadership roles.”

Richard said that CBH’s sponsorship of participants and the program benefited the community: as a grower owned organisation, everything it did had a community input.

“Everything CBH does is with a benefit to regional community in mind,” he said.

The benefits are ongoing with ex-CBH ARLP graduates continuing to play a role in the industry.

Gavin said that the connection made with people in groups in the first few weeks of the program is strong.

“We know things about each other that no one else knows. The connection with those in the cohort is very strong. While it is not an exclusive club, we shared a unique experience,” Gavin said.

“The ARLP connection with CBH pays dividends. I believe it pays across the organisation: people may leave, but they are still in the industry and part of it,” he said.

Brianna agreed that even graduates of the ARLP who were from different cohorts were able to connect immediately.

“When I meet with members of ARLP cohorts the shared experience strips away barriers as you know they have been equally raw and open to

change,” Brianna said.

She said the outcome of involvement with the program was worth the cost to CBH.

“While some ARLP graduates are still with CBH, those that have left still have strong connection with most involved in ag in some way, or in the regions,” Brianna said.

Mandy pointed out that CBH, being a cooperative owned by growers, was sympathetic to the needs of the regions and the need to invest.

And the ARLP graduates still with the company tended to invest any spare time and energy they had in the community programs that it was involved in, and that tackled a wide range of issues from mental health and leadership, to the support of the arts, sport and the Royal Flying Doctor Service.

In Mandy’s words, the ARLP “unlocked the potential of the farm girl” who never pictured herself on a board of anything, and along the way, it has helped to build up a core of skilled leaders, Australia-wide, who will help foster a regional Australia that reflects the empathy and competence of a new generation of rural leaders.



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