**Empowering women in agriculture**

**Insights from the Fairlight Foundation internship programme evaluation**

**By Dr Lesley Petersen**

The Fairlight Foundation internship programme supports women in developing the skills, confidence, and knowledge needed for careers in agriculture. Established to address the under-representation of women in leadership roles, the programme aims to prepare participants for meaningful contributions in the industry. Since the programme’s inception in 2020, the programme has evolved to include practical on-farm training, leadership workshops, and mentorship, equipping interns with a broad range of skills for their future careers. With 100% of participants completing the programme and stepping into meaningful roles, the Fairlight Foundation is making a tangible difference in the sector.

Each year, three interns are selected for the programme, which focuses on hands-on learning and skill building workshops, helping the interns connect their academic learning with real-world agricultural practice. Participants gain essential technical skills, such as livestock handling, fencing, and machinery operation, whilst also improving communication, teamwork, and problem-solving abilities. These core competencies prepare them not only for the practical demands of farming but also for the broader challenges of the agricultural sector. The programme seeks to empower participants to take on leadership roles in agriculture and becoming mentors and role models for others. As one graduate shared, *“The programme gave me the confidence and skills to pursue leadership opportunities and inspire other women in the sector.”*

The evaluation was funded by Food and Fibre Centre of Vocational Excellence (Food and Fibre CoVE) to assess the programme’s impact, outcomes, identify any areas for improvement, and explore its future sustainability. The evaluation also aimed to determine how the programme could inform similar initiatives in the wider food and fibre sector. Feedback was gathered from four key participant groups: current interns, graduates, employers of graduates, and the Fairlight Station team, including the programme Director. Their perspectives provided a balanced understanding of the programme’s strengths, challenges, and areas for growth. Key questions included understanding the programme’s effectiveness in advancing women’s careers, meeting employer needs, and building industry capability.

The interns and graduates consistently shared how the programme helped them connect theoretical knowledge with practical application. Several highlighted the value of learning on-farm skills, which enabled them to adapt to different farming environments and situations, whilst also building their confidence to tackle challenges independently. One intern noted, *“The programme allowed me to apply what I had learned at university in a way that made sense on the farm.”* Graduates also emphasised that these experiences enhanced their adaptability and confidence, skills they now apply in their roles as junior shepherds on farms.

The programme also focuses on the development of core transferable skills. In addition to technical training, participants strengthen their communication, teamwork, and critical thinking abilities. These skills support success in farming roles and open pathways to leadership and advisory positions within the agricultural sector. Graduates noted that the programme gave them the confidence and tools to mentor others and inspire more women to pursue leadership roles in the industry.

Both graduates and interns highlighted how the leadership training helped them build self-leadership and develop the skills to lead teams and communicate effectively. One graduate reflected, *“The leadership workshops taught me how to work with different people and gave me the tools to support and mentor others.”* This emphasis on personal and professional growth aligns with the programme’s commitment to increasing female representation in agricultural leadership.

Building on this, employers provided constructive input, acknowledging graduates’ technical proficiency, adaptability, and work ethic. Many graduates step into positions with greater responsibilities shortly after completing the programme, demonstrating their ability to contribute effectively to team dynamics and workplace goals. Their ongoing enthusiasm for hiring Fairlight graduates reflects the programme’s success in preparing participants for meaningful roles across the sector. As one employer explained, *“Fairlight graduates are skilled, enthusiastic, and ready to take on leadership roles. They make an immediate difference in the workplace.”*

A key feature of the programme is its focus on mentorship. The Fairlight Station team provides guidance, feedback, helping interns to take on new challenges in a supportive learning environment. In addition to technical and transferable skills, mentorship provides participants with the support and guidance needed to develop their independence and resilience and apply these skills in real-world settings. As the Director explained, *“We aim to develop resilient, capable individuals who can succeed in agriculture and inspire others.”*

The evaluation identified opportunities for further enhancement. Interns suggested making experiences such as dairy farming visits mandatory and increasing the focus on financial management training. There is also scope to introduce content on sustainability, emerging technologies like AI, and cultural awareness to help interns develop diverse perspectives and practices, ensuring the programme keeps pace with industry trends. Interns and graduates also recommended including more self-directed learning opportunities towards the end of the internship to better prepare them for working independently in farm roles.

The Fairlight Foundation internship programme is helping to prepare skilled and confident women for the agricultural sector. Employers frequently express interest in hiring graduates, describing them as adaptable, reliable, and capable of taking on responsibilities. By continuing to adapt and improve, the Fairlight Foundation is not only empowering women to pursue fulfilling careers, but also advancing its vision of a more diverse and innovative workforce, where women play a pivotal role in shaping the sector’s future.

**To check out the evaluation report coming soon, click** [**here**](https://foodandfibrecove.nz/reports-and-resources/project-delivery/ff-initiatives/retention-and-vet-opportunities-for-seasonal-workers-2/)**.**