

# Independent evaluation of the Innovation Manager Program

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## Executive summary

This project has reviewed AMPC's Innovation Manager (IM) Program. The evaluation was undertaken to ensure AMPC's investment in the program is delivering its intended benefits and to identify opportunities for improvement in future rounds of the program. The evaluation involved a review of documents associated with the program, an online survey of participating IMs and their managers, interviews with 20 IMs and senior managers of both participating companies and non-participating companies, and a scan of comparable programs in Australia and overseas. An update of a 2022 benefit-cost analysis for the program by GHD was also undertaken.

The review has found that the IM Program is very well regarded by participating companies and especially by IMs. There is considerable self-reported evidence that the program is achieving its aims of fostering an innovative culture within companies and improving the flow of information within and between processors, and between processors and AMPC. The program is also helping to develop emerging leaders in the industry by developing knowledge, skills, an innovative mindset and confidence. The update of the 2022 program benefit-cost analysis (BCA) has shown a very favourable benefit-cost ratio of around 11.9 for the program, but this should be taken as only very indicative due to the large number of assumptions required.

The review provides AMPC management and Board with confidence that the IM Program is achieving its stated aims and delivering significant benefit to industry. Seven recommendations are made for AMPC's consideration. In brief, these are:

1. If AMPC is going to repeat the IM program—and it does appear to be a very sound and popular investment for AMPC—it should essentially repeat the current design, which is working well, subject to some minor adjustments.
2. AMPC should clarify that the focus of the program is to improve the quantum and quality of innovation among levy payers *by developing and enabling emerging talent in the industry*. This means that companies will not be invited to nominate contractors or to roll over previous participants, except (say) where those individuals have been in the current program for less than two years.
3. If the intrapreneurship course or other professional development courses are to be offered in the next round of the program, AMPC should make it clear from the application phase that participants are expected to fully participate in it, and guidance on the time commitment should be provided.
4. AMPC should resolve irritations concerning the data entry portal and make every effort to demonstrate the value of the data that is collected.
5. AMPC should facilitate the ongoing engagement of program graduates on a 'light touch' basis, i.e. largely allowing them to drive future networking themselves. AMPC's role could include ensuring alumni are invited to industry events and, where appropriate, provided with a space to meet. If it suits AMPC's purposes, specialist communities of practice for information exchange—for example, on the application of AI in plants—could be formed and/or groups of alumni convened to address particular projects or problems/opportunities.
6. AMPC should make stronger efforts to collect data on financial and other outcomes from the program. This is important because, while the program currently enjoys widespread support, it is a major investment and needs to demonstrate value. One opportunity is to incorporate *ex-ante* BCA analysis of at least larger projects into IM reporting. AMPC has a tool that could be used for this purpose. Data collected would facilitate a formal impact assessment of the program, say two years into the next round. This assessment could be done without the *ex-ante* data, although it will be a bigger undertaking, and there is value in developing skills in project evaluation among the IMs.
7. AMPC should also consider developing case studies on IMs, plants or projects that showcase the value of the IM Program.

## Acronyms and abbreviations

|       |                                                        |
|-------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| AI    | Artificial intelligence                                |
| AMPC  | The Australian Meat Processor Corporation              |
| BCA   | Benefit-cost analysis                                  |
| BCR   | Benefit-cost ratio                                     |
| CRRDC | Council of Rural Research and Development Corporations |
| ICMJ  | Intercollegiate Meat Judging (program)                 |
| IM    | Innovation Manager                                     |
| MERI  | Monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement      |
| MLA   | Meat and Livestock Australia                           |
| NPV   | Net present value                                      |
| RDC   | (Rural) Research and Development Corporation           |

## 1.0 Introduction

The Innovation Manager (IM) Program is a major investment in innovation adoption and people development by the Australian Meat Processor Corporation (AMPC). The stated aims of the program are to:

- ◆ improve collaboration and knowledge sharing among plants, AMPC, other external stakeholders, and cross industry via a strong cohesive cohort
- ◆ improve industry extension and adoption
- ◆ assist the delivery of AMPC programs and projects
- ◆ generate industry-relevant project ideas
- ◆ build capacity and provide career opportunities
- ◆ [ability to] support the professional development of individuals and the cohort<sup>1</sup>

The program supports a dedicated IM role within a processor company by co-funding the salary and expenses of the IM, on a matching basis, to a maximum of \$60,000 per annum. The current program runs over three years and will finish in November 2026. Each cohort is in lockstep, so that while an IM may join part-way through the program, the AMPC agreement with their employer will cease with the other contracts at the end of the three years.

The program was significantly re-designed for its present iteration. Previously, the program offered full funding of the IM position. New requirements for external interactions by the IM were also introduced. In the previous program, AMPC co-innovation managers were the main point of contact between AMPC and each company (and its IM). AMPC no longer has co-innovation managers. Under the current program, IMs are required to attend two face-to-face cohort meetings annually as well as quarterly meetings between the IM and AMPC. More comprehensive quarterly milestone reporting was also introduced, and IMs are required to upload certain company data to a shared

<sup>1</sup> AMPC Innovation Manager Program Guidelines

system held confidentially by AMPC. Another new element in the current program is formal professional development training, which in the third year has been an online course on intrapreneurship.

There are currently 21 participants in the program (one of these acts as IM for two plants). Some individuals from the previous program continued into the current one and there has been some turnover in participants since the commencement of the current program.

The 22 plants involved in the program are owned by 15 different parent companies (one company has four IMs, while four other companies have two each). A further two companies were in the program but had their agreements terminated when they were unable to replace IMs who left the company, and another participating company went into voluntary administration partway through the program. Two other companies applied to join the program but did not proceed to signed contracts.

There has been some turnover of individuals in IM positions. Seven plants have had a change of IM at some stage during the program, and two of these have had 3 IMs each.

A review of the IM Program was completed by GHD in 2022. The GHD review estimated the net present value (NPV) of the program to be \$100.2 million, providing a benefit-cost ratio (BCR) of 9.6. For the reasons noted above, however, the program as evaluated in 2022 differed significantly from the current program.

AMPC sought an updated evaluation of the IM Program as part of the normal governance of its investments. The objectives of the project were to:

1. Assess the current AMPC Innovation Manager Program against its intended objectives, including its impact on innovation outcomes, industry capability uplift, and return on investment for participating organisations.
2. Identify strengths, gaps, and improvement opportunities. Undertake an analysis of the program's design, delivery model, and participant experience to identify key strengths, limitations, and areas where the program can be enhanced to better meet industry needs. Review of retention rates.
3. Benchmark and define a future program model. Benchmark the program against comparable national and international initiatives to identify best practice and use these insights to develop evidence-based recommendations for the future of the program, including structure, delivery models, target cohorts, and scalability aligned with industry needs and AMPC strategic priorities.

The findings are presented below.

## 2.0 Methodology

The project involved the following stages:

### 1. Inception meeting/planning workshop

The consultant met with the following staff from AMPC at the commencement of the project:

- ◆ Program Manager – People and Culture
- ◆ Project Officer – People and Culture
- ◆ Data and Insights Manager

The purpose of the meeting was to confirm the project methodology, timeframes and deliverables; identify the materials to be supplied by AMPC; agree expectations about reporting of progress; and discuss any relevant background sensitivities or contentious issues that may be encountered during the review.

## 2. Desktop analysis of project information and reports

Documents with relevance to the program were reviewed, including:

- ◆ program guidelines
- ◆ project application template
- ◆ various milestone reports
- ◆ metrics template
- ◆ program evaluation by GHD, 2022

## 3. Online survey of IMs

An online survey questionnaire was designed using Survey Monkey®. The questionnaire included three questions (2, 5 and 6 in the present survey) asked by GHD in its 2022 evaluation of the program, in order to provide some measure of change over the intervening four years. The survey was piloted with AMPC before finalisation. A link to the survey was then sent to participants by AMPC. Reminders to complete the survey were sent weekly while it remained open over a four-week period. Twenty individuals completed the survey.

The survey questionnaire is provided in Appendix 1.

## 4. Online interviews

A sample of 20 individuals associated with the program was interviewed, including IMs, senior managers of participating and non-participating companies, and AMPC board members and staff.

AMPC provided a list of potential interviewees, selected to provide a cross-section of geography, business size and species focus. Individuals who had provided interesting responses to the survey were also approached for interview. Interviewees were sent a list of questions in advance. Interviews typically took between 30 and 45 minutes.

## 5. Scan of comparable programs

An online search of comparable programs was undertaken. Artificial intelligence (AI; Claude Sonnet 5, Anthropic) was used to check the completeness of the original search and identify any programs that may have been missed. Results delivered by the AI were checked for accuracy. In one case, an organisation delivering a similar program to the IM Program was interviewed to obtain further information. The review of comparable programs also drew on the consultant's knowledge of the domain.

## 6. Analysis of data and preparation of the draft report

Data from stages 1-5 was analysed and this draft report was prepared.

# 3.0 Findings

## 3.1 Benefits of the program

*[Note: in the discussion below, quotations from survey responses and interviews are reproduced. They are from IMs, other processor management, or AMPC staff.]*

Figure 1 summarises the responses from IMs to the survey question: *How would you rate the extent to which the following potential benefits of the IM program have been realised by your company?*

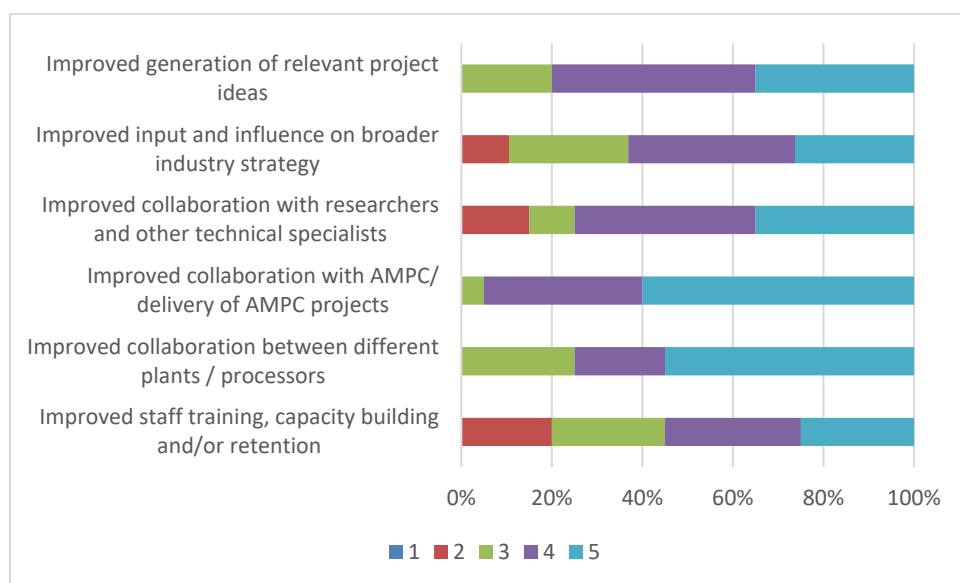


Figure 1. IM views on realisation of suggested benefits of the IM Program (1=We haven't realised this benefit at all, 5=This has been a great benefit of the program; n=20)

The survey allowed for the respondent to nominate additional benefits. The few comments received largely restated or emphasised benefits listed in the question, although one—'improved visibility of relative performance'—was an interesting take on the collaboration aspects of the program.

These responses are consistent with those from the interviews. IMs themselves, in particular, repeatedly identified better collaboration with AMPC, with other processors, and (to a lesser extent) with researchers and other technical specialists, as the greatest benefits of the program. The benefit of this improved collaboration seems to go deeper than simply having better networks. As one IM put it, the program helped them to realise that:

*"You don't know what you don't know, or who knows it"*

There is a strong sense that the IM Program creates a more innovative mindset that says: 'the answer to my problem is out there somewhere, I just have to find it'. Another IM commented that they had not fully appreciated AMPC's role in the industry and the breadth of technical support it was able to offer. Others made similar observations.

There is no doubt the program has contributed to the strength of relationship between AMPC and participating companies. The quarterly and annual meetings between (variously) the IM, other company personnel, and AMPC program staff provides an excellent opportunity for the mutual exchange of information. The IM also acts as a point of contact for AMPC staff visiting plants.

*"I act as a conduit between different parts of the company and with AMPC – I'm known as the 'AMPC person'"*

The willingness of IMs to share knowledge among themselves was also a striking finding of the interviews. We were given several examples of instances where an IM had contacted a fellow member of the cohort—outside the program activities—to learn how they were addressing a particular issue. There is a recognition that processors are competing more with overseas meat suppliers than they are with each other, and that one of the keys to increased competitiveness is to pool their innovation efforts. That, after all, is one of the precepts of the program.

The greater understanding of what other businesses and AMPC are doing reduces risk, which in turn affects the quality of innovation. Companies can trial innovations knowing they have been successfully implemented by others. Also, support is available where the roll-out may not go smoothly. One IM commented that, in the absence of the IM role:

*“We would avoid the riskier innovations that carry a higher return on investment, because we could not justify the risk on our own”*

Having a dedicated IM provides companies with the ‘space to innovate’, which also improves the quality of innovation. As one IM expressed this benefit:

*“Having a dedicated person on tasks / projects that would otherwise not get done or take a lot longer to get done by existing staff members”*

Another interviewee noted that, where the IM position is not a dedicated one, people tend to get pulled back into their substantive roles. They also observed that when an operational staff member is confronted with a problem, or process deficiency, they will tend to look for the quickest workaround so that they can get on with meeting their immediate priorities.

It is difficult to quantify how many specific, additional projects can be attributed to the IM Program. Some projects would have happened anyway. In the survey, a question to this effect elicited responses ranging from one or two to more than 50. Interviewees were clear that many projects would not have happened without their involvement.

IMs and senior managers also noted that it was not just the number of projects that is improved by the program, but also the nature of those projects. One respondent commented:

*“Many [projects are attributable to the IM Program]. The honest picture is that we may well have done some of these projects anyway, but the program changed how they were done. Instead of taking the standard, off-the-shelf option, we delivered them with an innovative aspect, and that is where the real value sits”*

The interviews sought to understand more about the value of the IM Program for the individual IM, from the perspective of both the IMs themselves and their managers. Here again there was an emphatic view that the program had driven real change. IMs were reported to have developed a much greater understanding of the businesses in which they were working. This has been particularly true where the incumbent is quite new to the industry or the company, or has spent time in one particular area, such as operations or quality assurance. The cross-organisational nature of the IM role has provided exposure to all aspects of the business.

Personal attributes such as confidence, networking and problem-solving skills have also been improved in program participants.

It is interesting that the survey responses (Figure 1) suggest that ‘Improved staff training, capacity building and/or retention’ is not rated highly as a benefit that has been realised in all cases. The survey numbers are small and should not be over-interpreted, but this result may reflect the variation in professional backgrounds and stage of career among individuals in the IM cohort. The interviews strongly suggested that capacity building has in fact been a very strong outcome of the program—with the exception of a couple of IMs who are in the late stages of their careers and have not found the intrapreneurship course useful (discussed further below).

The benefits of the program can be summarised in the logic map presented in Figure 2. This map is a version of a theory of change—in other words, the sequence of changes that occur between AMPC’s delivery of the program and the realisation of the desired outcomes.

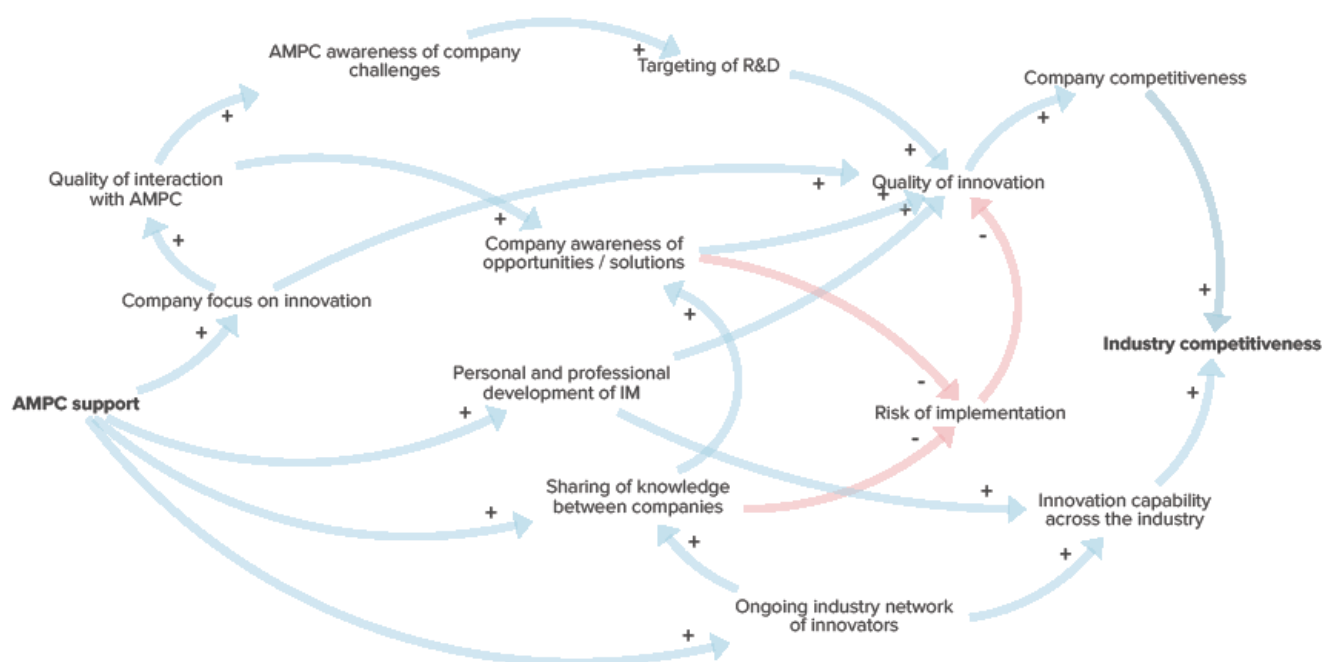


Figure 2. Logic map of benefits of IM Program

A couple of people questioned whether the extent to which program was focused on the 'Personal and professional development of IM' path in the logic, as distinct from the various 'collaboration' pathways (with AMPC, with other companies, and with research / solution providers). This is an important point. As mentioned above, it became clear in the interviews that the current cohort of IMs vary in their professional background and stage of career, and this has shaped attitudes towards various elements of the program. This is discussed further in section 6.1.

### 3.2 How participating companies apply the program

The survey asked about how the respondent business filled the IM role, and whether the role would exist in the business without the support of the program. This question was also asked in the 2022 evaluation. Results are shown in Figure 3 and Figure 4.

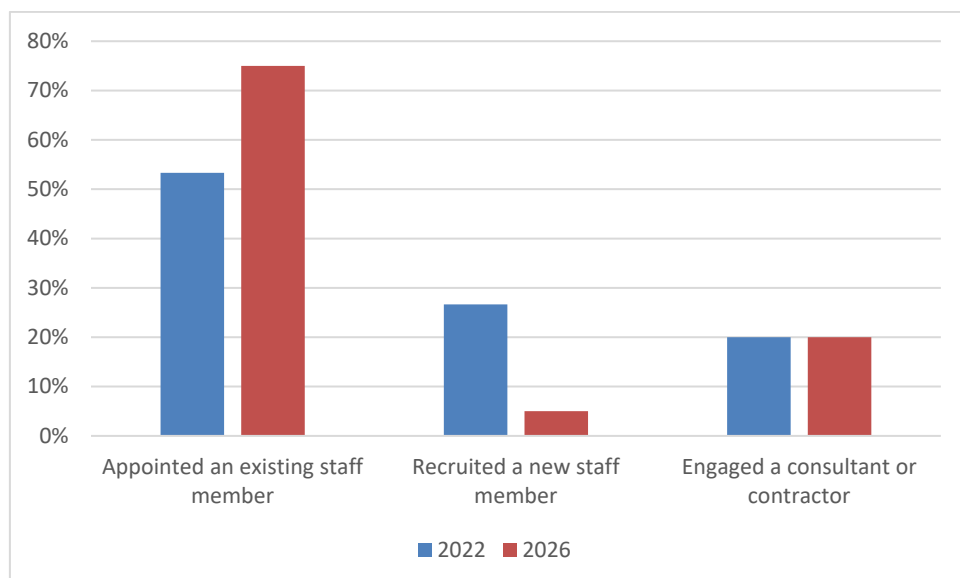


Figure 3. Survey responses on how the business filled the IM role, from 2022 and 2026 surveys (n=15 and n=20)

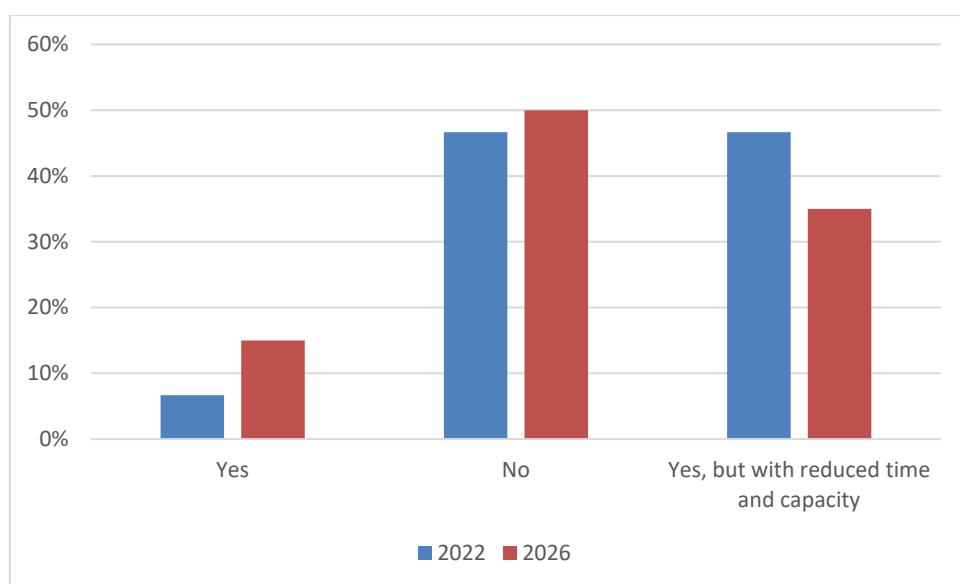


Figure 4. Survey responses on whether the IM role would exist in the business without the support of the program, from 2022 and 2026 surveys (n=15 and n=20)

The sample sizes for both the 2022 and 2026 surveys were small, so not too much should be read into the comparison between the two. Also, the comparison is confounded by the fact that several of the current cohort also participated in the previous program.

With these caveats in mind, the results are broadly similar, except for the apparent increase between 2022 and 2026 in companies appointing an existing staff member to the IM role rather than recruiting someone new.

### 3.3 Program design

The program comprises a number of elements:

- ◆ cohort meetings: a minimum of two in-person and two online sessions per year
- ◆ quarterly meetings with AMPC
- ◆ annual innovation meeting
- ◆ strategy on a page
- ◆ data

In addition to participating in these activities, IMs must maintain a project register and submit quarterly milestone reports.

The survey asked about the value of these various activities within the program. Results are shown in Figure 5.

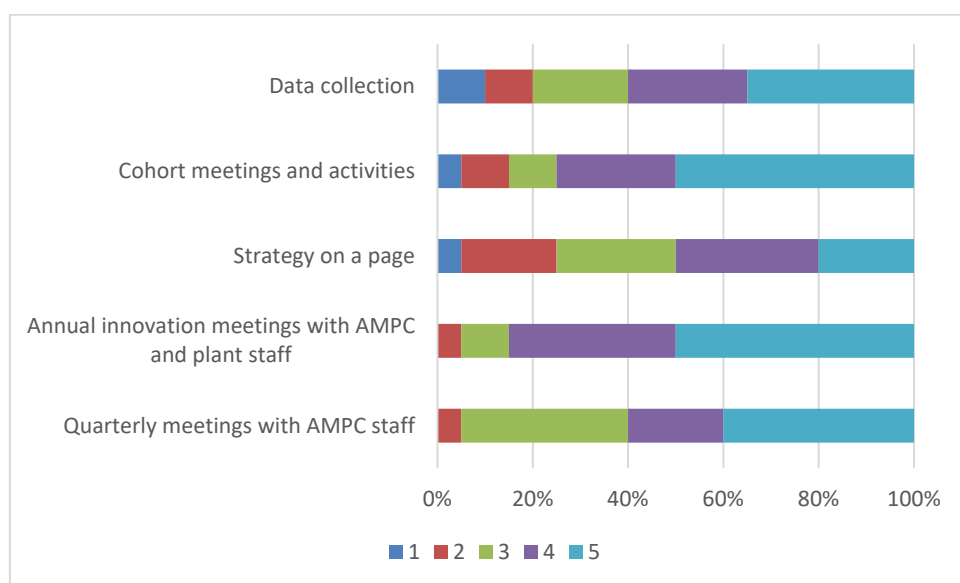


Figure 5. IM views on value of various components of the IM Program (1=Of little value, 5=Highly valuable; n=20)

As the figure shows, the meetings with AMPC staff (especially the annual meeting) and the cohort meetings and activities are the most popular components of the program. This was reiterated in the interviews. Interviewees spoke very highly of activities such as the problem-solving exercise held in conjunction with the Queensland Country Meat Processors Association, which served the purpose of both building teams and also delivering outcomes with direct application to real-world situations. A visit to Western Australia which included a tour of a brewery, to learn about its approach to innovation, also received positive reviews.

*“Without the networking, I would miss out on the candid advice, referrals, and collaborative energy that came from trusted relationships, things no online course or solo effort could replace”*

Meetings between IMs, other plant staff and AMPC personnel are also considered to be highly beneficial. They provide an excellent opportunity for AMPC staff to learn about the issues being faced by processors, and for processor staff to be apprised of the breadth of research being undertaken by AMPC. The annual innovation meeting also helps to build understanding of the program with other plant personnel.

*“Important for broader program visibility and networking. Justifies the effort for strategic discussions”*

There were more mixed views about the requirement to collect and upload company data for benchmarking. Some see the value of the data and appear to be using it already to monitor performance. Others believe that the data will eventually deliver value, but they are not seeing that yet. A small number of companies are not willing to share data, at least not productivity data that they see as offering a competitive advantage.

One interviewee also expressed the opinion that AMPC does not have sufficient capability to ensure data security. Others argued that for some subsets of data—e.g. plants in Western Australia—it is impossible to anonymise benchmark data because plants are too readily identifiable.

A couple of people were also critical of the portal used to upload the data, saying that it can be frustrating to use.

*“For the effort more work needs to be done to clean the data and make it representative for all processors. Not sure if the portal was the best setup”*

There are mixed views, too, on the strategy on a page. Most survey respondents and interviewees found the strategy useful as a simple reference and communication tool and said that the relatively small effort required to develop it was justified. Others commented that it was only used within the program and had no buy-in from the company more broadly, limiting its value.

*“Not too burdensome however not being used outside of program”*

In addition to the program components listed above, this year the IM cohort has been participating in an ‘intrapreneurship’ course delivered by an external expert. There were mixed views on this course. Negativity towards it seems to come from four related sources:

- ◆ It wasn’t part of the original ‘deal’ with the program.
- ◆ It is a considerable time burden that takes away from networking activities, which many find more valuable.
- ◆ Not everyone likes learning online—they prefer a more learning-by-doing approach.
- ◆ For a small number of participants, it is teaching things they already know.

Others—the majority, it seems—have found the course valuable, although even some in this group have found it difficult to keep up with the online modules.

Milestone reporting does not appear to be overly burdensome. Almost all survey respondents and interviewees said that quarterly reporting is a reasonable expectation, with some also believing it is a good discipline.

*“Necessary and welcomed. It is the only way AMPC can have confidence in what we do, and it is work we should be doing anyway. I am happy to do it”*

Likewise, the maintenance of a project register.

*“This is useful as it clearly evidences the amount of work I am doing within the business”*

Feedback on AMPC’s management of the IM program was very positive—both from program stakeholders and from staff in other parts of AMPC. Program staff are considered to be ‘firm but fair’ in their requirements of participants, appropriately holding them to account for their deliverables.

## 4.0 Benchmarking against comparable programs

A scan of programs in Australia and internationally did not identify any that were closely comparable, except for two programs offered by Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA). Under its Innovation Capability Building sub program, MLA

has a Collaborative Co-Innovation program, which allows supply chain businesses to access co-investment by MLA in innovation projects. In contrast to AMPC's IM program, the Collaborative Co-Innovation program is project-based rather than supporting positions *per se*. Projects are for three years and are staggered—that is, the projects are not in lockstep like AMPC's IM program contracts. There may be more than one of a company's staff members involved in a project. Solution providers may also be involved.

Participants in the Collaborative Co-Innovation program meet quarterly. Past participants also often join these meetings. There is also a professional development component of the program. In the first quarter of each year, the group nominates a topic of interest (e.g. AI, developing a business case, attracting external funding). MLA develops modules on these topics and delivers them during the upcoming year<sup>2</sup>. This is a good idea and might be something AMPC could consider. AMPC and MLA could even share training modules.

The Co-Innovation program was evaluated in 2025<sup>3</sup>. Unsurprisingly, the evaluation of the Co-Innovation program found similar benefits to those identified in this current review. The program resulted in the delivery of innovation projects that would not otherwise have been pursued or would have been done differently, and these projects returned triple-bottom-line benefits. The innovation capability of participants was also demonstrably enhanced.

The second MLA program of interest is the Digital Product Officer program. This is a 'co-funded industry capability initiative designed to accelerate the adoption of digital technologies, data-driven decision making, and feedback systems across the red meat value chain'<sup>4</sup>. We understand that this program too does not support positions within companies but rather funds projects to adopt specific digital technologies such as the electronic National Vendor Declaration.

We understand that, because all AMPC contracts are checked by MLA before execution, MLA is able to see where AMPC is supporting IMs and ensures there is no duplication between the organisations' respective programs.

There are other rural Research and Development Corporations (RDCs) with some level of investment in processing research (for example, Dairy Australia, Horticulture Innovation Australia, Sugar Research Australia, Wine Australia, Fisheries Research and Development Corporation). None of these appear to have programs providing direct funding support for an embedded staff member.

The Intercollegiate Meat Judging (ICMJ) program, of which AMPC is a partner, has some similarities to the IM Program. The purpose of the ICMJ program is 'to attract graduates and early-career professionals to the red meat industry and foster the development of future leaders'<sup>5</sup>. ICMJ mainly comprises two national conferences, one held in southern New South Wales and one in northern Queensland. Participants are mainly tertiary students, with industry professionals also able to attend the event in Rockhampton. The conferences involve guest speakers, interactive workshops and training, a careers expo and a meat judging competition. There are no structured activities for alumni of the program.

AMPC is also a supporting partner in Meat Business Women. This is an international organisation (Australia, the United Kingdom, and Ireland) that describes itself as 'the global professional community for women across the entire meat and food supply chain'<sup>6</sup>. Around 60 companies from throughout the meat value chain are partners or supporting partners. Meat Business Women runs various awards, mentoring, study tours, training programs, networking events and related activities.

<sup>2</sup> Josh Whelan, MLA, personal communication, 14 August 2026

<sup>3</sup> MLA, Co-Innovation program 5 Year Measurement and Evaluation, V.RMH.0010 final report, February 2025

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.mla.com.au/research-and-development/reports/2026/v.isc.5500---evaluation-of-the-isc-co-funded-digital-product-officer-program>

<sup>5</sup> <https://icmj.com.au/our-program/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.meatbusinesswomen.org/what-we-do/our-story.html>

The ICMJ program and the activities run by Meat Business Women seem to be highly regarded in the industry. Neither appear to offer any particular lessons for this review, however, as both organisations are quite different in their purpose, structure and target audiences to the IM Program.

Various meat industry bodies in other countries run programs to develop emerging leaders. The Meat Institute (US) Emerging Leaders Program is a typical leadership program, much more akin to the Australian Rural Leadership Program (ARLP) than to the IM Program. Its cohort of 24 in 2026 will undertake leadership training in Washington and will meet with congressional members, as well as visiting supply chain sites. The one-year program also includes mentoring, and networking events throughout the year<sup>7</sup>.

The American Association of Meat Processors offers an internship program to encourage students and recent graduates to consider carers in the meat industry<sup>8</sup>. The Meat Industry Association of New Zealand has an undergraduate and postgraduate scholarship program including mentoring, networking opportunities and a pathway into the industry on graduation. The Meat Foundation (US) offers something similar<sup>9</sup>.

In summary, while there are several programs in Australia and around the world that offer programs to encourage young entrants to the industry, or to foster emerging leaders, none were found that have the specific objective of encouraging innovation in the way that the IM Program does—with the exception of the MLA programs described above. That there are no similar programs internationally is not surprising given the unique nature of the Australian RDC model.

In our view, though, other RDCs with investments in the post-farm value chain could certainly learn from the IM Program.

## 5.0 Benefit-cost analysis

As noted above, GHD conducted a BCA as part of its evaluation of the IM program in 2022. The methodology for that review included an in-depth examination of a sample of 15 IM projects. The BCA analysis was described as indicative in nature and reliant upon high-level, informed assumptions about economic returns from projects and their attribution to the program. It did not attempt to quantify all the benefits of the program (such as individual professional development).

AMPC asked us, as part of the current review, to update the 2022 BCA. The 2026 survey provided an estimate from the IMs of the number of projects they had been involved in that would not have taken place in the absence of the IM program. Estimates in response to this question ranged from one to over 50 (median 5), and two respondents did not provide a numerical response. We have decided to adopt a conservative value of 2 for this parameter, on the assumption that the projects cited are likely to include a number of smaller projects.

We were also provided with the cost to AMPC to date deliver the current IM program (\$6.9 million). Note that this figure is the total contracted expenditure and does not include staff time or corporate overhead. We have deducted the same amount (\$6.9m) from the total value of project benefits, as companies have co-funded the IM positions.

This current review did not include an in-depth analysis of projects undertaken by the current cohort, so estimates for other parameters have had to be taken from those of GHD in 2022, namely the typical capital investment and annual net return for each project.

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.meatinstitute.org/awards/Meat\\_Institute\\_Emerging\\_Leaders\\_Program](https://www.meatinstitute.org/awards/Meat_Institute_Emerging_Leaders_Program)

<sup>8</sup> <https://aamp.com/page/internship>

<sup>9</sup> <https://mia.co.nz/mia-scholarships-current/>

Table 1. Benefit-cost analysis: summary

| Parameter                                      | Value    | Explanation/source                                                        |
|------------------------------------------------|----------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Typical project investment                     | \$0.50m  | Typical (conservative) figure from GHD review                             |
| Typical project annual return                  | \$0.15k  | Typical (conservative) figure from GHD review                             |
| Discount rate                                  | 5%       | Recommended by CRRDC*                                                     |
| NPV per project                                | \$1.49m  | Calculated from investment, annual return over 10 years and discount rate |
| No. projects per IM attributable to IM program | 2        | Survey results                                                            |
| No. of IMs                                     | 22       | Supplied by AMPC                                                          |
| Program NPV                                    | \$58.71m | No. IMs x no. projects per IM x NPV per project                           |
| AMPC cost to deliver program                   | \$6.92m  | Supplied by AMPC. Contract costs only, does not include AMPC overheads    |
| Program BCR                                    | 8.5      | Program NPV / AMPC cost                                                   |

\* Council of Rural Research and Development Corporations, Cross-RDC Impact Assessment Program: Guidelines, updated August 2026

The estimated BCR for the program is 8.5, which is comparable to the estimate of GHD (9.6) in 2022. This is not surprising as we have adopted several of their parameters. As GHD noted, this is a very favourable BCR in the context of RDC-funded projects, which typically show returns of around 5:1.

We urge considerable caution with this figure, however, as the analysis contains some very broad assumptions. AMPC would benefit from collecting more data on project investments and expected returns as the next IM program progresses. This is discussed in section 6.3.

## 6.0 Opportunities for improvement

### 6.1 Program design

As noted above, one of the AMPC directors questioned whether there is a clear understanding within AMPC of the focus of the IM Program, that is, whether to improve the quantum and quality of innovation among levy payers by either:

- ◆ supporting an innovation function within companies, or
- ◆ developing and enabling emerging talent in the industry

Both of these approaches have merit, but they suggest different design principles. If the former of these is the focus, then the same individual from a given company might participate in several iterations of the IM program and the program would be less likely to incorporate one-off elements like the intrapreneurship course. If the latter, then the program would operate on an all-in, all-out basis and be specifically designed to progressively build skills and knowledge.

A number of the current IMs expressed interest in continuing with the IM Program in its next iteration. These are mainly from smaller companies, where there is neither a ready career path after the IM Manager role nor a successor coming through to take it on. Also, some participants have only been in the program for a short time. If participants are not permitted to continue, some companies will drop out—although their current IM may continue to participate in an alumni network and thus still deliver some of the benefits of the role to the company.

On the other hand, having a mix of people who are new to the program and those who have been involved for three years may make for difficult group dynamics and program design. For example, continuing IMs could not be expected to repeat the intrapreneurship course.

The current program seems to be a hybrid between the two options described above. The cohort is very diverse, ranging from younger people in the early stages of their careers, to older and much more experienced people, sometimes close to retirement. We understand that this situation is at least partly due the cohort being a mixture of individuals who carried over from the previous program, and those who joined at the start of the current program (or since then).

This diversity is in some respects a virtue. Interviewees for this review spoke positively of young people learning from those with more experience, while more recent entrants to the industry have contributed new ways of thinking and more recent academic knowledge. However, differing demographics also make it difficult to design a program that caters to all needs. The intrapreneurship course is the clearest example of a program component that suits some but not all (see section 3.3).

On balance, we think that the most sustainable model for the IM Program is one that clearly seeks to develop and enable emerging talent in the industry. We recommend that current participants should not be allowed to re-apply unless they have completed less than two years in the current course. 'Graduates' should instead be kept engaged through the network of alumni (see section 5.2) and by serving as a point of contact when the AMPC Extension and Adoption Manager visits the plant.

There is a risk associated with this course of action. The responses to the survey question in Figure 4 suggest that some companies will not continue with an IM role if it is not financially supported by AMPC. Presumably, though, if the current program has demonstrated the value of an individual as an IM, then the company will find a way to allow them to continue to deliver that function in some form, especially if they are part of a dynamic information-sharing network.

When IMs or their managers were asked what could be improved about the program as it currently operates, most could offer no suggestions. Some would like to see more face-to-face events but acknowledge that this may be impractical. As noted above, some participants are not finding the intrapreneurship course particularly useful, but this dissatisfaction would be largely dispelled by:

- ◆ having the program adopt a focus on developing and enabling emerging talent, as described above, and
- ◆ making it clear from the start of the program that any professional development activity is a mandatory element of the program, and that participants must commit the required time to it

There are no apparent lessons on program design to be learned from other Australian or overseas programs except perhaps the MLA approach of asking the participants for their preferred professional development activities.

## 6.2 Maintaining program alumni engagement

Another question faced by AMPC is how to maintain engagement with and within the cohort of IMs once they 'graduate' from the program. Most of the IMs who were interviewed wished to see some sort of continuing AMPC

support for activities that allow alumni to stay in touch. A few felt that their network would continue without intervention.

Suggestions for future activities to keep IM alumni engaged, from participants and from the consultant's experience, included:

- ◆ specialist communities of practice for information exchange—for example, on the application of AI in plants
- ◆ projects to tackle particular problems or opportunities using groups of alumni
- ◆ specifically involving alumni in AMPC Innovation Showcases
- ◆ involving alumni in future IM Programs, for example as mentors or presenters
- ◆ a 'knowledge hub', similar to a LinkedIn portal, where events, personnel movements and other day-to-day information can be shared, as well as training modules, standard operating procedures and so on (we understand something like this is in development)
- ◆ alumni gatherings on the sidelines of industry events, or standalone, at a national or regional / state level
- ◆ webinars at some appropriate frequency (suggestions ranged from six-monthly to two-monthly)
- ◆ a 'phase II' program that builds on the outcomes of the original program

Most interviewees from senior company management and from AMPC believed that a 'light touch' by AMPC with program alumni is appropriate. The individuals themselves need to be responsible for maintaining their network. AMPC could assist by ensuring alumni are invited to industry events and, where appropriate, provided with a space to meet.

AMPC might consider more active forms of engagement such as communities of practice or projects where there is industry benefit. Leadership programs often adopt similar approaches. For example, Leadership Victoria has assembled groups of alumni from its Williamson Community Leadership Program to assist charity groups to address major strategic or structural issues. Such activities require relatively low commitment by participants but are professionally stimulating and satisfying.

## 6.3 Performance measures

Several interviewees observed that there is no evidence-based 'elevator pitch' for the IM Program at company level nor strong quantitative evidence of its benefits. There is good qualitative evidence that the program is delivering on its stated aims. A high-level benefit-cost analysis (BCA) was also included in the 2022 program review by GHD and has been repeated in the present evaluation. However, both of these analyses relied on some broad assumptions. They were also conducted at the whole-of-program level, so they do not show an individual company what returns it might expect through participation in the program.

We note that GHD recommended that AMPC develop a monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement (MERI) plan for the IM Program. GHD developed a program logic and suggested several metrics and indicators on which data could be collected. The benefit hierarchy suggested by GHD was Inputs > Outputs > Outcomes and a number of potential indicators were listed under each of these headings.

Some of the indicator data suggested by GHD is collected through the milestone templates that IMs are required to use for their quarterly reporting and could be compiled without too much effort (e.g. number of meetings held, etc). Other data such as AMPC and processor cash inputs, percentage of milestones overdue and average days overdue can also be readily compiled. Other data would need to be deliberately collected (e.g. number of IM engagements with other plants). Input and output metrics of this type may be useful to the management team to monitor whether the program is being administered effectively.

In our view, though, the main imperative is to gain some quantitative measure of the company-level and industry-level impact of the program and therefore the return on AMPC's investment in it.

One AMPC director expressed the view that the two key performance indicators for the IM Program should be the number and quality of projects attributable to the IM Program. These two pieces of information would provide a strong indication of the overall benefits of the program.

This review has attempted to quantify the number of projects attributable to the program, but the estimates provided vary greatly between IMs and it is difficult to have a high degree of confidence in them. Part of the problem is that this parameter is subject to a judgment on whether the project would have happened without the existence of the IM Program. Evaluating the quality of projects is also a challenge. Ideally, plants would collect data to demonstrate the financial or other return from each innovation. (It could be argued that the simple fact of a company's willingness to invest in a project suggests an expected positive BCR and is therefore a sufficient indicator of 'quality'.)

AMPC could consider requiring IMs to undertake an *ex-ante* analysis of the expected benefits of each project they are involved in. Presumably, companies are already required to provide estimates of the benefits of a project if they apply to AMPC for funding or respond to an AMPC expression of interest process. This analysis need not be highly detailed, and it might only be required for projects above a certain value. For some projects, it may only be possible to describe qualitative benefits (e.g. improved safety or environmental performance).

IMs may need training in undertaking BCAs at the start of the program if they do not already have that skill. We understand that AMPC has at least one tool for estimating *ex-ante* BCAs that could be used for this purpose.

AMPC could then commission a periodic formal impact assessment for the IM Program, including an BCA. We would recommend this is done, say, two years into the next program. It may involve using the *ex-ante* data (or *ex-post* data, if available) from a sample of participants and extrapolating the findings to the whole program. Proper impact assessments are reasonably expensive but justifiable for a program of the size of the IM Program.

Another indicator for which data would be useful is personal development. This is challenging to measure objectively. One way might be to require that the IM and their manager complete an annual evaluation of how the IM has developed over the 12 months, using criteria such as:

- ◆ knowledge of the industry
- ◆ knowledge of the company and plant
- ◆ technical skills
- ◆ problem-solving skills
- ◆ strength of networks
- ◆ confidence in their role

AMPC should also consider developing some case studies of individual IMs, plants or projects. Case studies can be very effective tools to communicate the value of a program like this one.

## 7.0 Recommendations of the previous review

It is useful to compare the findings of the current review of the IM Program with those of the previous review, conducted by GHD in 2022. As described in section 1, the design of the program as significantly altered from the version evaluated by GHD and the one currently under review.

Table 2 summarises opportunities for improvement identified in the GHD review and the corresponding findings from 2026.

Table 2. Commentary on GHD recommendations from 2022 GHD review

| 2022                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | 2026                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Formalise the planning framework for the program, which would include updating and documenting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The program logic, which clearly articulates the program activities and how the program will achieve its intended outcomes</li> <li>An outline of the program guidelines and governance arrangements</li> <li>The approach to communicating and engaging with program participants and other stakeholders</li> <li>A MERI plan, which will include updating reporting templates to ensure that appropriate data is gathered against the indicators identified as necessary to track progress and measure program success</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | <p>A formal document, 'AMPC Innovation Manager Program Guidelines', is in place. It comprehensively describes the purpose and aims of the program, expectations of participants, financial arrangements, activities, and reporting requirements. It does not include a MERI plan.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <p>Work with IMs to gauge interest in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establishing a 'community of practice' to facilitate regular sharing of knowledge and best practice through a combination of face-to-face forums as well as online collaboration tools</li> <li>Participating in formal or informal reference groups to discuss and progress major industry challenges. This could include the use of plant innovation strategies to inform and test AMPC strategy.</li> <li>Participating in formal or informal mentoring to develop emerging industry talent and the next generation of IMs</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | <p>Milestone templates with standardised headings have been implemented to collect indicator data as recommended by GHD: project updates (status, cost, funding mechanism, details, expected completion date). However, there appears to be no systematic process to aggregate and report data.</p> <p>Sharing of knowledge between IMs and AMPC, and amongst IMs, is a very strong feature of the current program. The current program design captures the intent of these recommendations fully except perhaps mentoring.</p> |
| <p>Build on the identified strengths of the program to ensure its success into the future. This includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communicating the return on investment that can be achieved through recruitment of a dedicated Innovation Manager to both existing program participants and the broader industry, such that beyond a period of 'seed' funding, processors would see value in continuing to invest in the existing role through their own funding arrangements. This would in time allow AMPC to extend the program to more of its members and/or invest in developing new Innovation Manager candidates.</li> <li>With a strong pipeline of PIPs and future AMPC budgets almost fully allocated, Program participants should be actively encouraged and supported to source alternative funding sources to pursue new innovations. Information sharing on opportunities for accessing capital and working with other grant providers could be an area that is worked on through the proposed community of practice or other similar arrangement</li> </ul> | <p>Communicating the return on investment achievable by processor participation in the program does not seem to have been done. A recommendation to this effect has been made in the current review.</p> <p>The second recommendation in this area has been overtaken by changes in AMPC's approach to funding projects in plants (the PIPS program no longer exists).</p>                                                                                                                                                      |

## 8.0 Conclusions and recommendations

The IM Program is a well-designed initiative that enjoys very strong support among the sample of AMPC levy payers contacted during this review. Both the IMs themselves and their senior executives see great benefit from their involvement. Non-participating companies appear for the most part to have reasons specific to their businesses for

not becoming involved, and all but one of these were not opposed to the program *per se*. Most indicated that they were open to becoming involved in future iterations of the program.

The current iteration of the program differs quite significantly from the previous one. The changes appear to have been positive ones, encouraging greater interaction between IMs and AMPC, and among the IM cohort, and these are rated by a large majority of participants as the best aspects of the program. There is good qualitative and semi-quantitative evidence from the survey and consultations for this review that the IM Program delivers benefits to both the individual IM and to their employer. We were not able to find any comparable programs around the world except for two run by MLA.

However, there are some opportunities for improvement. We recommend that:

1. If AMPC is going to repeat the IM program—and it does appear to be a very sound and popular investment for AMPC—it should essentially repeat the current design, which is working well, subject to some minor adjustments.
2. AMPC should clarify that the focus of the program is to improve the quantum and quality of innovation among levy payers *by developing and enabling emerging talent in the industry*. This means that companies will not be invited to nominate contractors or to roll over previous participants, except (say) where those individuals have been in the current program for less than two years.
3. If the intrapreneurship course or other professional development courses are to be offered in the next round of the program, AMPC should make it clear from the application phase that participants are expected to fully participate in it, and guidance on the time commitment should be provided.
4. AMPC should resolve irritations concerning the data entry portal and make every effort to demonstrate the value of the data that is collected.
5. AMPC should facilitate the ongoing engagement of program graduates on a 'light touch' basis, i.e. largely allowing them to drive future networking themselves. AMPC's role could include ensuring alumni are invited to industry events and, where appropriate, provided with a space to meet. If it suits AMPC's purposes, specialist communities of practice for information exchange—for example, on the application of AI in plants—could be formed and/or groups of alumni convened to address particular projects or problems/opportunities.
6. AMPC should make stronger efforts to collect data on financial and other outcomes from the program. This is important because, while the program currently enjoys widespread support, it is a major investment and needs to demonstrate value. One opportunity is to incorporate *ex-ante* BCA analysis of at least larger projects into IM reporting. AMPC has a tool that could be used for this purpose. Data collected would facilitate a formal impact assessment of the program, say two years into the next round. This assessment could be done without the *ex-ante* data, although it will be a bigger undertaking, and there is value in developing skills in project evaluation among the IMs.
7. AMPC should also consider developing case studies on IMs, plants or projects that showcase the value of the IM Program.

## 9.0 Appendices

### Appendix 1: Survey questionnaire

#### Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey on the AMPC Innovation Manager (IM) Program. It should only take around 15 minutes to complete.

The survey is part of a process to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of the IM Program, conducted on behalf of AMPC by Forest Hill Consulting. Contact details for Forest Hill are provided at the end of the survey.

Please note that the responses you provide will be strictly confidential to Forest Hill. We will only report the survey findings in an aggregated, deidentified form.

### Your details

1. Please provide your name and contact details. Knowing your position in the company will help us to interpret your responses. We may also want to follow up with you to further discuss some details (again, your responses to this question are confidential).
  - Name
  - Company
  - Position in company
  - Email Address
  - Phone Number

### Benefits of the IM Program

2. How did your business fill the Innovation Manager role?
  - Appointed an existing staff member
  - Recruited a new staff member
  - Engaged a consultant or contractor

### Comment

3. How would you rate the extent to which the following potential benefits of the IM Program have been realised by your company? (rating 1-5 where 1 = We haven't realised this benefit at all to 5 = This has been a great benefit of the program)
  - Improved staff training, capacity building and/or retention
  - Improved collaboration between different plants / processors
  - Improved collaboration with AMPC/ delivery of AMPC projects
  - Improved collaboration with researchers and other technical specialists
  - Improved input and influence on broader industry strategy
  - Improved generation of relevant project ideas

Do you have any comments? Are there any benefits we haven't listed?

4. Are you able to estimate how many projects your company has taken on as a direct result of having an IM? In other words, projects that would not otherwise have happened?
5. Without the support of the Innovation Manager Program, would the role exist in your business?
  - Yes
  - No
  - Yes, but with reduced time and capacity

Comment

6. Without the support of the Innovation Manager Program, what would be the most noticeable impact on your business?

**Program components**

7. How valuable to you or your company are each of the following components of the IM Program? (rating 1-5 where 1 = Of little value to 5 = Highly valuable)

Do you have any comments?

**Ongoing IM cohort activities**

8. At the conclusion of the current IM Program, would you like to see your cohort continue to keep in touch? If so, what would be the best ways for this to happen?
9. Please comment on the following administrative requirements of the program. For example, do you think the effort justifies the benefit?
  - Reporting
  - Project register
  - Data collection and reporting
  - Quarterly reporting meetings
  - Annual innovation meetings
  - Strategy on a page
  - Cohort meetings
  - Other (please specify)

**Final comments**

10. Do you have any final comments you would like to make about the IM Program?

**Thanks**

Thank you for completing this survey.

If you have any additional comments you would like to make, please contact Scott Williams at Forest Hill Consulting on 0413 059 190 or [scott@foresthillconsulting.com.au](mailto:scott@foresthillconsulting.com.au).