

Using Podcasts in Tertiary Education – Exploring ‘the Social Licence to Operate’ in Agriculture

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Abstract:

A decentralised model of tertiary education delivery via online resources has many benefits for student accessibility and inclusion, particularly for rural and remote students. However, it also presents many challenges, including for small cohorts of students, some of whom may access these online resources asynchronously. CQUniversity’s Bachelor of Agriculture is delivered on campus and online. Here, creative approaches are required to cater for the learning needs and preferences of a geographically dispersed student cohort, with many students balancing their learning commitments with part-time work in the agricultural industry. Such approaches include the use of alternative modes of lecture delivery, where appropriate. This paper will outline the use of podcasts to replace lecture content in Social Licence to Operate, a third year Bachelor of Agriculture unit at CQUniversity. It outlines how a number of factors, including characteristics of the student cohort, challenges in arranging guest lectures, and strategies for student engagement led to the decision to implement podcasts. The paper discusses the advantages and limitations of podcasts and some logistical recommendations for others wishing to adopt a similar strategy to teaching.

Introduction

Social Licence to Operate (SLO) is a term that is defined as “*an intangible, unwritten and non-legally binding social contract, or the existence of informal community acceptance of a social institution’s activities*” (McManus, 2023, p. 1243). More than simply permissible under law, an activity, business or industry possesses a SLO when it enjoys social permission or latitude to operate, having social acceptance or approval (Boutilier et al., 2015; McManus, 2023).

While its greatest use is in the realm of extractive industries, other sectors, particularly those that claim stewardship over vast physical and biological resources (such as agriculture) or are otherwise economically significant (the financial sector), recognise the imperative of the SLO (Moffat et al., 2016). The term acknowledges that while an activity or business may comply with legislation, it nevertheless can face public pressure and scrutiny for its environmental or social impacts (Moffat et al., 2016). In such cases, SLO is ‘withdrawn’ from stakeholders who in turn face risks including reputational damage, protests, blockades, oppositional lobby movements, boycotts and, in extreme circumstances, sabotage (Boutilier et al., 2015).

In agricultural markets, the ability to obtain and retain a SLO is a growing requirement placed on stakeholders in the primary industries sector (Hampton et al., 2020). Propelled by a growing urban-rural divide in many industrialised economies and greater social and environmental consciousness on the part of consumers, SLO presents both an opportunity and a risk to existing

and emerging agricultural industries. This is evidenced by a number of political and economic trends, such as the increase in cage-free egg production, increases in vegetarianism and veganism, demands for climate action, boycotts on agricultural industries deemed by some to be breaching ethical or moral standards, an increase in certification schemes in agricultural markets and greater regulation of farming practices (Beckie et al., 2020; Douglas et al., 2022). While these trends tend to ebb and flow, their existence and influence nevertheless indicates a relatively new shift in societal values governing a 12000-year-old human endeavour.

Given the importance of the SLO highlighted above, the Bachelor of Agriculture at CQUniversity, Australia includes a third-year unit (subject) titled “The Social Licence to Operate” under the unit code AGRI13001. The unit provides students, many in their final year of undergraduate studies, with an opportunity to explore the competing demands of agricultural industries to meet the food and fibre requirements of an increasing global population and simultaneously address social and political scrutiny directed towards certain agricultural practices. Such practices include animal husbandry procedures, water use, environmental stewardship and the use of agri-chemicals. Throughout the course of this unit students consider a range of these SLO-related phenomena, examine approaches for responding to such pressures and explore strategies for obtaining or maintaining a SLO in agriculture.

Students enrolled in CQUniversity’s Bachelor of Agriculture represent a diverse group, however they are generally located in Australia’s (and predominantly the state of Queensland) rural and regional centres and by the time they have entered their final year of studies, many are engaged in employment in the agricultural sector, which has recently experienced a surge in skills demand across the OECD (Ryan, 2023). The cohort contains a combination of recent high school leavers and mature-aged students.

This paper examines the use of a podcast series for the SLO unit at CQUniversity in place of weekly lectures in an attempt to creatively engage the cohort of students in this unit and expose them to a diversity of guest speakers.

Podcasts

A podcast is a digital audio file which can be downloaded or streamed to devices such as mobile phones and computers. Often appearing in a thematic series, podcasts have become increasingly popular since the term was first used by the British daily newspaper, *The Guardian*, in 2004 (Lomayesva et al., 2020). Globally, the adoption of podcasts has been driven by their ready availability through various streaming services together with increased smartphone adoption (Craig et al., 2023). Digital consumer behaviour research has found that Australia leads English-speaking countries for the greatest percentage of podcast listeners, with the research finding that 43% of Australians aged 12 and over having listened to a podcast in the previous month (Geraets, 2023).

Podcasts have since been included as e-learning resources in many higher education disciplines, including medical and health sciences; engineering; language; and law (Alpay & Gulati, 2010; Borrego, 2023; Kelly et al., 2022; Killeen & Summerville, 2020; Lomayesva et al., 2020; McNamara et al., 2021). Here, both externally produced podcasts (such as those typically available on public audio streaming services) and internally produced podcasts (from the educational institution) are employed to enrich the student learning experience (Kelly et al., 2022; König, 2021). Publicly available educational podcasts in particular subdisciplines of medical science receive tens of thousands of downloads per episode (Kelly et al., 2022). Given the popular usage of podcasts in Australia referenced above, and other findings suggesting that

young adults are the most frequent users of podcasts (Craig et al., 2023), the adoption of the medium in higher education seems a natural fit.

While the use of podcasts as a means of delivering agricultural extension has received some attention in the academic literature (Chivers et al., 2023), their use in agricultural higher education has not been explored. The rapid growth, widescale usage and utility of podcasts presents them as a useful tool worth considering for inclusion in agricultural education at universities, technical colleges and within professional development endeavours. This paper seeks to contribute to this discourse and provide some practical lessons for the use of podcasts in higher education.

The Podcast Decision

Most units (subjects) in CQUniversity's Bachelor of Agriculture program employ both lectures and tutorials as weekly teaching activities for students. This engagement is often strengthened through the inclusion of other resources, including pre-reading materials and formative assessment. In some units, particularly those that build students' capacities in technical skills, residential schools with laboratory- and field-based classes are also included. From 2018 to 2022, the SLO unit described here was delivered through weekly lectures and tutorials. While this mode of delivery allowed for weekly in-class engagement with students, it presented a particular challenge when inviting guest lecturers to speak, primarily due to challenges in aligning the guest lecturer's availability with the fixed schedule of the lecture. Perhaps more than most of the units in the Bachelor of Agriculture program, the SLO unit lends itself well to the inclusion of guest speakers. This is because the concept of an SLO necessarily requires industries, in this case agriculture, to canvas a diversity of perspectives in order to ascertain the position of society and specific stakeholder groups toward an activity or industry.

To provide context, the unit runs over a 12-week term, with each week allocated a particular theme, and presently structured as follows:

1. Introduction
2. The Urban-Rural Divide
3. Measuring the Social Licence to Operate
4. Climate Change and Agriculture
5. Biodiversity and Agri-Environment Schemes
6. Water Use and Contamination
7. Land Use Conflict and Land Use Planning
8. Animal Welfare: Husbandry Practices
9. Animal Welfare: Processing
10. Live Animal Export
11. Labour Conditions in Agriculture
12. Human Health and Agriculture

Resolving the challenge of incorporating perspectives from relevant stakeholders and community members required a solution which, while allowing for the inclusion of guest speakers, also ensured that students were engaged and could take ownership of their learning. Having reflected on this challenge from time to time, my approach as unit coordinator was to mainly seek out only one or two guest speakers a term and do all I could to be flexible around their time availability. In addition to this, presenting diverse perspectives to the class was achieved through the use of various reading materials, news reports, short videos, documentaries, and other resources which were either discussed in class or linked through

CQUniversity's online learning platform, *Moodle*, as copyright permissions allowed. I did not consider podcasts as a learning resource until a friend studying at a different Australian university mentioned that one of his classes was delivered through this medium, though in that case the lecturer of the class was the sole voice on the podcast. Including a podcast option also presented the possibility of creating an asynchronous learning resource in place of the lecture. After exploring the possibility of a podcast with the Head of Course for CQUniversity's Agriculture program at the time, the podcast idea for the SLO unit was born.

Tips for Success

The below sections describe the podcast and outline some tips for success, gleaned after some six months of development and across three terms of implementation and use as a learning resource.

Podcast Guests

As mentioned previously, the decision to include a podcast in the SLO unit was made largely to develop a greater diversity of voices within the unit. A meaningful exploration of SLO in agriculture requires a drawing of reality that includes diverse perspectives on a contentious issue, such as the use of herbicides in plant production agriculture or the live export of livestock.

To facilitate such diverse perspectives, the podcast guests were drawn from a variety of groups. Academics and agricultural industry professionals, particularly primary producers, were the most frequent types of guests. Other guests, including Indigenous elders, members of parliament and former AGRI13001 students, also provided invaluable perspectives on relevant issues. Because the withdrawal of the SLO can be driven by the community, including through formalised advocacy groups (Robinson et al., 2020), members of the non-agricultural community formed one important podcast guest group. These individuals were mostly drawn from Australia's urban centres. This occurs through a variety of avenues, including the ballot box, direct advocacy and/or consumer demand.

Lessons Learnt: Podcast Production, Format and Structure

With the decision to implement the podcast established, attention then turned to the logistics of production and podcast structure. The following paragraphs detail lessons learnt during the development and delivery of the podcast series.

Audio Recording and Editing

My previous use of the video editing software *Camtasia* for developing learning resources in other units provided a good starting point for audio editing. Having trialled some audio production with this application (which was available for free as part of my institution's software package arrangements), the decision was made to use *Camtasia* for producing the podcasts. Editing was necessary given that each podcast episode would often include multiple guest speakers, my own commentary and input, often in the form of introductory and concluding remarks as well as a discussion framing the remarks of guest speakers. For example, the Week 1 podcast included four speakers: a member of the general public from one of Australia's large cities to discuss urban perspectives on agricultural production, a primary producer who had implemented a number of practices partly to address questions of the SLO in agriculture, a previous AGRI13001 student who spoke about their experience with this unit and the benefits of this study for their career as an agriculturalist, and narration by myself.

Recording of the podcasts was most often conducted with the video conferencing software *Zoom*. On occasions when interviews with participants were conducted face-to-face, a mobile phone was used for recording audio. Guests would be asked pre-arranged questions during the recorded discussion (discussed below), but the editing process afforded the possibility of summarising a line of questioning or ensuring that my audio was clear and free of the occasional “ums”, “ahs” and other forms of stumbling that a new podcast host is particularly susceptible to. Editing also allowed for removing surplus aspects of a response if a guests’ reflections required some curtailment.

Podcast Structure and Role of the Host

The podcast episodes were generally but not always structured by beginning with my introductory remarks on the topic, followed by an introduction to the relevant guest. The subsequent discussion with the guest speaker was often conversational in nature, with questions provided to them in advance of our recorded discussion. Most of these questions were open-ended, rather than questions that can be answered with “yes” or “no”, facilitating extended responses from guest speakers (Knott et al., 2022).

While guest speakers fulfilled obvious functions (as noted above), introductory remarks and appropriate subject matter context from the academic host are important for ensuring that such podcasts comprehensively address student learning outcomes. Without such remarks, the podcast risks existing simply as an offering of perspectives without applying analysis, context or encouragement for critical thinking. Naturally, guest speakers are engaged to speak to their area of expertise. It is the presiding academic’s responsibility to ensure that these are placed in a context appropriate to the unit and that they fulfill the course and institutional requirements that the relevant learning resources are designed to achieve. For this reason, post-conversation editing was at times necessary, allowing for the inclusion of additional remarks if a guest’s contributions required more context or further explanation.

The academic host plays an important role in steering the podcast discussion as well. More than just an opportunity to record responses to the pre-prepared questions, podcasts present opportunities for eliciting impromptu reflections based on the discussion at hand. The podcast host also needs to ensure that the discussion remains relevant to the subject matter. Instances where the discussion veers off course or where the guest requests to reattempt their response can be smoothed out during editing. For this reason, guests should be informed that the editing process affords the opportunity to remove errors or responses that they would rather re-attempt. This should be made clear at the outset of the discussion, along with transparent disclosure of how students will access the podcast.

Creativity

Fulfilling the academic requirements mentioned above is not incompatible with employing creative approaches. Achieving this complementarity was a key goal of the SLO Podcast Series. In some cases, ambient sound or music was included. In the episode on water use, for example, the podcast began with an audio clip of flowing water from a stream in the Murray-Darling Basin, a large drainage basin covering much of the arid and semi-arid areas of inland Australia’s southeast (Leblanc Tweed, Van Dijk, Timbal, 2012). This was followed by a narrated introduction to the role of the Murray-Darling Basin in Australian agricultural production and a brief summary of the controversies surrounding agricultural water extraction from the basin’s waterways before continuing with discussions with various content area experts. The inclusion of ambient sound from the natural environment in this case sought to strengthen student engagement and connection with the episode content. As Clevenger and Rick (2021) outline, interweaving field recordings and other sounds into podcasts *moves* listeners and has the

potential to generate various affects. Nature also acts as a source of awe and wonder, acting to motivate learning and curiosity (L'Ecuyer, 2014; Sinai et al., 2022). In other cases, brief musical notes were added, as well as other ambient noise where appropriate.

Creative licence also extended to the structure and timing of the podcast. Beyond the inclusion of discussions with guests and the introductory, concluding and context-providing remarks mentioned above, there was no uniform structure to the podcast, as an overly prescriptive formula on structure risks limiting creativity. In previous iterations of the unit, lectures ran for 90 minutes and were delivered via a blended face-to-face and livestream delivery. Podcast episode running time, however, ranged between 30 to 100 minutes, depending on the topic, guests' availability and the inclusion of other learning resources made available to students. If the reading and other resources for a particular week were significant, students were generally provided with a shorter podcast. Nevertheless, most podcasts ran between 45 and 70 minutes.

Podcast Host Style

As is the case with popularly consumed podcasts, each podcast host will vary in their style of delivery and conversation. I was able to draw on my experience as a podcast and audiobook listener to identify techniques in others' approaches, delivery style and production that I felt were both engaging and would resonate with students. Reflecting on my own oratory skills and deficits also shaped my approach to podcast production.

For this reason, many of my contributions to the podcast, outside of facilitating the conversation with the host, were scripted. Scripted contributions allow for clear delivery of important learning content, without the need to edit out missteps. However, reading from a script does necessitate a level of formality that would be inconsistent with the conversational tone of the podcast discussions. I sought to maintain the same informative and meaningful but informal tone that characterised the conversation with guests – there is a distinction between a script for a podcast and an audio recording of text that would otherwise be present in pre-reading material.

From a practical perspective, I soon found that recording these scripted sections at nighttime would often elicit a less energetic and at times unclear spoken delivery. This was only obvious to me when listening back to the audio. This experience highlights two important reminders: avoid recording at night or when tired; and be sure to listen to all recordings (including the final edited product) before publishing this for students. On the latter, audio issues tend to appear throughout the process, and quality control is important for the student experience. For this reason, also, it is helpful to maintain all original audio clips rather than the final product only. This allows for 'reconstructing' the podcast if issues arise.

Regardless of best efforts, however, such podcasts are not free from imperfections. This is especially true if producing a podcast series for the first time. Therefore, a regime of continual improvement, both for production quality and to accommodate advances in subject matter, will serve to ensure year-on-year refinement.

Challenges

Happily, the experience with the SLO Podcast Series was largely free of significant challenges. The guests I interviewed were generous with their time and responses and most had good quality audio recording equipment, sufficient for a low-tech podcast such as this one. Nevertheless, some challenges did arise. Some are preventable or can be remedied through editing while others are just a reality of podcast production. Strategies for maintaining the focus

of the discussion are outlined above, and the paragraphs below explore some additional challenges and strategies for solutions.

Technology Challenges

Technology challenges are perhaps the most obvious. Poor audio quality and working with unfamiliar or new technology can be particularly challenging. To prevent poor audio quality on videoconferencing technology such as *Zoom*, guests should be asked to ensure that their microphone is working. Conducting the conversation live, however, affords the host the opportunity to confirm that the audio is of sufficient quality. Adjustments to microphone settings often remedy any issues. Failing this, alternative modes of recording the audio, such as a phone call, can be sought. *Camtasia* editing software also includes mechanisms for improving audio recordings, including by increasing or decreasing relative volume levels (in some cases there will be noticeable disparities between the volume level of the guest and the host).

Editing is, as outlined above, a necessary and useful skill to have in producing dynamic podcasts that can accommodate robust academic content, a multiplicity of guest voices and some creative expression. Editing can also at times be a tedious exercise. Therefore, familiarisation with editing software, in this case *Camtasia*, can be achieved in a few ways. I was fortunate enough that my induction as an academic at CQUniversity included a workshop on *Camtasia*. I subsequently produced a few pre-recorded lectures and other video resources using *Camtasia* and learnt the basics through trial and error. I found this program to be easy-to-use and relatively intuitive. Additional online tutorials are also helpful for the more complex tasks and functions in *Camtasia*. Therefore, a combination of training, peer-to-peer troubleshooting, prior experience, trial and error and easy-to-use software are effective strategies for an efficient editing process (Rasmussen et al., 2023).

Introducing Podcasts to Students

Podcast use in higher education may be unfamiliar to some students. The reasons for adopting and implementing a podcast as a learning resource should be made evident to students to facilitate the uptake of what will often be the first time that students use podcasts in this way at university. In this case, students were informed about the reasons for this decision, namely that it allowed for asynchronous access to learning material (allowing for students to engage with this material at a time in the respective week which would suit them), could incorporate a greater range of guest speakers and that it was a new way to access class material. The details on how the podcast would be used were outlined through an introductory email, a post on the unit's *Moodle* page, as a reminder in the initial moments of the first podcast episode and again in the Week 1 tutorial session, delivered live face-to-face and online.

The User Experience

Aspects of the user experience, including listening and downloading, should be tested by the relevant academic before launch. Any instructions for use, such as which web browsers are best to use, should be included at the outset of the term. In the case of this podcast series, students reported that they were unable to download or play the audio files through *Apple's* web browser *Safari*. When this was brought to my attention, students were then instructed to download or play the audio files through other browsers, including *Google Chrome* and *Mozilla Firefox*, from which the audio could be played or downloaded without any apparent issues.

While some challenges of the user experience will be missed in this process, collecting feedback from students will be especially helpful in continuous improvement, both throughout the term for each episode and on the podcast resource as a whole. Future research on podcasts

as class resources will therefore need to include perspectives from both students and podcast guests.

Conclusion

The use of podcasts in higher education is growing, commensurate with their popularity across society in general. Some higher education subject areas are particularly suited to employing podcasts as effective learning resources. This paper explored the development and implementation of podcasts in AGRI13001 – Social Licence to Operate, a third-year unit (subject) in CQUniversity Australia's Bachelor of Agriculture program.

The below list summarises the most important advice I can offer from this experience:

- Use recording and editing software that you are familiar with or that is easy to use, I mostly used *Zoom* and *Camtasia*, respectively.
- Use good recording equipment, ensuring it is trialled beforehand
- Ask podcast guests open ended questions
- Ensure guests are aware of how the podcast will be used by students
- Send podcast guests questions in advance of your discussion
- Add introductory and concluding remarks, as well as other commentary/narration in the podcast to ensure that this resource fulfils its role in serving the relevant unit learning outcomes.
- Re-record your questions or delivery, if need be, particularly for audio clarity.
- Use creative licence, such as through the inclusion of ambient sound from nature or from busy social settings.
- Test the user experience – can podcasts be easily downloaded and listened to?
- Link podcast material to other learning resources and activities.
- Implement continuous improvement year on year, editing, adjusting or replacing podcast episodes as needed.

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