Transcript – ABARES Graduate Webinar

**Panel speakers**

* Charlie Qin (host speaker)
* Dave Galeano
* Emily Dahl
* Jenny Eather
* John Walsh

**Attendees**

* Brittany
* Emma

**Charlie:** Alright, well. That should be a few more people, so we'll get started. Welcome everyone to this online webinar hosted by ABARES. My name is Charlie and I'm an economist in the agricultural forecasting and policy team here at ABARES and a lot of my work is analysing coarse grain markets. So coarse grains is stuff like barley and sorghum, and I joined a bit as a graduate back in 2020 and I'm going to be the host speaker for this webinar. Just a reminder. Also, this webinar will be recorded, so keep that in mind. Before we get into today's webinar, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today. For me, that's the Ngunnawal people, and I also pay my respects to their elders past and present. I extend that respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here today. So for today's webinar will be focusing on the ABARES graduate program in just a bit, we'll get to hear from some past ABARES's graduates about their experiences, but I think it's good that we start with some basic questions.

So firstly, who are ABARES and what do they do? So ABARES stands for the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Science, where the research arm of the Department of Agriculture, Water and Environment. And if you hop on the website, you're gonna see that our mission is to provide professionally independent data, research, analysis, and advice that informs public and private decisions affecting Australian fisheries, agriculture and forestry. So this is enabled by ABARES staff, which are made up of trained economists and scientists, and today's webinar is going to be focusing on the Economist roles that we have here at ABARES and provide an insider look at the work we do.

Now, in terms of the graduate program, in 2023, ABARES is offering a 12 month entry level professional program as part of the graduate program. You'll join a team and directly contribute to research that supports policy and industry. You'll also have the chance to be involved in opportunities, including the Outlook conference and in-house agricultural policy course, and also complete a placement with the policy area of the department.

So from here I think we can pretty much just get straight into the panel for today with us. We've got Dave, Emily, Jenny and John, and we might just quickly go around the panel in alphabetic order and just briefly introduce ourselves and also tell us a bit about your experience during the graduate program. So Dave, I'll hand it over to you.

**Dave:** Yeah, thanks Charlie, so I’m a bit older than Charlie. I started the day bears in 2001. As a graduate. I started in the fisheries economics area, grew up in Sydney, studied AG economics at Sydney Uni, and then moved to Canberra. Got a great job in a bears so the fisheries economics work I did was around assessing the economic performance of Commonwealth fisheries. Now this is mainly because there's an economic objective in the fisheries legislation so that kind of work that I did, sort of from day one. So we would just jump straight into the deep end, was around assessing the performance of Commonwealth fisheries. So I ran a fishery surveys program. So we went out and spoke to commercial fishers, collected a whole pile of financial data from them and calculated indicators of performance. So net returns productivity and that sort of thing. And then I left ABARES at around 2007 and I went and worked at Department of Environment. A stint at the fisheries regulator and then I worked on water. Tomorrow Darling Basin authority before actually coming back to ABARES in 2016. That senior leadership position, but I guess the thing I really liked about the grad program was that it was like I said before, from day one I was working on real projects. I wasn't just doing admin, wasn't just doing photocopying and I got to apply my knowledge from my degree practically straight away. So that really set me up for the rest of my career. So there's a quick snapshot of me. Happy to hand back to you, Charlie.

**Charlie:** No worries, So alphabetic order. I think that's Emily. Next yes Emily, I'll hand it over to you. Thank you.

**Emily:** Thanks Charlie. So I joined a bears at the same time as Charlie did through the grad program at the beginning of 2020 and I started out in the agricultural forecasting and policy team as the oilseeds analyst. I'm currently the wheat analyst and I'm still working in the same team before joining a Bears. I had worked in another government department. That was in Brisbane so having finished my honours and economics, I was really keen to take on some new challenges and had this opportunity of moving to Canberra and working at ABARES and using my qualifications.

**Charlie:** Yeah, thanks that Emily, that's that's great to hear and we might pass over to Jenny next. If that's alright.

**Jenny:** Hi everyone, I'm Jenny UM I joined ABARES in the 2013 graduate intake. Come back then I started in the macroeconomic team. So uhm, that was helping come up with the macroeconomic UM assumptions that the commodity forecasters used in doing their forecasts. Nowadays I'm in the agricultural trade team. Before I join ABARES, I studied agent studies and economics at a new and then went off to China for a couple of years. And then do my masters in economics at UQ.

**Charlie:** Thanks, thanks much Jennie and I think lastly, we've just got John and also just a reminder to people joining that. If you could kick your microphones muted thank you.

**John:** Yeah, thanks Charlie so. I started as a graduate last year 2021, so I've been here for just over a year and my story is probably a little bit different to some of the other graduates in it. For me it was a second career, so I actually worked as a physiotherapist in a hospital for the five years. Prior to joining ABARES, which is obviously quite different, and during that time I became interested in economics and policy and at the time particular health policy and health funding and in the end I'm denied and I bit the bullet and jumped in and started a master of economics and then through the study of that. So I came across other areas of economics to look at and an elective I took was environmental econ and it was during that that I discovered a bears just during the Union assignment and I you know, Full disclosure. I had no idea what was at the time, but I still remember the articles about farm profits and climate change. So it's really interesting and really current and relevant, so I immediately kind of tweaked and earmark. ABARES is somewhere that I might want to work one day and then sure enough end of the degree I apply for the entry level. Graduate program and was lucky enough to get accepted last year, so been here for a year. I'm working in the natural resource in economics program and then within that I'm in the water team so water economics, which I won't get into right this second. But basically looking at analyzing the water markets across the Murray Darling Basin in Australia. So again something that's topical, relevant and and current so really enjoying the work and I'll leave it there for a moment. Thanks, Charlie.

**Charlie:** Awesome, that's great to hear John and we're now gonna have our live Q&A session, so if anyone has questions, feel free to pop them into the chat. I've got Stephanie in the room here next to me, helping me out a bit with questions, so if you see a head or a hand that might be her, but she's she'll be helping me out a bit with those questions. But John, I'm going to hand over to you for our first question.

So look as a graduate, you can pretty much expect to be the most junior member. Of any team you join, what sort of contribution can you expect to make through working at a graduate level?

**John:** Yeah, great question. So I think the first thing to say right off the bat is that it's not an internship, so certainly having been in Canberra for a year now and obviously having talked to a lot of other graduates from different departments and some of their experiences are a little bit more of the internship level. But the ABARES program is nothing like that at all. So you really jump in just like Dave said, feet first from day one you're doing real work, real projects, research on current relevant topics and that's been that's been really great. So just to give a quick example, I guess is. I'm currently working on a report. It's called the water market outlook and in compiling that report with the team we gathered data. We analyze it. We do a bit of economic modelling. We write the whole report, at least the report, and then we even have a webinar following it and you might think that as a graduate as the most junior Member you would just be working on sort of the bottom level tasks within that maybe a bit of data cleaning data import, but that's just not the case, so I've been able to work across every single one of those aspects, every single one of those tasks and. To give a bit of context. So I started last year and I was like you know what our water markets and then within six months I was the affairs analyst on a webinar answering questions live about the water markets and our latest report. So you started, you know you're on this trajectory straight up from day one, but you support it all the way. And yeah, equal parts challenging and rewarding. Thanks, Charlie.

**Charlie:** Awesome no thanks John. I think I have a next question just on learning and development and I'm going to pass it to you Dave. But if anyone else has anything to say after that, feel free to build on or or elaborate. But yeah, I think learning and development look that doesn't. That doesn't just stop after university and I think it's especially important at the start of your career. So Dave, how did your time during the graduate program contribute to your learning and development?

**Dave:** Yeah Charlie, great question. So I mean really, in a word, a crucial so you know I did a fair bit of economics at uni. Obviously four year degree Sydney Uni, lots of economics there. Lots of applied economics in there. But look, it really wasn't until I started working at eight years that you got to really put that into practice. So I guess you get to put in practice, but it also helps. It also help with a bunch of other sort of skills related so that one of the couple of things that worth mentioning are like purposely stopping and thinking about some perceived problem that's come up. It could be someone from an industry or a stakeholder or whatever. This is real. Honing of hang on. What is the problem here? Thinking about that in a structured way, So what are the incentives that apply? Is there a market failure going on here or is just some rent seeking behaviour? And if there is a market failure, well, what sort of market failure is it? Because the government response to that will be different depending on you know what the issue is. Also, because we're in this unique position of being a a division of the department and a research Bureau doing their technical work, we had this focus sharp focus even back then on how is anyone going to use this piece of analysis. So maybe in contrast to academia, there's a sharp focus from day one of a project. OK, what are we doing here and why? Who's gonna use it? What did management decision or decision from a minister or someone in the department about a policy that's going to be implemented or a decision or whatever? How is this bit of work going to help with that? So it was crucial for honing that. And then there's all the other, more equally important, but more generic things like you know the targeting, good writing, communication, relationships, all of that 'cause you know you could have the best bit of modelling in the world. But if no one can understand what the bloody hell we going on about, or you don't bring people along, then it's not worth a whole lot. So there was a. There's a big focus on that as well. And then on a more personal level, I guess there was the more the social side of thing. So you know, I was a really shy kind of chat once I finished uni. Pretty sure he want to talk to him, any people, but the whole process at ideas with cohort, you know social clubs and via clubs and sporting teams. And all that. That really helped me settle in in a new city and gain confidence, you know, to to sort of get on with the rest of my career. So yeah, it doesn't stop learning and development. Thanks, Charlie.

**Charlie:** Yeah no, I absolutely agree and I think. Here at a bad you get exposed to things that you don't necessarily get as much exposure to at university. I think a big one for me was writing. You know, I did in my 4 year economics degree. Aside from my last year, I did barely any writing, but here at ABARES right from the get go writing and producing reports is a regular part of my work and not only do I get that experience, but I also get a lot of feedback from people that are much better at writing than me because they've had a lot more experience so. That's a tremendous learning and development opportunity, and. John, you've unmuted yourself. Did you have to go just when you finished?

**John:** Yeah, I was just gonna jump in really quickly. Maybe I jumped the gun there just to say that you kind of prompt reminded me I'm talking about the writing, but for me it was coding so obviously dabble a little bit in these things in your economics degree, less or more depending on what university you might have gone to, but certainly it's a part of 21st century working in economics and. When I arrived at ABARES, uhm, yeah, immediately I kind of said look, you know something I really want to build on and it was supported by my team and actually was able to take on an online course. Again, was supported by others, so you given that bit of freedom and to actually develop the skills and it's really encouraged, and I think also to Dave's point, it's because it's a bit more of a research arm, yet you have a slightly longer time horizons maybe than at the main department, so you're able to take that time to really develop those skills. So I've learned more in the past year in terms of technical stuff than in the whole degree, so yeah.

**Charlie:** I'm going to change topic a little bit now, and Jenny I'm going to ask you a question just about the people here at ABARES. So naturally once you start working at a big, you're going to spend a good chunk of your time with the people here. That's just, you know, that's just the fact, and you know two questions. Firstly, how do you find working with the people here? And secondly, throwing in a buzzword - workplace culture. How do you find the workplace culture here?

**Jenny:** Yeah, so uhm. I've been here for, uh, almost 10 years now, so can't be too bad. One of the things I like about working at a bears is that dumb people are relaxed and friendly, but at the same time they're really motivated and value excellence. So that's probably one of the things that's kept me around for so long. Uh, also, uh, I just like to say that. It's been a really good place for me. I've had two kids since I joined a bears and each time I went on mat leave. It's been a really easy process and I've come back to, you know, a good position and they actually promoted me while I was on my last stint of mat leave. So that was very appreciated. And when I first started laborers, I really enjoyed the social aspect I was. I think I even got in the world for a Christmas party for being first the beer fridge. On Friday afternoons, how embarrassing, but anyway, yeah, really enjoyed the friendships from UM, the other, you know, young economists. And you know, COVID has sort of made the social side of things a little bit more difficult. But yeah, I do really like working with the people here. And I I do like working in the small teams together with other people who might have different skills. Project. Yeah, so if you like working with other people. Yeah, put in an application. Charlie can notice that something there. So the other thing I suppose, and maybe this is not strictly culture, but I think it probably is, is there's a lot of people in areas that have been in ABARES for quite a lot quite a while, and you know subject matter experts whether it be fishery science or fish economics. Or, you know, grains markets or whatever, and there's this real sort of wanting to share knowledge. So a lot of the senior people are quite keen to share the knowledge they've built up overtime on a particular in a particular area or industry. So there's not this culture as well. I started down the bottom, didn't know anything, so it's up to you to learn it all yourself. There's a lot of wanting to mentor and help people understand issues and the industry and all the rest of it. So it's a kind of place where you learn lots. Just writing a ministerial or or, you know, jumping from one issue to another? You kind of get to get a little bit deep in some issues and understand them in a bit of detail and there's a sort of a learning culture around that as well.

**Charlie:** Absolutely, and I think having the opportunity to ask questions is really important from early on, because it's it's not very especially as a graduate. You don't want to be siloed and just have to figure out everything for yourself. A lot of people in the team here can help you out, and Emily, I'm just going to ask you a question next and it's just about can you tell us a highlight perhaps of your graduate program? It could be like a project or a publication that you worked on. Is there anything in particular that you want to draw out?

**Emily:** Yeah sure, thanks Charlie. Well something that I've really enjoyed and got a lot out of was the placement that I did with a policy team in the department and so that was in my first year in 2020. And really, that experience did broaden my network and I learned a lot more about how the department functions, but also the important role that ABARES plays in providing data to help form policy advice. So it was. Quite an interesting opportunity too well, having worked at a ABARES, I think at that point it had been around six months and then kind of going to a team in the department and seeing the other side of things. So I really valued that experience.

**Charlie:** No, absolutely and ABARES is an organization which is in a quite unique position as a part of the department, but also being a research institution. And Dave I might pass back to you just on a question about you. Now you're an assistant secretary at a ABARES, and that's you know that's a for people that aren't familiar with APS level. That's Dave is sort of like the same level as the boss of my manager. And sorry, you know you don't. You don't just get to that sort of position overnight. That doesn't just happen overnight and I'm just curious how did your graduate program experience and learning and to your development and progression?

**Dave:** In that sense, yeah, so we'll probably cover that in some of my earlier comments. Or maybe I should have separated it out a little bit, but it really the first thing was that holding of the economics you know, I finished uni thinking was best economist in the world, but you know, of course I wasn't because I hadn't actually applied it. Anyway, so it really helped me sort out that economic side of things. And then also those other things that I mentioned before. But in particular I guess the the writing thing that I mentioned. But the relationships then I never really understood, you know, go through uni. You got the odd uni assignment where you know you got two people that slack off and you never do any of the work and you do all the work. And it's it's terrible. But when you get into the workplace, the value of relationships, I didn't really understand that. Until my grad year and then of course, that's just developed as it's gone along so. You know, if you're trying to influence someone, don't don't sort of drop something on them at the 11th hour, you know you gotta bring them along for the ride, and that's the part of that is also the building the social capital along the way, so you know, even in my grad year, my boss would drag me along to meetings with the the fisheries policy people just to meet them and understand what they're facing and put myself in better put myself in their shoes to know how it is that I can help them so that relationships thing I think is crucial.

**John:** And there's definitely a focus on that in ABARES. Just to piggyback off that real quick, Charlie. Certainly in my last 12 months I've had the privilege of sitting in quite a few meetings with some water related bodies, so the MDBA and the water division in the department itself. Discussing ACCC inquiry on a lot of a lot of big topics and also universities as well, and sometimes as a graduate you're there with with questions to ask and other times you're there just to to experience some. You know what's been talked about, and it's certainly the culture ABARES that everyone you know who's in that team can come along. It's not a case of your graduate, you don't. You don't need to know this. It's very inclusive in that way. So yeah, I just wanted to add that.

**Charlie:** Absolutely, and just a reminder also to people attending that. If you have any questions, feel free to pop them into the chat or also just you know you can pop on camera and speak out and ask a question. I'll pause a little bit to allow questions to come in, otherwise I'll keep firing away. Oh yes, Brittany. Did you have a question?

**Brittany:** Yeah, sorry, I turned in like a little bit late and I was having a bit of Internet problems so you probably did already cover this, but I just wanted to ask. I work for a government agency already in their economics and analytics team and the work that I'm doing at the moment is quite like data focused and I personally just like the nature of the work we have at the moment I don't get much of a chance to do writing as well as the analytics and economics part, so I was just wondering, in ABARES are there teams where you do get to do both or is it more stratified like you're either doing the analytics or you're doing the policy and it's not much crossover?

**David:** I can have a crack. Yeah yeah, absolutely. So. I mean, I think John you might not have got John comment little earlier if you joined a bit late, but. You know that the idea is it's pretty rare to have someone that just comes in, and they're just the data monkey. So what usually happens is you do a bit of everything. You do a bit of, you know, data analysis or collecting the data, cleaning the data, analysis a bit of modeling some of the writing some presentations of it, going to meetings with whoever the client is, so pretty rare and not be doing writing in eight years. It's a fundamental thing we do. Most of the things we put out a report, insights, papers or whatever. So yeah, definitely writing. If you come to a is a grad.

**John:** 100% ABARES in the first report I worked on a table is within the first month I was drafting and writing content which was in the final publication and Dave actually is one of the people who reviews what I write. So you get some pretty good feedback. That's pretty ruthless editing at times, but it's yeah really good process and writing is 100% a part of everything that we do here. You're in the last little while we've rolled out a few training courses in writing as well, so we've brought someone into town to, you know, run through a fairly intensive sort of thing where we. So it goes through, you know who's your audience and understanding, putting yourself in their shoes. And so we put a high value on good writing, so we typically train around that as well.

**Charlie:** I'm just gonna add on also, if you're curious about the sort of writing and work that we do at ABARES, have a look at the ABARES website because we publish most of our work, and so there's no shortage of samples and work online for you to check out, just to have a look at and see for yourself what we do here. I'm just going to go to.

There's a question that chat, but I'm just going to go to Emma first, who I think had her hand up. Emma. Did you want to come off mute and ask your question?

**Emma:** Yeah, can you hear me OK? So I was wondering if people with undergraduate degrees only had just as much of a chance? Or are you more looking for honours and masters? Graduates. Dave, did you wanna hear this question?

**Dave:** Yeah so yeah, look if you got a good undergraduate. Degree yeah, we're we're happy. Happy to have a chat with you so you Obviously Masters and honors are highly regarded and everything but but if you've got a good undergraduate degree wide recognition, put an application in. If you're interested in working at eight years, because we're certainly interested in having a chat, chat to you. Because like I said before. You know you learn economics, unity, but it does really get home when you hear it a there. So as long as you got good fundamental economics, you know you know which way supply curve slopes and the demand curve slopes and and so on. We you know that that's that's really what we're looking for.

**Emma:** OK, great, thank you. I did have a follow up question but I'm happy to come if you wanna go to the chat first.

**Charlie:** Yeah, no worries, I'll just address the. So I think Samuel had a question about transitioning to moving to Canberra. So Andrew has rightly pointed out we do provide support for that, and there are. There's if you want more information about that, we're happy to provide that about what that support is like. But I a few of us in. I think Emily actually moved here from Queensland from Brisbane. Actually, we're both from Brisbane, but Emily did you want to comment at all just about that transition and what that was like?

**Emily:** Sure, well I'm yes. I'm moved from Brisbane and I'm so grateful to ABARES in the department they really helped make that transition as smooth as possible. So for instance they helped out with temporary accommodation for the first few weeks just so I could make a start in the new role and not have to worry so much about securing or finding a place to rent because at that time of year it can be a bit tricky. In Canberra especially so yeah, honestly it was quite a good start and having started with so many other graduates who were not from Canberra and we kind of banded together and have a yeah, there's quite a good socially I suppose starting out.

**Charlie:** Thanks for that Emily. Emma, I'll just come back to you. Did you wanna raise your question again? Just anything else you wanted to add on?

**Emma:** Yep, yes. Are there equal positions for men and women? Or it's basically just based off of? You know the individual's performance, I suppose.

**Dave:** We all might have a crack so so we don't have quite well hang on. Stephanie's gonna go no go so we don't have quotas or anything like that, but you know, really we're in the position of these days. There's not as many people doing economics at uni so we encourage anyone to apply and anyone that meets our merit test will be offering them a job so. You know, by all means, please please put application in. But yeah, we don't have. We don't have formal quotas, we're in a position of we just we kind of take we take who we can get really, yeah. OK, great, thank you.

**Charlie:** Cool OK, We're just running short on time. Were there I think that was we might just go to our closing question and then any other subsequent questions, maybe we can follow up afterwards, but just to close any advice for people looking to apply to the ABARES graduate program and we might just go around the panel and each just provide a response and Dave. Once again I might just kick off with you and just go in alphabetical order again, but any closing comments about advice for people looking to apply?

**Dave:** Yeah, so we are the department of AG water environment, but if you don't have an AG background or you need in grow up on a farm or didn't do an Agri or whatever. If that doesn't matter, we're really looking for economists that are interested in applying economics and you can learn about the AG sector once you're here. So don't be shy if you don't have an AG background. Just put an application in.

**Emily:** Thanks, Charlie. And As for the interview as well, I must say that it was a very relaxed kind of friendly atmosphere and it yeah, it was nice. The panel made me feel welcome and yeah, supported.

**Jenny:** Yeah, just wanted to come follow on from what Dave said. I didn't have an AG background before coming to Avis. My masters thesis was to do with some financial system growth in China. Uhm, so if you're interested in applied economics, it's a great place to come. There was a question in the chat of how important are grades, UHM? I have been on grad panels a couple of times and. Uhm? There's somewhat important, but come from personal experience. I my grades were pretty patchy. I had chronic illness through my undergraduate, and my few fails some HD's and you knowfew bear passes here and there, so. Don't let that. Put you off putting in an application. Just try and work on your pitch. Come give us a good idea of why you want to work at a bears and what what you can bring and. Yeah. You've got to be in it to win it I guess is what I'd say. But yeah, there's a lot of different things that we're looking for and dumb. Yeah, just put in an application is what I'm saying.

**Charlie:** Thanks Jenny, Uhm any closing comments from you, John? Yeah, I mean just to quickly clarify.

**John:** Certainly don't need the AG background or my major capstone project was in health economics. UM, and then as far as the interview goes, yeah, just enjoy it. I I did a whole lot of interviewing you here. I was applying for different grad programs and I can honestly say that one was the most enjoyable and most interesting, and that's been consistent with the other grants here as well, so certainly don't be afraid to put an application and the only other hot tip I'd say is read the website before him. Always good to have some few things to talk about.

**Charlie:** Absolutely. I second that suggestion John. And also it's yeah great advice because some of these people might be on your panel. So great advice from them from about interviewing and applying for a bit. So we're just running short on time, so we might have to wrap things up there just a few closing details to keep in mind. So firstly is a closing date for applications, so applications close on 15 of April for the AB's graduate program, so make sure you get. Your application in before that date. If you're looking to apply because you don't want to miss out, and I think Kay has pointed posted the link for the graduate program application into the chat, but will also send around a subsequent email with that link as well, and also just keep in mind that in terms of mandatory qualifications for application, that's just a degree in economics, science, mathematics or statistics. So if you meet that requirement. Absolutely centre our requirement and we be keen to hear from you and we'll also provide the email addresses of the panel members today. So if you'd like to reach out, or if you have any further questions, please feel free and they're pretty easy to talk to, so they're happy to have a chat or field. Any questions you might have. And with that we might wrap things up. Thanks everyone for attending this online webinar and we'll see you guys around so thanks. Thanks. Thank you. Thank you.