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ANZ Scholarship boost for farming women

Two farming women from opposite ends of New Zealand are making the most of scholarships received for a national leadership and governance programme for women in primary industries.

Recipients of ANZ Scholarships for the Agri-Women's Development Trust's Escalator programme, Jenny McDonald of Ashburton and Sandra Matthews of Gisborne, are now half-way through the 10-month course along with 12 other women. The pair are motivated to build on their leadership skills and experience so they can take on new challenges in primary industries and communities.

Having moved south to Ashburton in the 90s to share-milk and then go on to buy a dairy farm, chartered accountant, Jenny McDonald, has always worked off-farm. "My work initially allowed me to feel more part of the community. However, over the past 20 years I've also been fully involved in my children's activities - Parents Centre, Home and School president for seven years and nine years on Ashburton College Board of Trustees.

"My youngest child has recently headed off to university so I saw Escalator as an amazing opportunity to invest in myself and help me work out where to direct my efforts in future. Learning how I lead and what my strengths are has been eye-opening.

"As part of Escalator we've also just completed training with the NZ Institute of Directors which really cemented my school board governance experience. The training gave me great insights about how to build a more effective board," Jenny McDonald said. As part of Escalator's practical work component, Jenny will travel to Wellington next month to observe the board meeting of the Primary ITO. "Escalator is both exciting and challenging. I'm learning new skills and stepping out of my comfort zone to practice them, while making new connections and building confidence.

"It's too early to say where I'll focus my efforts next but it's likely to involve leadership in the local community or the wider agribusiness sector."

The other ANZ scholarship recipient Sandra Matthews tells a similar story. "Escalator is enabling me to embrace the learning and put theory into practice with organisations I'm involved with." Sandra moved to a sheep and beef farm near Gisborne 25 years ago where she raised a family, worked in finance and more recently co-founded Farming Women Tairāwhiti, an educational support organisation for more than 400 rural women in the Gisborne region.

"Escalator has helped me understand my strengths and how to better use my transferable skills. Serving on school board of trustees and local committees was a hugely valuable experience and I now realise how important this was in my leadership journey. I'm inspired to work in board governance as this is where change can be made but also work at a grass-roots level helping others become aware that they can create change.

"Jenny and I are extremely grateful for the investment the ANZ have made in us by awarding these scholarships to undertake the programme. We look forward to contributing positively within the agri-sector in our future career paths" Sandra Matthews said.

ANZ general manager of commercial and agri, John Bennett, said the scholarship recipients were poised to help meet some exciting challenges in such as being able to connect their farm stories to the world and consumers.

"We have seen the value of the Escalator programme for many women over the years – and not just in the people we've supported. When you look at the alumni, they are leading new initiatives and new discussions that would not have happened otherwise. We are seeing some rich rewards being delivered to agricultural businesses and communities."

Applications for the 2018 Escalator programme are now open. Further information is available at awdt.org.nz