

CONFERENCE PAPER

SUCCESSION IN THE FAMILY FARM BUSINESS¹*Matt Lobley*

Farming remains almost exclusively an inherited occupation and one in which the transfer of business control and ownership to the next generation is arguably one of the most critical stages in the development of the business. This paper draws on a variety of sources, including a widespread international comparison, to review the farm succession issue in detail, and to consider some of the implications – positive and negative - of a reliance on familial succession.

Key words Succession, retirement, inheritance, farm, new entrant, family

Introduction

Farming remains almost exclusively an inherited occupation and one in which the transfer of business control and ownership to the next generation is arguably one of the most critical stages in the development of the business. As with many family businesses, one of the prime objectives of family farms is to pass on control of a sound and often improved business to the next generation (Gasson and Errington, 1993). This may involve the transfer of the ‘home farm’ to a successor (or multiple successors) or it may involve the transfer of the necessary capital to establish a new farm business. Thus, it is possible to distinguish between succession to the farm and succession to the occupation of farming. In addition to succeeding to the farm and/or occupation, the successor also benefits from the transfer of skills and, frequently less tangible assets such as a detailed knowledge of the home farm, its micro climate and idiosyncrasies. Succession then, is the process of transferring managerial control and other intangible assets such as site (farm) specific knowledge.

The mirror image of succession is retirement. Just as succession is a process rather than a single event, retirement from farming “can be seen ... not as an individual act but an extended sequence of transitions” (Rosenblatt and Anderson, 1981). The self-employed generally face a greater range of opportunities in terms of the balance between their time devoted to work and time devoted to other activities and in the case of farming, in particular, the term ‘retirement’ can cover a wide range of situations. At one extreme, it can refer to the process of selling up and leaving farming altogether, frequently though, it may involve withdrawal from some of the more arduous tasks alongside a continuing day-to-day involvement in the business. For some, full retirement is achieved by selling up, moving away from the farm and no longer relying on a farm to produce retirement income. For others, a pathway of semi-retirement with retirement income to some extent dependent on farm income may, after a series of transitions, eventually lead to full retirement and a move out of the farmhouse or even off the farm entirely. Finally, inheritance denotes the legal transfer of ownership of business assets (including land and quota). Whilst conceptually separate, these processes are obviously linked and

1. This paper was originally presented at The Oxford Farming Conference, January 2010, and is reprinted by kind permission of the author and the Conference Secretariat.

the timing and smoothness of the process can have considerable implications for the farm business as well as the individuals involved in that business.

The twin processes of succession and retirement can be a time of considerable financial and emotional stress on farm households (Burton and Walford, 2005) and there is much evidence of the impacts on the successor and the business when the principal farmer (usually a male) cannot bring himself to fully let go of the 'reins' (Errington and Lobley 2002; Potter and Lobley 1992). Succession and the 'failure' of succession can have a powerful influence on the development trajectory of a farm. Symes for instance, found that farms lacking a successor were less likely to be managed intensively, and that "the production cycle declines closer to a subsistence mode in old age than at any other point in the life cycle" (Symes 1973). On the other hand, the identification of a successor can act as a trigger for business development, and the existence of a successor can provide a powerful motivation for on-going investment in the business even into the old age of the retiring farmer (Potter and Lobley, 1996). Although the full impact of succession may not be revealed until the successor is incorporated into the business, in many cases, the anticipation and expectation of succession can influence decision making long before a potential successor is identified and indicates a desire to succeed. So when farmers, as they frequently do, point to a toddler playing with a toy tractor and proudly identify him (and it almost always is a 'him') as 'my successor', that may already be influencing thinking and decisions about the farm, making some business options unthinkable while others become more attractive. Against this background, this paper considers why intergenerational succession remains important in contemporary agriculture and compares rates and patterns of succession in England and several other countries, before going on to consider some implications of the concentration of agricultural assets in the hands of relatively few established farming families.

Why is succession important?

In simple terms, intergenerational succession is important because it represents an integral facet of the family farm. Intergenerational succession represents the renewal of the family farm and can potentially act as a helpful corrective in addressing the apparent increasingly aged population of principal farmers.² In the UK (and many other countries) families are responsible for most farms and much farmed land. For example, a recent survey of 255 farmers in six areas of England found that 84% operated 'established family farms' (i.e. those who are at least the 2nd generation of their family to be farming the same farm or nearby farm), and were responsible for managing 86% of the area covered by the survey (Lobley et al, 2002). Sometimes family occupancy of the farm or local farmland was extremely lengthy and 31% of established family farmers could trace their family's occupancy of the farm to 1900 or earlier (known as Century Farms in the USA). Not surprisingly, many (61%) had been responsible for their farm for at least 20 years, although a

2. To an extent the frequently quoted figures demonstrating the high average age of British farmers is misleading. 'Official' figures are based on the age of the registered holder of the holding. In many cases this will be an older person but the individual responsible for the day to day running of the business will often be much younger.

significant minority (18%) had assumed responsibility in the last ten years. Few (8%) were new entrants in the strictest sense that they were the first generation of their family to farm in the locality and had not previously farmed elsewhere. Of those assuming control of the farm in the last five years, only 9% were new entrants in this sense. Thus, the main entry route into farming in England remains intergenerational transfer within a family (ADAS *et al* 2004; Lobley *et al*, 2002). This is not to suggest that intergenerational succession is or should be the only means of entry in to farming. Far from it, the 'new blood' effect of entrants from outside the agricultural sector has long been recognised (e.g. Northfield, 1979). Indeed, more recent evidence suggests that new entrants to organic farming in England are among the most entrepreneurial and dynamic of farmers (see below).

Decisions made (or sometimes avoided) about the management of family farms have implications for rural economies, rural communities and the environment. Farm family businesses face a range of complex drivers for change. Much attention has focused on global processes of trade liberalisation and seemingly endless rounds of CAP (Common Agricultural Policy) reform. However, farm level drivers are also important because it is here that the effects of other drivers of change are mediated, as well as being a source of internal farm household drivers. Indeed, a considerable body of evidence (e.g. Potter and Lobley 1996; Gasson and Errington 1993; Bryden *et al* 1992) suggests that family events and processes such as births, marriage, ageing, succession and retirement can influence reaction to changes in the external environment and can trigger restructuring in agricultural businesses.

Clearly, succession is, or should be, of importance to policy makers given evidence that the process has a considerable influence on farmer behaviour and responsiveness to particular policy measures. In addition, the facilitation of the timely transfer of the farm business is an explicit objective of many policy initiatives (although admittedly, other than the Fresh Start experiment there are few examples of this approach in the UK) and it is therefore important that policy-makers understand the processes of intergenerational transfer in their respective countries. For farm advisers, a fuller understanding of the process of succession is important because at the very time when the new generation is seeking to improve productivity or business viability through investment, the older generation may be engaged in disinvestment to provide for their retirement. This is particularly likely where no separate pension provision has been made and the farm business itself is expected to provide retirement funds. Thus, advisors need to consider how to maintain a viable business for the next generation while minimising the financial and emotional stress increasingly associated with the pursuit of this goal.

Impacts of succession on the farm business

In an earlier paper, Potter and Lobley (1996) identified three principal effects associated with succession and retirement. The first is the 'succession effect' which refers to the impact of the expectation of succession on the farm business. Evidence suggests that farms may be developed over a long period in order to provide a business capable of supporting two generations or to yield

sufficient capital to establish successors on separate holdings. The succession effect can operate from close to the time of the birth of the first ‘potential successor’ although it is more likely to be felt when a successor indicates their intention to follow the occupation of farming:

“... once married and with children of my own, my ambitions became stronger to provide a good standard of living and improve the value of the farm. Once both sons definitely wanted to come home then expansion and improvement plans came to fruition”.

“Because I’m in partnership with two sons we’re in full swing, we are going forward. If I was on my own things would be very different. I wouldn’t have bought the new farm for a start”. (Quoted in Potter and Lobley 1996)

Farms with a successor present are much more likely to have a history of significant capital investment and expansion than farms lacking a successor. Sometimes this is closely linked to the ‘successor effect’, the impact of the successor themselves as they gradually (or sometimes rapidly) assume managerial control. Successors often return from a period of agricultural training with new ideas and an innovative approach to the business. The extent of their impact will be influenced by how rapidly they ascend the ‘succession ladder’ (see Errington and Lobley, 2002) although Potter and Lobley (1996) report that over 9% of all capital investment, 6% of all land purchase and 8% of all major enterprise change in a sample of 504 farms across Britain over a thirty year period took place within a year of the successor’s return to full time work on the farm.

Finally, the ‘retirement effect’ can be identified towards the end of a farmer’s career and is most pronounced where succession has been ruled out. In these cases farm operators frequently disengage or even withdraw from agriculture, down-sizing to reduce work load, letting or selling land and frequently farming remaining land less intensively. In some instances, these farmers can be regarded as ‘capital consumers’ (Lobley and Potter, 2004), progressively liquidating farm assets to provide an income as part of a gradual process of leaving farming.

The rate and pattern of succession: some international comparisons

This section draws on published and unpublished data from the *FARMTRANSFERS* project which is an international research collaboration initiated by Professor Andrew Errington of The University of Plymouth and John R. Baker of Iowa State University. The project is based on a survey questionnaire© originally developed by Professor Errington and subsequently replicated in a number of different countries (see Table 1) using the questionnaire© to provide a standard set of data to be added to the *FARMTRANSFERS* database. *FARMTRANSFERS* is currently directed by John Baker, Ian Whitehead (University of Plymouth) and Matt Lobley. To date over 15,600 farmers have completed a *FARMTRANSFERS* questionnaire.

The *FARMTRANSFERS* questionnaire collects a range of information on plans for succession and retirement, information sources used, expected retirement income sources and detailed information on the delegation of decision-making responsibility between the principal farmer and his/

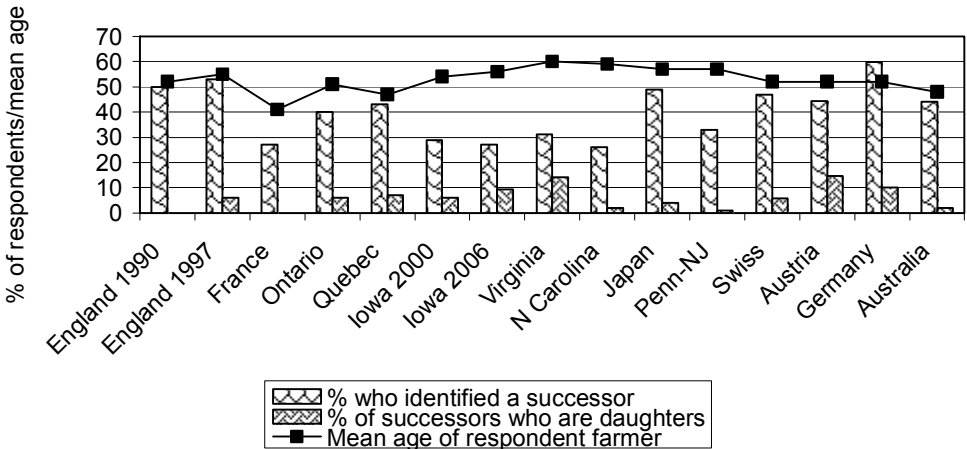
Table 1. FARMTRANSFERS surveys 1991-2009

1991 England	1993 France
1997 Canada (Ontario & Quebec)	1997 England
2000 Iowa	2001 Japan
2001 Virginia	2003 Germany
2003 Poland	2003 Switzerland
2004 California (Humboldt county)	2003 Austria
2004 Australia	2005 Pennsylvania & New Jersey
2005 North Carolina	2006 Wisconsin
2006 Iowa	2009 Romania

her successor(s).³ In terms of the rate of succession, as Figure 1 illustrates, the situation in England compares quite favourably to that in France, Canada and several US states. Indeed, only Germany has a higher rate of succession than England (compared to the 1997 sample), while Iowa, Virginia, North Carolina and France have markedly lower rates of succession. The very low numbers of daughters/daughters-in-law identified as successors is readily apparent in Figure 1 and is arguably an issue of international concern.

In part, the ability to identify and secure a familial successor depends on the age of the principal farmer. It can be seen from Figure 1 that the mean age

Figure 1. Identification of a successor: some International comparisons



Source. FARMTRANSFERS database

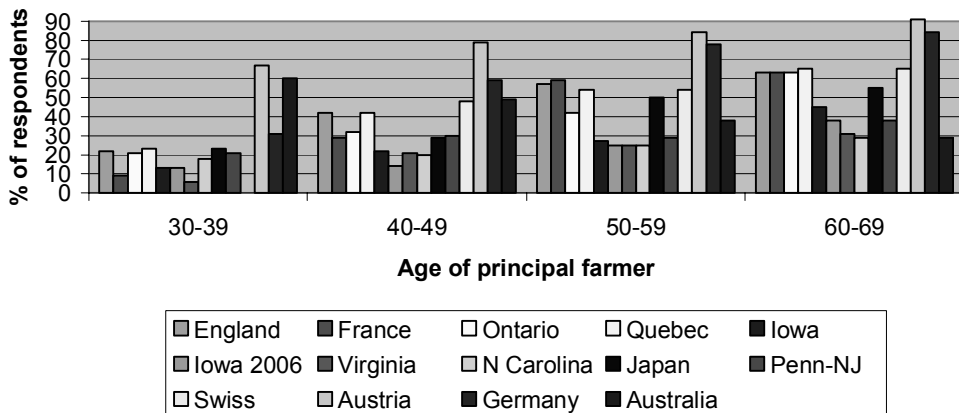
3. Further information on these aspects of the project are available from the author.

of farmers in the English samples is broadly comparable with those elsewhere, although respondents in France and Quebec were noticeably younger.

In Figure 2, the association between the age of the principal farmer and the likelihood of having secured a successor becomes clear. With the exception of Austria and Australia, younger farmers are associated with very low rates of expected succession. In England, France, Canada and Switzerland, the expectation of succession increases noticeably with age, so that by the time that farmers are in their 60s over 60% of respondents in these countries have secured a successor. Succession rates in the US, however, tend to remain low.

However, identifying a successor is only a starting point in the process of intergenerational business transfer. The way in which the successor is brought into the business and prepared for management and leadership will have implications for their ability to run the business effectively once the transfer of management has occurred. Gasson and Errington (1993) characterised the successor who has worked with their parents for a long time but has been given few managerial responsibilities as the “farmer’s boy” and argued that it is a typical problem in farm succession. The “problem” is that the farmer’s boy has little opportunity to develop the managerial skills needed to operate the family business and is essentially a hired worker, kept in place by the promise that the eventual reward will be ownership of the family farm. Other routes to succession may involve running a separate enterprise, or even a separate holding, or working in another business before coming back to the farm.

Figure 2: The association between identification of a successor and age of principal farmer



Source: *FARMTRANSFERS* database.

Using data from the *FARMTRANSFERS* database it is possible to identify what it is successors are doing and how much delegated responsibility they have. This information has been used in Table 2 to indicate the frequency of the “farmer’s boy” problem in different countries (and US States). It can be seen that, along with Austria, Germany and North Carolina, in England a

significant proportion of successors can be categorised as “farmer’s boys”. Although large numbers of successors in England operate separate enterprises, few run separate stand-by farms and they are the least likely to be involved in a ‘professional detour’ (i.e. working in another sector to gain business experience). Uchiyama *et al.*, (2008) undertook a similar approach but restricted their analysis to successors aged 35 and over (on the grounds that it might not be unreasonable for younger successors to be in a farmer’s boy role). In a comparison of Japan, Canada, USA and England, they found that “England stands out because of its much higher proportion of “farmer’s boy” successors. One out of six successors who are 35 years old or older, and one out of five full-time farming successors who are 35 years old or over, are classified as “farmer’s boy”” (Uchiyama *et al.*, 2008 p.42-43). The “farmer’s boy” problem may arise for various reasons, including cultural and social norms (see Salamon, 1992). Moreover, the expectation that the family farm will essentially provide a pension for the older generation can significantly delay delegation of decision making responsibility, particularly where the older farmer does not want “to entrust his/her ‘pension’ to a younger family member.” (Uchiyama *et al.*, 2008 p.43).

Recent evidence of the level of intergenerational succession in England

Although the international comparisons discussed above are valuable, there are a number of limitations to the data set, not least of which is the fact that the last national *FARMTRANSFERS* survey took place in 1997! The period since then has seen the popularisation of the notion that British farming is facing a crisis in succession (particularly following the 2001/02 Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak, the latest round of CAP reforms, and a period of low incomes). Nevertheless, most evidence points to relatively high rates of succession and hints at the ongoing persistence and tenacity of family farmers. For example, a survey of 255 farmers conducted by Lobley and colleagues in the wake of FMD (Lobley *et al.*, 2002) found that a total of 33% of respondents had identified a successor to take over their business. This figure, however, varied considerably according to the age of the respondent with 45% of those aged 55-65 reporting a successor and 60% of those aged 65 or over. These figures are comparable with earlier surveys of succession on English farms (see for example, Errington and Tranter, 1991) and with the data from *FARMTRANSFERS* presented in Figure 1. In total, 83% of the sample expected to still be farming in five years time, while most of those who expected to leave had identified a successor. These results suggest that the bulk of the agricultural area of England will remain in the hands of established farming families. Indeed, only 5% of the farmers interviewed expected to leave farming in the near future without a successor.

Since the 2001/02 survey the 2003 CAP reforms have ushered in the most radical change to agricultural policy in England for decades. Again, this has promoted talk of a ‘crisis’ in farming and a lack of successors. In 2005 Lobley and colleagues returned to a sub-sample of respondents to the 2001/02 survey and found that 56% now reported having a successor and that this rose to 80% for those aged 65 and over (Lobley *et al.*, 2005a). The increase in the rate of

Table 2: Occupation of identified successors aged 16 or over

	England	Ontario	Quebec	Iowa	North Carolina	Penn- NJ	Austria	Germany
n=	221	164	244	86	433	298	165	175
Mean age of 'successor'	32	30	26	31	36	35	26	25
Farmer's boy	32.3	8.8	7.7	9.3	37.2	3.7	36.4	29.1
Partnership	3.7	7.0	3.9	4.7	3.0	1.7	6.7	5.1
Separate enterprise:								
High autonomy	21.7	19.9	20.3	5.8	2.1	9.1	6.1	24.6
Low autonomy	22.4	9.1	25.5	5.8	10.2	19.1	12.1	19.4
Other:								
Runs own farm	6.8	9.9	5.9	19.8	7.9	30.2	0.0	0.6
In FT education	2.9	15.1	22.2	9.3	2.8	12.1	3.6	6.3
Other 'professional detour'	10.2	30.2	14.5	45.3	37.0	24.2	35.2	14.9
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: *FARMTRANSFERS* database.

expected succession partly reflects the ageing of the respondents (as we have seen, rates of succession increase with farmer age), although as rates of anticipated succession have risen for all age groups it also seems to indicate a strengthening of commitment on the part of the farmers themselves to remain on the land. To what degree this sentiment is shared by their children and potential successors is less clear. One contributor to a stakeholder discussion group was forthright in his assessment:

"I can't help feeling that the current generation of people who are working on the farms will sort of go. I'm 55 and that great flush of people who were really enthusiastic ...about agriculture...And my sons aren't, I've got three sons under eighteen and they aren't really interested, they see the farm as somewhere to get a bit of pocket money from but they don't see it as a way of life".

Research in Scotland and in Cumbria suggests that a lack of intergenerational successors is such a threat that it may lead to a collapse in the traditional system of family farming (Burton *et al.* 2005, Burton, 2002). Farmers have been voicing similar views for many years and yet the evidence suggests that rates of succession are not dissimilar now to those in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Indeed, research conducted for Defra on *Entry to and Exit from Farming* (ADAS *et al.*, 2004) suggests that there is a strong demand from various types of new entrant to English agriculture, including intergenerational successors but also those from a non-farming background.

Moreover, it is suggested that “the overall picture of the entry and exit situation of UK farming is one of relative stability where the typical pattern is a complex and gradual process of intergenerational transfer of the family business...” (ADAS *et al.*, 2004 p. 54).

More recently, evidence from a large survey of farmers in South West England⁴ suggests that rates of succession on farms operated by principal farmers in their 60s are only marginally lower than the rates recorded by the English *FARMTRANSFERS* surveys in the 1990s (see Figures 3 and 1). In total, 90% of those reporting that it was “too early” to know if they had a successor hoped that they would secure a successor. It is somewhat worrying, however, that 14.6% of respondents in their mid-60s stated that it was “too early” to be sure if they had a successor or not! Most (87%) of the successors were male, although in the 30% of cases of multiple successors the likelihood of having a female successor increased significantly.

Such aggregate figures can obscure spatial differences in the rate of succession. For instance, it is often assumed that farmers in the hills and uplands find it particularly difficult to attract a successor. Data from the same south west survey shows that, although farmers in the Less Favoured Areas (LFAs) of the south west are less likely to have identified a successor compared to their lowland counterparts, the difference is marginal (see Figure 4). Of course, the south west uplands are very different to other upland areas in Britain so these figures should not be taken as a general indication of the state of intergenerational succession in the uplands.

Clearly, despite widespread evidence that large proportions of farmers do secure successors, many farmers do not and, when succession ‘fails’, concerns are often raised about the implications for the sustainability of family farming (e.g. Burton *et al.*, 2005 and Burton, 2002). However, it has long been recognised that ‘too much’ family succession itself could pose a threat to the future and that there are

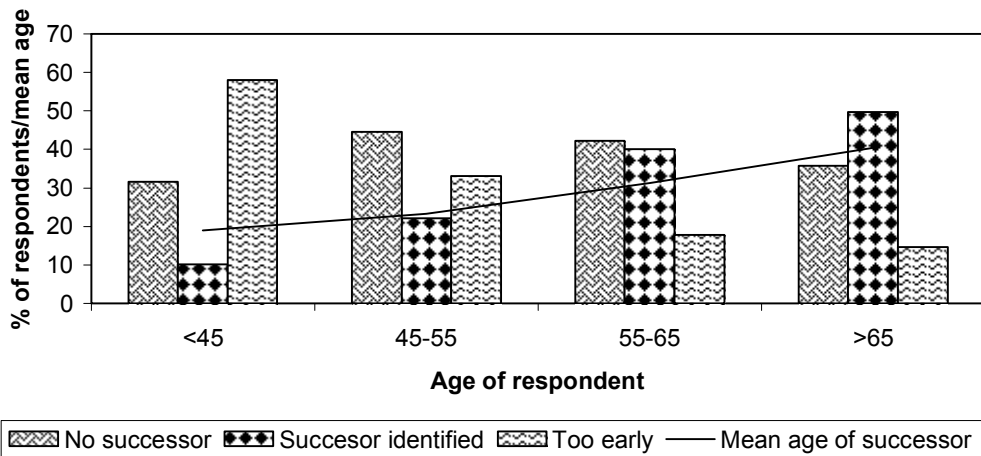
“dangers in agriculture becoming a closed shop and that it would not be desirable if entry to farming were restricted solely to a privileged class of inheritors or to those few with large sums of capital to buy themselves in” (Northfield 1979 p.177).

The dangers of the “closed shop” approach are principally assumed to be lower levels of innovation, less business dynamism and poorer motivation to respond to new and emerging challenges (Caskie *et al.*, 2002. Policy Commission of the Future of Food and Farming, 2002).

It is commonly agreed that the challenges facing contemporary agriculture require a wider range of skills than the practical farming skills which may have sufficed for previous generations. Farmers are being encouraged to embrace new technology, develop their own brands, produce food products rather than just bulk commodities, and to market directly to purchasers and end users. Although the new entrant sector of UK agriculture is relatively poorly understood there is some evidence to suggest that new entrants possess

4. In late 2006 Lobley, Butler and Winter undertook a postal survey of 1852 farmers in South West England.

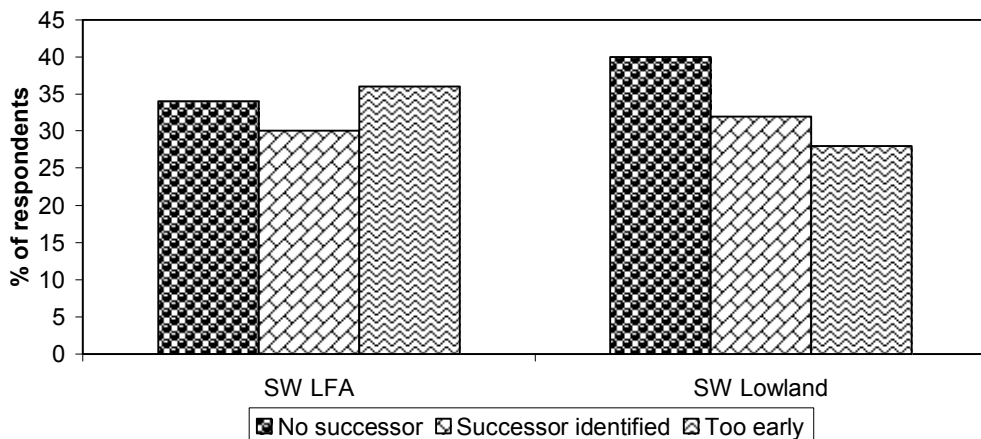
Figure 3: Rates of succession in South West England, 2006



Source: Centre for Rural Policy Research, unpublished data.

many of these skills and, moreover, that they are more likely to do so than other farmers. A comparison of the socio-economic impact of organic and non-organic farmers (Lobley *et al.*, 2005b) discovered that organic farmers were less likely to have succeeded to their farm. More significantly, they were much more likely to be younger, highly educated and to be involved in various types of direct sales initiatives and other business enterprises linked to the farm.

Figure 4: Rates of Succession in the South West Uplands and Lowlands, 2006



Source: Centre for Rural Policy Research, unpublished data.

Many brought skills from previous careers in business, advertising, media and sales and were operating innovative and dynamic businesses which frequently generated higher sales revenue (per hectare) than other farms.

Conclusions

Intergenerational succession remains the main entry route into farming in England. A relatively small number of established farming families continue to pass down, through the generations, their land holdings and the occupation of farming. Despite assumptions that British farming faces a succession crisis, comparisons with other countries indicate that the rate of succession in England compares favourably to several other countries and is much higher than that in several US States. Moreover, that rates of succession remain relatively unchanged (despite the problems associated with BSE, the crisis of FMD and the challenges and uncertainty surrounding the more recent reforms to the CAP) is testament to the tenacity and persistence of farm families. That said, evidence is patchy, being confined to certain parts of the country, or dated, such as Errington's 1997 survey (see Gasson et al, 1998).

In addition to succeeding to managerial control of the business and eventually inheriting business assets (including an often highly valuable home) successors receive a transfer of detailed local agricultural and environmental knowledge. Again, these are highly valuable, if less tangible, assets. The repeated transfer of farms in a given locality down several generations of the same families results in farming families that are deeply socially embedded in their communities. These are precisely the characteristics that the earliest writers advocating the family farm model valued and wished to maintain and promote. Indeed, there is much to be valued and cherished in all of this and the evidence reviewed here suggests that, despite some reports, English farming does not, at present, face a crisis of succession. At the same time, while 'crisis' may be too strong a word there are nevertheless important questions to be tackled regarding succession.

For instance, how can the 'farmer's boy' problem be addressed? High rates of succession alone cannot secure the future of British agriculture if adult successors are kept at arms length from business planning and decision-making until they are middle aged. As we have seen, rates of succession are much lower in the US but equally, the farmer's boy phenomenon is much less common there as well. It may not be a coincidence that initiatives to facilitate intergenerational transfer of farm family businesses are quite common in America.

Finally, does the data presented here suggest that the "closed shop" which concerned Northfield 30 years ago is today a barrier to development and innovation in the farm sector? Most new farmers are familial successors and yet there are certainly some reasons to believe that genuinely new entrants (i.e. those with no previous farming background) bring with them a set of attitudes and skills which equip them to run dynamic farm businesses which meet the needs of contemporary demands. While it is true that they may not possess detailed and practical farming knowledge, and as a result may employ a farm manager (thus creating employment opportunities for the sons and daughters

of farmers), they do possess many of the business and people skills that are likely to be associated with future farming success. The succession question, therefore, is not just how do we ensure ongoing high rates of familial succession but also, how do we achieve a better balance between the undoubted valuable contribution of established farming families and the benefits of the 'new blood' effect of new entrants?

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