AgriLink Living Lab Trainers' Handbook

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Who is this Handbook for?

Welcome to the Trainers' Handbook for running a course based on the online educational resources about *Creating innovative agricultural advisory services through a Living Lab* produced by the AgriLink project.

There is not an overwhelming demand from farmers and advisers to set up Living Labs. In part, this is because they are unfamiliar, with questions over who pays for them and who runs them, as well as what benefits do they provide. The self-study online course can go so far in answering such questions and it is preferable if they can learn the course together or can take elements from it to suit their own contexts and purposes.

This Handbook has been prepared to provide guidance for teachers and/or trainers on how to use these educational resources with colleagues and/or learners in several different ways, depending on your own circumstances and plans.

It makes some assumptions that you already have some training or teaching experience to build upon. If you are new to this role, then you need to do some prior study of training or teaching practices. There are many free online courses that you could study, including one on **Teaching and Learning Tricky Topics** from The Open University.

You may already know what you want to do and so use this Handbook as a guide or checklist. Alternatively, you may be wanting ideas. In either case, I have provided detail on four different ways of running a course and to help you plan what you want to do when designing and delivering your course to a group of people.

AgriLink was a project funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. The project aimed to help stimulate the transition towards more sustainable agriculture by improving understanding of the role played by agricultural advisors in strengthening knowledge flows, enhancing learning and boosting innovation in the wide variety of different farm types that exist in Europe. Living Labs formed one of the seven work packages in AgriLink, where we researched the relevance of the living lab methodology as a way to boost innovation. One output from this work package was the development of educational resources centred on an online course.

In the online course we explore the experiences of the people involved in designing, developing and/or participating in those Living Labs. This enables people who study the course to judge the skills, resources and capacities needed to start up and run a Living Lab for a more sustainable agriculture themselves.

Currently, these educational resources have been made available as open educational resources (OERs)[1] which can be self-studied at a distance online or downloaded in other formats for offline self-study[2]. But this also means that these educational resources can be used in many ways other than just at a distance for self-study, including as the basis for:

- face-to-face classroom teaching
- short residential schools
- blended or distance learning with tutor support
- independent or group study.

The aim of this Handbook is to outline how the AgriLink educational resources can be used for teaching colleagues and students alike (hereafter called learners). The main resources are the online course on *Creating innovative agricultural advisory services through a Living Lab* and the *AgriLink Living Lab Toolbox*. You may not be that interested in setting up a Living Lab, but you may be interested in using one part of either of these rather than the whole course or Toolbox. This is fine. These guidelines are our suggestions based on our experiences in other projects using online OERs for other purposes. Indeed, as with any OER, feel free to adopt and adapt as many of the ideas as seem appropriate for your own situation and settings, all the while acknowledging the original source as required by the Creative Commons licence.

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[1] OERs are educational resources for self-study by learners. They have an open licence applied to them which means you can use, re-use, remix or adapt them for your own teaching, depending on the actual licence used.

[2] Instructions on how to do this are on the course website.

Using AgriLink educational resources for face-to-face classroom teaching

Some people are confident, independent self-learners, but for other learners success with the AgriLink educational resources relies on interactions with a tutor and other learners through:

- ensuring they successfully achieve the learning outcomes of the study session
- encouraging them to discuss the topics together
- encouraging them to think how they could apply what they learn in a real context.

In the classroom, you need to decide how you can make best use of the AgriLink educational resources. Remember that they are designed for independent study, so you do not have to include everything in your classroom session. You can use the educational resources from the course to guide study time outside the classroom and for homework. Use lesson time for activities, discussions, challenging topics, practical exercises, questions, developing examples and scenarios, and relating the content to your local context.

Before you start using the educational resources, there are practical matters to consider. You will need to adapt your lesson plans according to your answers to these questions:

- Do you have enough printed copies of the educational resources to give to each learner, and one for yourself? Or can they access the educational resources online?
- Will your learners manage and be motivated to study the materials independently outside the classroom?
- Are there other components of the training to consider, such as formal assessments, practical sessions, etc.?
- Do you have access to a computer and projector for PowerPoint presentations, or internet access? Can you make use of audio or video material on the internet to support your teaching?

Another practical point to be aware of is that learners will need a dedicated Study Notebook to capture their notes and reflections, and record answers to the reflective activities, if they are not doing so on a computing device or online. Learners may need support and encouragement in using their notebooks. You should stress the value of learners keeping all their relevant notes in one place, so they can easily be referred to when needed. If learners are studying on their own for some of the time, you should encourage them to write down any questions that occur to them so that they can be raised with you or in class later.

We suggest you consider the following general points when planning your teaching:

- Study sessions should be designed to build on one another, so it is preferable to teach them in the order that they are presented in the original course.
- Some study session topics might be more challenging for learners than others, so you should consider how to build in more time for those sessions.
- Learners will get the most out of the materials if you guide them through the most important principles, ideas and concepts in the study materials.
- Build in time for learners to share and discuss their thoughts during lessons. This is just as important as setting aside time to go over the written materials.
- Consider getting the learners to work together in small groups rather than individually and think creatively about activities and exercises that could be suitable for group work.

How do I create a lesson from the AgriLink educational resources?

There is no set approach for delivering the content of the educational resources in a lesson. The structure of your lesson – what you teach, the materials that you use – is likely to depend on a range of factors.

However, we believe that you will have the most success in using the materials if you do the following:

- Base each lesson on one section or study session of the original course or topic in the Toolbox. The sessions are set at one hour each but could take longer for those unfamiliar with the topics, so you may need to adapt this. For example, for one-hour lessons, you could select any particularly challenging or interesting parts and leave other parts for learners to read outside the classroom.
- Make sure you are completely familiar with the material in the study session and understand how it fits into the course as a whole before the lesson.
- Consider what you want learners to focus on during the teaching session and what you may want learners to work on outside the lesson (either before or after the teaching session).
- Take sections of the core content and turn them into short talks lasting approximately 10–15 minutes. You probably need three or four of these short talks for a two-hour lesson. These will work best if there is an activity or exercise between each talk that will keep learners engaged.
- Develop activities and exercises that relate the topics to your location and relate to the learners' own experiences. Incorporate these between your short talks on the core content.
- If you have the facilities, you could produce accompanying PowerPoint slides that you can put up on a screen or give learners handouts. Alternatively, make a list of the key ideas and concepts that you can write on a board and talk through in the class.

Basic lesson plan

In this section of the Handbook, we provide details of a basic lesson plan in three parts that has been designed to engage learners and maximise their learning from a complete AgriLink online course study session of one hour. Table 1 summarises the three parts, and they are described in more detail below.

Table 1 Basic lesson plan

	Part 1: Introducing the lesson	**Part 2: Core teaching and learning**	**Part 3: Summary and learning reflection**
Purpose of this part of the lesson	Set out the main objective of the lesson. Highlight the terms that learners should understand by the end of the lesson. Outline what learners should have learned by the end of the lesson.	Present information, concepts and principles. Engage learners in exercises and discussions to assess whether they can apply the information encountered.	Present an overview of the information covered in the lesson. Provide an opportunity for learners to reflect on their learning in relation to the learning outcomes of the study session.
Study session components to be used in this part of the lesson	Key terms Learning outcomes	Core content	Summary Reflective activities
Suggested timings for a one-hour lesson	5 minutes	45 minutes (divided into shorter sub-sections)	10 minutes

Part 1: Introducing the lesson

This section outlines ways in which the topic, learning outcomes and key terms associated with the course can be integrated into the introduction to the lesson. The introduction:

- summarises the purpose of the lesson
- highlights some of the key concepts and principles that learners will be exploring.

When thinking about how to integrate the topic, learning outcomes and key terms into a lesson, consider the following ideas:

- Spend five to ten minutes introducing the session.
- Write the topic on the board, or display the topic on the screen for the class to see. Ask the group why they think this topic could be important. Suggest that learners read the introduction section of the study session before they answer to help them to think about why it could be important.
- You could ask a few quick starter questions to stimulate discussion and get learners to think about their background knowledge of the topic.
- Write/display the key terms and/or learning outcomes on the board for the class to see and keep them visible throughout the lesson. As the lesson progresses, cross them out or tick them off when they have been covered.

Part 2: Core teaching and learning

When constructing your lesson plan, consider the following tips:

- Prepare your short talks in advance. Assuming you have allocated 45 minutes of a one-hour lesson to the core teaching, make sure you have broken this time down into three or four subsections from the core course content. During your talks, encourage learners to ask you questions if they do not understand something. This will help them to remain engaged.

- Break up the talks with activities. Try to ensure learners do something different every 15–20 minutes to keep their attention focused on the topic. Avoid a long lecture or a group activity that takes a long time as this will make learners feel bored.

- Use the reflective activities to prompt discussions, either for the whole class together or in small groups. You could give different discussion topics to different groups and get them to share their discussions with the whole class at the end.

- You don't have to fit everything into the suggested one-hour lesson. Learners can be instructed to complete homework, either beforehand to bring to the lesson or afterwards.

Part 3: Summary and learning reflection

The final section of your lesson will focus on the summary section and reflective activities. We suggest it would be most effective if you split it into three parts:

1. Recap the learning outcomes covered by the session – try turning these into questions and asking learners to raise their hands if they think they can answer them. This is a really good way of easily evaluating how learners have understood the lesson and the concepts and ideas covered.

2. Go over each of the main points made in the summary. You could try modifying some of these points to include the word 'not' and asking learners if the statements you make are true or false. Again, this is a way of evaluating how learners have engaged with the concepts and ideas presented in the lesson.

3. Go through the reflective activities with the learners or ask them to work on their own or in groups to answer these questions. You don't need to go through all the activities, but they are excellent tools for evaluating learners' engagement with the lesson content. You can compare the answers from learners with the answers to those activities provided in the course and discuss how they may differ. You could also devise some alternative reflective activities or questions of your own, especially if you can relate them to your local area and the learners' experience. If you want to leave time for class discussion about the reflective activities and their answers, you may need more than the 10 minutes suggested in Table 2 for Part 3 of your lesson.

Finally, remember that a lesson plan is a proposed course of action – in the classroom you may need to change and alter your plan according to your learners' needs. Remember to capture these changes in a revised plan so that you or colleagues know what is likely to work best for learners next time.

Using AgriLink educational resources for short residential courses

AgriLink educational resources can also be used as foundation materials for short residential courses in a college or other training centre. This could be two or three days over a weekend or a four- or five-day course during the week, run as a single event or a series depending on how much material you want to cover. For example, you could base a week-long course on the educational resources or spread it over two or three weekends that included other practical activities as well. The consistent structure of the weeks in the AgriLink online course facilitates planning and adaptation to different timings and schedules.

We suggest that the approach to using the educational resources for short courses is like that for classroom teaching and requires lesson planning combined with other activities. It is important to provide a variety of activities so that learners continue to be motivated and engaged with the materials. The AgriLink educational resources provide the text-based foundation of knowledge that you can combine and enhance with hands-on activity and group work.

Time management is always important for training activities, but especially so if you have limited time and are working to a tight schedule. To make best use of the time available, you may want to provide copies of the educational resources to learners before the course starts and ask them to work through particular sections or answer some of the reflective activities beforehand. When you meet at the training centre, you and they will have already made a start with the programme. This will enable you to focus on group activities and practical exercises that cannot be undertaken individually. This optimises the value of the programme of study and makes best use of the time available.

Using AgriLink educational resources for blended or distance learning

As noted earlier, the AgriLink educational resources are mostly written using tried-and-tested techniques for distance learning. Distance learners study independently, usually in their own home or workplace. Blended learning is a combination of distance learning with a mix (blend) of other learning resources and experiences. These may include residential courses, fieldwork, practical training or other learning activities.

Learners who are studying by blended or distance learning are usually combining study with full- or part-time employment, so they have to fit their study into non-working hours, for example at weekends and in the evenings. The benefit is that they continue to earn money and fulfil their commitment to their employer at the same time as completing their studies. It also means that they have to study on their own, so they will need considerable encouragement and help to keep motivated. An important principle of effective distance or blended learning is that learners should not feel isolated. They require support that, most importantly, is provided by a dedicated tutor who can give clear guidance throughout their studies.

Learners also need support in other ways, such as a proper induction to the study programme and opportunities for communication with other learners. The recommended pattern for distance or blended learning learners is to study mostly on their own, but also to meet regularly in a study group with their tutor and other learners.

Using the AgriLink educational resources in a blended or distance learning programme, therefore, requires the appropriate organisational structure to be established to provide this essential support. Some of the key components of such a programme include the following:

- Educational resources: All learners will need access to or have their own copy of the AgriLink educational resources to keep with them for studying in their own time. This can be online or as printed copies (there are downloadable formats available from the online course).

- Tutors: Tutors need to be selected and appointed to support the learners in their learning. We recommend a ratio of 10–15 learners to one tutor in a study group. (The tutor role is explained in detail below.)

- Study programme: The programme should establish a schedule (see below) and criteria for successful learner completion. This will require assignments and other assessments to be developed, as well as effective record-keeping and administrative procedures. The programme needs to be aligned with policies and procedures of the training institution and other interested parties.

- Schedule for study: This should take account of study time available for working learners and consider how many study sessions they could reasonably fit in around their employment in a week or month. For example, if learners are working full time, then six to eight hours a week, which equates to three or four study sessions, may be reasonable. Time required for other activities, such as practical activities to accompany the modules, should also be considered.

- Study Support Meetings: Learners need to meet their tutor and other learners regularly to get the most from their studies. Planning these meetings requires suitable locations to be identified and agreed. The meetings could be held in a college, bureau office or other appropriate venue. The frequency of Study Support Meetings should be linked to the study schedule, but we suggest that they should be at least once a month. Learners and tutors need to travel to these meetings, which can also influence their location and frequency.

- Support for the tutors: Tutors need to understand what the learners are studying, how they are studying it and what support they need, so the tutors themselves must be informed, trained and supported. This will involve regular direct interaction between tutors and their supervisors and those who are leading the study programme. Tutors will also need guidance for Study Support Meetings and marking and commenting on any assessments, and for any other experiences to be offered to the learner.

Note that this is not an exhaustive list but indicates the main resource requirements for a blended or distance learning programme. The tutor's role is central to the process, so we have described this in some detail in the following sections.

The role of the blended or distance learning tutor

If you have been appointed as a blended or distance learning tutor, this section of the Handbook will help you understand what is expected of you in that role.

Supporting, encouraging and motivating your learners.

Your role as a tutor is to facilitate the learners' learning from the AgriLink OERs by providing support, encouragement and guidance that will help your learners to develop their abilities. In other words, you are not your learners' teacher – your role is to:

- help your learners to manage their learning experience
- help them to keep on schedule
- help them to submit assignments on time
- provide feedback on their progress
- help them to feel confident and positive about their learning
- encourage them when they feel they are falling behind
- explain concepts they find difficult to understand.

Crucial aspects of your role are motivation, creating mutual respect and providing an environment where your learners feel confident that they can talk to you (and each other) about their learning and any difficulties they may have.

Motivation provides the driving force for learners to tackle the difficulties and challenges that are associated with their learning. Motivation is particularly important when learners have many other demands on their time. Your learners will be motivated if they have a clear vision of their personal goal. Motivation is also influenced by learners' self-perception and their belief in their own learning ability. Your learners will feel motivated if they understand that their learning is important for themselves as individuals, for future qualifications and employment.

Each learner brings their own past experiences to their study. These experiences will have shaped their perception and attitude towards both learning and assessment. Keep in mind that previous learning experiences may have been negative for some of your learners. To overcome the fear of failure, learners need a supportive environment where they can take risks in their learning and make mistakes, question or challenge, and 'have a say'. This is helped by an atmosphere of 'unconditional positive regard' towards your learners, one that is non-judgemental and accepting.

Learning Agreement between you and your learners

Establishing a good relationship between you and your learners is very important. In the best situations there is mutual respect: you can trust the learners to do their best to learn from their study of the AgriLink educational resources, and the learners can trust that they will be supported by you during their time as a learner. To help develop this high level of trust, you should be clear about what you expect from the learners. You should also make it clear what the learners can expect from you as their tutor. Sometimes this process is called a Learning Contract or Learning Agreement.

In the first Study Support Meeting, it is helpful to discuss this with the learners and make two lists: one of the responsibilities that you expect them to fulfil and another of the support that they can expect from you. Each learner should write the agreed lists in their Study Notebook, and then you and the learner should sign this Learning Agreement. If any problems arise later, either in the learner's progress or the study support they receive from you, both you and the learner can make reference to this signed agreement.

Study Notebooks

It is important for each learner to have a dedicated Study Notebook for their studies, as mentioned earlier in the context of classroom-based teaching. This is even more important for distance learners, and part of your role is to encourage the learners to use their notebooks routinely throughout their study. Their Study Notebook should be used to record:

- the date on which they completed each study session
- any notes they made while studying it
- their written answers to the reflective activities for that study session
- any queries that they want to raise with you
- if appropriate, a record of the practical training or other learning activities that they have completed.

Each learner should record their activities in a way that suits them personally. Some may use an exercise book, while others may prefer a loose-leaf file or folder, and others will file it on their computer or online. In either case, make sure that they continue to be systematic in recording all the required material for the whole time that they are studying.

When you meet your learners at Study Support Meetings, you should ask to see their Study Notebooks, and in particular they should show you their answers to the reflective activities. This will enable you to check their understanding of the study session and offer support when needed. This activity also gives the learners an opportunity to ask you about any issues that have arisen for them since your last meeting.

Marking assignments and providing feedback to learners

If the programme of study you are teaching includes formal assessment, then an essential part of your role is to mark assignments and give feedback to learners on their performance in their written work. This is an important way of providing them with personal learning support. It provides an opportunity to build the teaching and learning relationship with your learners. You can assess whether the learner has met the learning outcomes for each study session or module, and you can measure the learner's understanding and progress through the curriculum. You can give the learner encouragement for what they have done well and advice and guidance about how they can improve.

Providing feedback on written assignments enables you to:

- praise the good points in their answers
- explain why marks have been lost or gained
- explain anything that your learner has not understood
- provide examples and refer learners to particular pages in the module, where necessary
- help your learner attain the learning outcomes for each study session and/or module
- be flexible in your responses to the different learning needs of each learner
- help every learner to identify their strengths and weaknesses.

It is important for learners to have written feedback from you on their assignments, rather than just verbal comments, so that they can read it in their own time. You should write your comments on each script as you mark it, using local language if you feel this will be more helpful to learners than writing your comments in English.

But what feedback is useful to learners? Your feedback should:

- be returned promptly (for example, at the next Study Support Meeting) while they can still remember what they wrote in the previous assignment
- be supportive and encouraging
- offer more than just corrections – you should respond to good points and ideas in the assignment, and indicate why they are good
- help learners to develop skills such as structuring an answer
- suggest how to improve (for example, 'you also needed to explain the reasons for your answer')
- help the learner to take forward skills and ideas to the next assignment and beyond
- encourage the learner to become more skilled at self-assessment.

Using a positive tone and setting up a 'dialogue' in your written feedback is important. If learners don't like reading your comments, they won't learn anything. A relaxed and personal tone shows that you feel involved too and encourages and creates trust and mutual respect.

Many learners will be anxious about writing an assignment, particularly the first one, and may leave it to the last minute and then be short of time. Some learners find it difficult to keep focused on answering the questions and instead write about what they find interesting or answer a different question. You could talk to them about these issues in a Study Support Meeting. If you do find that they misinterpret the assignment, you can show them in feedback how to analyse the questions by adding comments about how you would have approached the questions and formulated your answer.

Facilitating learner groups and Study Support Meetings

Working in groups can enhance the achievement of specific tasks and help learners to develop individual skills and confidence. We have therefore included some guidance on how you can help your learners get the most out of their study group and the Study Support Meetings.

A major objective is for you to create the atmosphere in group meetings that will encourage everyone to relax and feel comfortable working together in the study group. The ways in which you encourage relationships and communication within the group can greatly affect the learners' experiences. It can help your learners in their personal engagement with the learning materials and enable them to become more independent of you. In this respect, your principal aim is to cultivate skills of independent learning in the learners and to facilitate that process rather than be the source of their knowledge.

At the first Study Support Meeting, you should therefore check that your learners know each other and then give them a chance to share their expectations, concerns and questions – with each other and with you. The rules for the group should be established, such as listening to each other and ensuring everyone has an opportunity to say how they are getting on with the learning materials.

The number of learners who are able to attend the Study Support Meeting may vary from time to time. However, the following characteristics are most frequently mentioned in evaluations of effective learning groups, even if there are only two or three people present:

- a climate of acceptance and respect for one another
- openness of communication
- listening is valued as much as talking
- everyone takes responsibility for their own learning and their own behaviour
- problems and conflicts are faced openly and constructively
- the tutor is responsible for encouraging and facilitating active participation by all the learners
- clarity in the setting of tasks, activities and deadlines
- everyone's contributions are acknowledged and valued.

There will be many things to do at each Study Support Meeting, therefore you are advised to plan the two or three hours available so you can make best use of the time. For example, during that time you will need to:

- invite learners to raise any queries or misunderstandings with the current study sessions or assignment
- review each learner's Study Notebook
- for formal assessment, give back the scripts from the last assignment with your marks and feedback comments
- discuss any issues arising from the last assignment
- provide guidance and support as needed
- collect scripts for the next assignment from each learner.

You may also want to plan some group activities or discussions, perhaps based on reflective activities or sections from the current study sessions.

Part of your role as blended learning tutor is being prepared to intervene if one or more learners are experiencing difficulties. However, it is important not to dominate the discussions in the group. It can be difficult to let go of the traditional authority of 'the teacher' and there is a certain amount of security in standing at the front and doing the majority of the talking. But it is important that you establish a supportive role from the start that enables your learners to become confident and independent learners. This emphasis on facilitation can broaden and enrich your role as well as benefit the learners.

Record keeping of learners' progress

One of your responsibilities as tutor is to keep accurate records of your learners' progress. This will be mainly in relation to:

- written formal assignments submitted by your learners according to the schedule for the programme of study
- your learners' attendance and participation in the Study Support Meetings.

You will need to comply with the administrative processes and systems of your study programme.

Managing your time

Part of your role as a tutor is to help your learners with their time management. They will need to find time for study between their work and other commitments and may look to you for advice on how to manage this.

Similarly, you need to find time to fulfil your various tasks as a tutor. You should be familiar with the contents of each module, including the reflective activities. In addition, you should allow sufficient time for marking assignments, writing feedback comments on each script and for planning Study Support Meetings. Be sure to allow yourself enough time to undertake these responsibilities according to the schedule for study.

Using AgriLink educational resources for independent and group study

AgriLink educational resources can also be successfully used for people studying on their own. Sharing the learning experience with other learners and having the support of a tutor is extremely valuable, but it is not essential. Independent study may be most appropriate for you if you want to improve your skills and knowledge in a particular subject area. It has the benefit of flexibility and allows you to accommodate other demands on your time.

If you are studying independently, you can choose to select particular study sessions from the modules according to your needs and wishes, but be aware that this type of self-managed learning requires dedication and discipline. You should set a timetable for study and use a dedicated Study Notebook. We recommend that you make use of the reflective activities to assess your own learning and that you record your answers before looking at the notes provided.

Group study in the workplace

Another approach to using the modules is a combination of independent study with some elements of distance learning. This can be particularly useful in a work-based context where there can be peer-to-peer learning and sharing of experiences.

If you are the supervisor or leader of a group of staff, these modules provide a convenient way of providing training without sending them away for a residential course, which may be expensive and take them away from their jobs. You can set them the task of studying one or more of the AgriLink educational resources or part of the AgriLink educational resources within a set time. The only resources required would be copies of the relevant modules (or internet access). You could also consider adapting the content to your specific work situation or setting tasks for your group of staff to link their study to their work activities.

Your role, as their supervisor, is similar to the role of the distance/blended learning tutor. If you are considering using the modules in this way, you will need to allocate some time for discussion and feedback sessions with your group of staff, but this will be significantly less than conventional training. Your staff will improve their skills and knowledge, and they will also have the benefit of support from you and from their colleagues who are studying with them.

Conclusion

This Trainers' Handbook can only provide a brief summary of possible ways of using the AgriLink educational resources but has set out the main options to help you plan your training programmes. There are or may be other considerations you need to consider, such as dealing with learners with certain disabilities, coping with disagreements or conflicts between learners, and respecting the confidentiality of assignments, particularly where learners are using examples from their employer or employment. As noted in the introduction, we are assuming that you have some form of teaching or training skills already. If not, you will find it much harder to cover these points without doing some prior study.

We hope that, whichever way you use them, you find the online course and Toolbox to be valuable learning resources that provide enriching and rewarding experiences for you and your learners.

Acknowledgements