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Optimum nutrition of the pregnant ewe:

A meta-analytic approach

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

Formal systematic review guidelines and meta-analytic methods were used in the present study to achieve three main objectives. Firstly, literature on the effect of ewe nutrition during pregnancy on fetal and postnatal lamb growth was reviewed and effect sizes estimated for fetuses/lambs at three stages of their life: 1) late gestation fetal weight (LGFW), 2) lamb birth weight (BW) and 3) weaning weight (WW). Secondly, the contribution of experimental factors responsible for variation in study results was determined. Thirdly, a field trial was conducted to increase understanding in an area identified by the meta-analyses as requiring further experimentation. Overall, early- and mid-pregnancy undernutrition had no significant effect on LGFW ($\beta_{[\text{Early-pregnancy}]} = -0.0007$, 95% Highest posterior density (HPD) = -0.26 to 0.28; $\beta_{[\text{Mid-pregnancy}]} = -0.07$, 95% HPD = -0.27 to 0.16), BW ($\beta_{[\text{Early-pregnancy}]} = 0.01$, 95% HPD = -0.36 to 0.34; $\beta_{[\text{Mid-pregnancy}]} = -0.02$, 95% HPD = -0.36 to 0.33) and WW ($\beta_{[\text{first 100 days of pregnancy}]} = -0.008$, 95% HPD = -0.42 to 0.18), suggesting that short to moderate periods of undernutrition in these stages are tolerated by ewes with limited impact on their offspring, when nutrition is re-established to pregnancy maintenance (PM) or above levels during late-pregnancy. Late-pregnancy undernutrition can significantly decrease LGFW and BW by up to 1.15 kg at birth, with residual effects at weaning resulting in weaned lambs that are up to 18% lighter than their control counterparts and thus, should be avoided. The present study also considered the effect of maternal above PM feeding on LGFW, BW and WW. The combined effects across these studies were variable, as few experiments investigated above PM feeding at each stage of pregnancy, and thus it was not possible to draw definitive conclusions. A field
experiment was undertaken to determine the effects of *ad-libitum* (AL) feeding at various stages of pregnancy and for differing lengths of time on twin lamb BW and WW. Results showed that providing ewes with AL feeding significantly (p<0.05) increased their live weight and BCS, but did not increase (p>0.05) the BW or WW of their lambs relative to their control counterparts. This study also suggested that AL feeding during late-pregnancy may have negative consequences to the survival of twin lambs and requires further examination. Thus, AL feeding is not justified as a management tool to increase twin lamb BW and WW, when nutrition is adequate during lactation. The present study represents the first meta-analytic approach examining the effect of changes in the ewe nutrition during pregnancy on the growth of offspring at various developmental stages. Given the complex interrelationship between nutrition of the pregnant ewe, her reproductive success, fetal growth and development, and offspring post-natal performance, no single study can provide a definitive understanding of responses to a particular treatment and there is value in combining available experimental evidence to elucidate a more global picture. A meta-analytic approach can find trends in combined data that would otherwise be overlooked using traditional review methods and can also identify gaps in current knowledge.

**Key words**: meta-analysis, sheep, pregnancy, undernutrition, *ad-libitum*. 


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# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. i  
Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................... iii  
Table of Contents ............................................................................................................... v  
List of Tables .................................................................................................................... xiii  
List of Figures ................................................................................................................... xvii  

Chapter 1: Literature review .............................................................................................. 1  
1.1 Preamble ......................................................................................................................... 3  
1.2 Narrative, systematic and meta-analytic reviews .............................................................. 5  
1.3 Meta-analysis – theory and practice ................................................................................. 11  
1.3.1 Formulation of the research problem ....................................................................... 12  
1.3.2 Collection of research evidence ............................................................................... 12  
1.3.3 Evaluation and identification of relevant studies ....................................................... 14  
1.3.4 Analyses and integration of evidence from individual studies ................................. 14  
1.3.4.1 Selecting an effect size statistic ......................................................................... 14  
1.3.4.1.1 Calculation of the standardized mean difference ........................................ 15  
1.3.4.2 Estimating the overall effect across studies; the meta-analytic mean .................... 18  
1.3.4.2.1 Fixed-effect model ...................................................................................... 18  
1.3.4.2.2 Random-effects model ............................................................................... 20  
1.3.4.2.3 Dealing with effect-size dependence ......................................................... 22  
1.3.4.2.4 Multilevel meta-analytic models .................................................................... 23  
1.3.5 Interpretation of the cumulative evidence ............................................................... 26
Chapter 3:  

Meta-analysis of the role of pregnancy nutrition in adult multiparous ewes in determining changes in lamb birth weight

3.1 Abstract .......................................................... 149
3.2 Introduction ................................................................. 151
3.3 Materials and methods .................................................. 153
  3.3.1 Search strategy and selection criteria .......................... 153
  3.3.2 Data extraction ....................................................... 155
  3.3.3 Data coding and datasets .......................................... 155
  3.3.4 Statistical analysis .................................................. 157
    3.3.4.1 Meta-analysis .................................................... 158
    3.3.4.2 Heterogeneity .................................................... 161
    3.3.4.3 $R^2$ estimation for meta-regression models .................. 162
    3.3.4.4 Publication bias .................................................. 163
    3.3.4.5 Sensitivity analysis .............................................. 163
3.4 Results ................................................................. 164
  3.4.1 Study retrieval and selection strategy ......................... 164
  3.4.2 Study characteristics and meta-analysis ....................... 166
3.4.2.1 Undernutrition ............................................................... 166
3.4.2.2 Overnutrition .............................................................. 181
3.4.3 Publication bias ............................................................ 185
3.4.4 Sensitivity analysis ......................................................... 187
3.5 Discussion ........................................................................... 188
3.6 Conclusion ........................................................................... 194
3.7 References .......................................................................... 196
3.8 Supplementary material for Chapter 3 ................................. 217
  3.8.1 Supplementary methodology ........................................ 217
  3.8.2 Supplementary references – list of excluded studies ........ 217
  3.8.3 Supplementary tables ..................................................... 284

Chapter 4: Weaning weight is affected by maternal nutrition during pregnancy – a meta-analysis of studies in adult sheep. .......................................................... 293

  4.1 Abstract ............................................................................ 295
  4.2 Introduction ....................................................................... 297
  4.3 Material and methods ....................................................... 299
    4.3.1 Search strategy and selection criteria ......................... 300
    4.3.2 Data extraction ........................................................... 301
    4.3.3 Data coding and datasets ............................................ 302
    4.3.4 Statistical analysis ...................................................... 303
    4.3.4.1 Heterogeneity ......................................................... 307
    4.3.4.2 R² for meta-regression models ................................. 308
    4.3.4.3 Publication bias ..................................................... 308
    4.3.4.4 Sensitivity analysis ................................................ 309
  4.4 Results ............................................................................. 309
Chapter 5: Feeding adult multiparous ewes above their pregnancy maintenance requirements does not increase lamb birth weight or their growth to weaning....371

5.1 Abstract ........................................................................................................... 373
5.2 Introduction .................................................................................................... 375
5.3 Materials and Methods ................................................................................ 376
  5.3.1 Experimental design ................................................................................ 377
  5.3.2 Pasture measurements .......................................................................... 382
  5.3.3 Animal measurements .......................................................................... 382
  5.3.4 Statistical analysis ................................................................................ 383
    5.3.4.1 Animal numbers ........................................................................... 383
    5.3.4.2 Data analyses .............................................................................. 384
5.4 Results ............................................................................................................. 386
  5.4.1 Herbage mass ......................................................................................... 386
  5.4.2 Ewe live weight ...................................................................................... 387
Chapter 5: Evaluation of undernutrition during pregnancy and nutrition above the requirements for pregnancy

5.4.3 Ewe body condition score .................................................................392
5.4.4 Gestation length ............................................................................396
5.4.5 Lamb data ......................................................................................397
5.5 Discussion .........................................................................................403
5.6 Conclusion ........................................................................................407
5.7 References .........................................................................................408
5.8 Supplementary material for Chapter 5 ..............................................413

Chapter 6: General Discussion ...............................................................415

6.1 Introduction .......................................................................................417
6.2 Summary of findings .........................................................................418
  6.2.1 Early- and mid-pregnancy undernutrition .....................................419
  6.2.2 Late-pregnancy undernutrition ....................................................420
  6.2.3 Ewe nutrition above the requirements for pregnancy ..................421
  6.2.4 Important moderator variables ....................................................422
    6.2.4.1 Length of undernutrition ......................................................422
    6.2.4.2 Litter size ............................................................................423
    6.2.4.3 Year of publication ...............................................................423
    6.2.4.4 Level of feeding of the control group ....................................424
6.3 Methodological considerations .......................................................426
6.4 Limitations .........................................................................................429
  6.4.1 Reporting details of primary studies ..........................................429
  6.4.2 Conception rate, ewe live weight and BCS achieved in Chapter 5 ....431
6.5 Practical implications for sheep grazing systems .............................432
6.6 Future research consideration .........................................................434
  6.6.1 A meta-analysis guide for animal scientists .................................434
6.6.2 Better and larger early- and mid-pregnancy undernutrition studies........ 435
6.6.3 Can results from periconceptional undernutrition studies be replicated using farm-scale research?................................................................. 436
6.6.4 Is the magnitude of the effect of undernutrition similar for singletons and twins relative to their potential size and can this be extended to triplets? .......... 437
6.7 Concluding remarks .............................................................................. 438
6.8 References ............................................................................................. 440
# List of Tables

Table 1. Summary of methodological differences between narrative and meta-analytic reviews (taken from Nakagawa and Poulin, 2012) ........................................................................................................... 10

Table 2. Commonly used methods to detect and correct for publication bias and some of the caveats in the listed methods. References are provided for the papers that propped the methodology and also for those reporting on some of the caveats in the methods. .................. 31

Table 3. Main characteristics of the nutritional restrictions of the three undernutrition subgroups (early-, mid- and late-pregnancy). ................................................................. 74

Table 4. Summary of papers used for meta-analysis in the early-pregnancy subgroup. Liveweight (LW) change refers to the difference in ewe live weight between the commencement of the nutritional treatment and that at the end of the nutritional treatment. The energetic level of undernutrition (relative to maintenance) is shown when and as stated by the authors. ........................................................................................................... 169

Table 5. Summary of papers used for meta-analysis in the mid-pregnancy subgroup. Liveweight (LW) change refers to the difference in ewe live weight between the commencement of the nutritional treatment and that at the end of the nutritional treatment. The energetic level of undernutrition (relative to maintenance) is shown as stated by the authors. ........................................................................................................... 172

Table 6. Summary of papers used for meta-analysis in the late-pregnancy subgroup. Liveweight (LW) change refers to the difference in ewe live weight between the commencement of the nutritional treatment and that at the end of the nutritional treatment (including conceptus mass). In studies marked with CF, liveweight changes are the difference between ewe live weight at the initiation of the nutritional treatment and the post-lambing weight. In studies marked with ML, liveweight changes are the difference between mating weight and post-lambing weight. The level of undernutrition (relative to pregnancy maintenance, PM) is shown when and as stated by the authors. .................... 176
Table 7. Summary of papers used for meta-analysis in the overnutrition dataset. Differences in live weight (LW) gains were calculated as the difference of LW gain/loss between the control and overfed groups between the commencement of the nutritional treatment and that at the end of the nutritional treatment (including conceptus mass). In studies marked with CF, differences in LW gain were calculated as the difference in ewe live weight between the initiation of the nutritional treatment and the post-lambing weight. In studies marked with ML, differences in LW gain were calculated as the difference between mating weight and post-lambing weight. The level of overnutrition (relative to pregnancy maintenance, PM; as pasture height; or ewe body condition score, BCS) is shown when and as stated by the authors.

Table 8. Summary of papers used for the undernutrition meta-analysis. Liveweight change is the difference in ewe live weight between the initiation of the nutritional treatment and the ewe live weight at the end of the nutritional treatment (including conceptus mass for studies in late-pregnancy). In studies marked with CF, live weight differences are the difference between ewe live weight at the initiation of the nutritional treatment and the post-lambing weight. Where available, the energetic level of undernutrition (relative to maintenance) is shown as stated by the authors. For some studies, the level of undernutrition was non-estimable (NE) from the available information. Period of restriction refers to days of pregnancy (0 = conception and ~150 = term).

Table 9. Results from the meta-analytic and meta-regression models in the undernutrition dataset. Estimates and highest posterior density intervals (95% HPD) in bold were considered statistically significant.

Table 10. Summary of the statistical results of meta-analytic and meta-regression models in two subgroups from the undernutrition dataset. Period 1 refers to studies with nutritional manipulations ending within the first 100 days of pregnancy. Period 2 include studies undertaken in late-pregnancy or that extended to late-pregnancy. 95% highest posterior density (HPD) intervals excluding zero are considered statistically significant (in bold text).
Table 11. Pre- and post-grazing herbage masses of pregnancy maintenance (PM) and ad-libitum (AL) herbage allowances (least squares means ± SEM) offered to ewes during early-pregnancy (pregnancy day 1 (P1) – P50), mid-pregnancy (P51-P100) and late-pregnancy (P101-140). ................................................................................................................................. 387

Table 12. Chemical composition and metabolizable energy expressed on a dry matter (DM) basis of pasture grab samples collected throughout pregnancy from the pregnancy maintenance (PM) and ad-libitum (AL) nutritional treatments (least squares means ± SEM). ............................................................................................................................................ 387

Table 13. Effect of ewe nutritional treatment on ewe live weight (kg) prior to artificial insemination (AI; at P-2) and in pregnancy (least squares means ± SEM). ...................... 390

Table 14. Effect of ewe nutritional treatment on their live weights (kg) in lactation (least squares means ± SEM). ................................................................................................................................. 391

Table 15. Effect of ewe nutritional treatment on ewe body condition scores (BCS) prior to artificial insemination (AI, at P-2) and in pregnancy (least squares means ± SEM). ....... 393

Table 16. Effect of ewe nutritional treatment during pregnancy on ewe body condition scores (BCS) in lactation (least squares means ± SEM). ................................................................. 395

Table 17. Effect of ewe nutritional treatment on ewe gestation length (least squares means ± SEM) and the proportion of ewes lambed by day 149......................................................... 396

Table 18. Effect of ewe nutritional treatment on lamb birth weight, crown-rump-length (CRL), chest circumference (CC), front (FL) and rear (RL) leg length and total litter weight (least squares means ± SEM). ................................................................................................................................. 399

Table 19. Effects of ewe nutritional, with gestation length as a covariate on lamb birth weight, crown-rump-length (CRL), chest circumference (CC), front (FL) and rear (RL) leg length and total litter weight (least squares means ± SEM)................................................................. 400

Table 20. Effect of ewe nutritional treatment during pregnancy on lamb live weights (kg) during lactation (least squares means ± SEM). ................................................................. 401
Table 21. Effect of ewe nutritional treatments during pregnancy on lamb weaning weight, total litter weight at weaning (least squares means ± SEM) and lamb survival. ...............402

Table 22. Birth weight data from nutritional studies in sheep in which three nutritional scenarios have been studied: pregnancy maintenance (PM), above pregnancy maintenance (APM) and undernutrition (UN). The difference in birth weight of the undernutrition groups was compared against PM and APM groups. .................................................................426

Table 23. Statistical power of some undernutrition studies that varied in the size of estimated effects and sample sizes. The sample size (n) for each group necessary to achieve a 50% and 90% power was also estimated using Cohen (1988) guidelines. .........................428
List of Figures

Figure 1. The expected proportion of significant results as a function of sample size and effect size (adapted from Hedges and Olkin, 1985) ................................................................. 8

Figure 2. Number of meta-analysis publications in PubMed since 1990. Journal articles were search using the search string: meta-analysis OR metaanaly* OR meta-analy* OR meta analy* as publication type. ........................................................................................................ 11

Figure 3. Schematic representation of the fixed-effect model (reprinted from Borenstein et al. 2010). • represents the common mean ($\theta$ =100) across studies, i.e. the true effect magnitude. ■ represents the observed mean for each particular study, and $V_1$ and $V_2$ represent the variance of the mean in study 1 and 2 in relation to $\theta$. ......................................................... 19

Figure 4. Schematic representation of the random-effects model (reprinted from Borenstein et al. 2010). For each study, the sample mean is represented by a full circle (●). In this case the true effect is not fixed and so it varies from Study 1 to Study 2 since they were samples from the distribution at the bottom where $\mu$ represents the mean of the distribution of true effects with variance $\tau^2$. The observed mean (■) in Study 1 and 2 differ from the true mean (●) of each particular population because they use a finite number of individuals to estimate the effect.................................................................................................................................................. 21

Figure 5. Schematic representation of a multilevel meta-analytic model (adapted from Nakagawa et al. 2017). ........................................................................................................ 25

Figure 6. Examples of hypothetical a) symmetrical and b) asymmetrical funnel plots, where the horizontal axis represents the treatment effects estimated from individual studies and the vertical axis represents some measure of study size (e.g. standard error on a reverse scale that places larger studies on top of the graph). Solid line represents zero effect. Dashed line represents the meta-analytic mean (Based on Sterne et al. 2005). More details in the text.................................................................................................................................................. 33
Figure 7. Hypothetical examples of the results of a trim-and-fill method: a) an asymmetrical funnel plot suggesting possible publication bias due to missing studies in the bottom-right of the plot, b) the “filled” and more symmetrical funnel plot including the imputed studies as mirror images of those on the left hand side (open circles). Solid line represents zero effect. Dashed line represents the meta-analytic mean a) before and b) after adjusting for publication bias.

Figure 8. Four-phase diagram depicting the flow of information through the different phases of a systematic review (adapted from Moher et al. 2009).

Figure 9. A Preferred Reporting Items for systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) flow diagram. The number of studies in each particular category is shown in parenthesis. The number of effect sizes (ES) is shown for each dataset.

Figure 10. Forest plot of estimates from the meta-regression of the undernutrition dataset. Posterior means for each period of pregnancy (intercepts) and “total days” (slope) are represented by circles. Horizontal lines represent 95% highest posterior density (HDP) intervals. Zero effect is shown as a vertical dashed line. Statistically significant effects are considered those whose 95% HDP do not cross zero.

Figure 11. Forest plot of estimates from the meta-regression of the overnutrition dataset. Posterior means for each litter size (intercepts) and “total days” (slope) are represented by circles. Horizontal lines represent 95% highest posterior density (HDP) intervals. Zero effect is shown as a vertical dashed line. Statistically significant effects are considered those whose 95% HDP do not cross zero.

Figure 12. Funnel plots of raw data (a and c) and the residuals and sampling error effects (b and d) from full models in the undernutrition (a and b) and overnutrition (c and d) datasets. Overall posterior (meta-analytic) means are shown as solid lines and zero effect sizes are shown as dashed lines.

Figure 13. Four-phase flow diagram following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement. The number of studies in each category is shown in parenthesis. The number of effect-sizes (E.S.) are given for each dataset.
Figure 14. Forest plot of estimates from the meta-regression of the undernutrition dataset. Posterior means for each period of pregnancy (intercepts) are represented by circles. Horizontal lines represent 95% highest posterior density (HDP) intervals. Zero effect is shown as a vertical dashed line. Statistically significant effects are considered those whose 95% HDP do not cross zero.

Figure 15. Bubble plot depicting the differences in birth weight responses to maternal undernutrition starting before or at mating (day 0, shown in dashed line). Bubbles represent the effect sizes for experiments undertaken in singleton- (red) and twin-bearing ewes (grey). Differences in bubble circumference demonstrate differences in the precision (1/standard error) between studies.

Figure 16. Line plot representing the nutritional manipulations for each observation in the mid-pregnancy subgroup. Lines of different colour represent studies using a control groups fed to meet their pregnancy maintenance requirements (PM; in green) or a control groups fed above PM requirements (in grey), respectively.

Figure 17. Line plot representing the nutritional manipulations for each observation in the late-pregnancy subgroup. Black and green lines represent nutritional manipulations undertaken indoors or outdoors, respectively.

Figure 18. Line plot representing the nutritional manipulations for each observation in the overnutrition dataset. Green and black lines represent studies with nutritional manipulations undertaken outdoors and indoors, respectively.

Figure 19. Funnel plot of effect sizes in the overnutrition dataset plotted against their precision (1/standard error). Red and grey bubbles are effect sizes for studies undertaken indoors and outdoors, respectively. Differences in bubble circumference accentuate the differences in sample size between studies.

Figure 20. Funnel plots of raw data (a and c) and the residuals and sampling error effects (b and d) from full models in the undernutrition (a and b) and overnutrition (c and d) datasets. Overall posterior (meta-analytic) means are shown as solid lines and zero effect is shown as
dashed lines. Observations marked in black, green and red in the undernutrition funnel plots (a and b) depict observations in studies undertaken in early-, mid- and late-pregnancy. ...

Figure 21. Flow diagram of studies identified, excluded and included in the present study. The number of studies in each category are shown in parenthesis. The number of effect-sizes (E.S.) are given for each dataset.................................................................311

Figure 22. Line plot representing the undernutrition periods used across experiments. Green lines represent effects measured with nutritional manipulations ending before day 100 of pregnancy, whilst black lines represent effects measured with nutritional manipulations during late-pregnancy or nutritional manipulations that extended to late-pregnancy. Dotted line demarcates day 100 of pregnancy.................................................................316

Figure 23. Bubble plot of effect-sizes in studies with nutritional manipulations ending before day 100 of pregnancy. Red and grey bubbles represent studies undertaken in singletons and twins, respectively. Differences in bubble circumference represent the precision (1/SE) of the study.................................................................320

Figure 24. Bubble plot of effect-sizes against the length of nutritional manipulations of studies undertaken in late-pregnancy or that extended into late-pregnancy. Red and grey bubbles represent studies undertaken in singletons and twins, respectively. Differences in bubble circumference represent the precision (1/SE) of the study.................................................................320

Figure 25. Line plot representing the overnutrition periods used across experiments. Red and grey lines represent studies undertaken in singletons and twins, respectively.............321

Figure 26. Forest plot of effect-sizes (ES) extracted from the overnutrition studies and the overall effect estimated using random-effects meta-analysis. The raw ES for each study is represented by a dot (●) their estimated standard errors (SE of Hedges’ g). The overall effect (◆) is the posterior mean and 95% highest posterior density (HPD) interval from the meta-analytic model.................................................................322

Figure 27. Funnel plots of raw (a and c) and the residuals and sampling error effects from meta-regression models (b) in the undernutrition (a and b) and overnutrition (c only)
datasets. Overall posterior (meta-analytic) means are shown as red solid lines and zero effect is shown as dashed lines. Observations in green and black in the undernutrition funnel plots depict studies undertaken in Period 1 ( nutritional manipulations during the first 100 days of pregnancy) and Period 2 ( nutritional manipulations including late-pregnancy).

Figure 28. Schematic representation of the six nutritional treatments used in this study. AL0-50 = maternal ad-libitum (AL) feeding from artificial insemination (AI) to P50; AL50-100 = maternal AL feeding from P50 to P100; AL100-140 = maternal AL feeding from P100 to P140; AL0-100 = maternal AL feeding from AI to P100; AL0-140 = maternal AL feeding from AI to P140; Control = pregnancy maintenance from AI to P140. Outside the aforementioned AL feeding periods, ewes were offered herbage at pregnancy maintenance levels.

Figure 29. Live weight trajectory of ewes in the six nutritional treatments throughout pregnancy. Each nutritional treatment is represented by a different line and colour: AL0-50, early-pregnancy ad-libitum (AL) feeding from pregnancy day 1 (P1) to P50 (---; blue); AL50-100, mid-pregnancy AL feeding P50-P100 (— —; green); AL100-140, late-pregnancy AL feeding P100-P140 (-- •--•; purple); AL0-100, early- and mid-pregnancy AL feeding P1-P100 (--•--•; red); T140, pregnancy AL feeding P1-P140 (--; grey), and; Control, pregnancy maintenance P1-P140 (——; black). Outside the aforementioned AL feeding periods ewes were offered the same pasture allowance as control ewes.

Figure 30. Body condition score (BCS) trajectory of the ewes in the six nutritional treatments throughout pregnancy. Each nutritional treatment is represented by a different line and colour: AL0-50, early-pregnancy ad-libitum (AL) feeding from pregnancy day 1 (P1) to P50 (---; blue); AL50-100, mid-pregnancy AL feeding P51-P100 (— —; green); AL100-140, late-pregnancy AL feeding P101-P140 (•--•--•; purple); AL0-100, early- and mid-pregnancy AL feeding P1-P100 (••--••; red); T140, pregnancy AL feeding P1-P140 (--; grey), and; Control, pregnancy maintenance P1-P140 (——; black). Outside the aforementioned AL feeding periods ewes were offered the same pasture allowance as the control treatment.