Whole College Evaluation
Report

REPORT

College name	Ballyhaise Agricultural College
College address	Ballyhaise Co. Cavan
Date of evaluation	16 November 2023
Date of issue of report	16 October 2024

What is a whole-college evaluation?

Introduction

Teagasc is the agriculture and food development authority in Ireland and is the main provider of further education in agriculture, food, horticulture, forestry and equine studies in Ireland. It provides courses in seven colleges, three of which are in private ownership. Under the framework of a Memorandum of Understanding between Teagasc and the Department of Education Inspectorate, the Inspectorate evaluates the quality of the education and training provision in those colleges.

The evaluation team for a whole-college evaluation comprised two members of the Department of Education Inspectorate, a senior member of Teagasc staff not associated with the college inspected and an external expert with relevant expertise.

The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

How to read this report

During this inspection, the inspectors evaluated and reported under the following headings or areas of enquiry:

1. The quality of management and leadership
2. The quality of teaching, training and learning
3. The quality of care and support for learners
4. The college's self-evaluation process and capacity for improvement

Inspectors describe the quality of each of these areas using the Inspectorate's quality continuum which is shown on the final page of this report. The quality continuum provides examples of the language used by inspectors when evaluating and describing the quality of the college's provision in each area.

This report is based on a selection of on-site lessons observed in a range of learning settings, including the college farm in the college, on interaction with learners and review of their work, meetings with the principal, with key staff members and with management and learner representatives, completed staff surveys, completed learner surveys, and a selection of college documents. The evaluation did not include inspection of the college's boarding facilities.

In the context of this report, the term *teacher* was used to represent all staff that contribute to the learner experience in the college such as teachers, technicians, farm staff and support staff.

Whole-college evaluation

Dates of inspection	14, 15, 16 November 2023
Inspection activities undertaken • Meetings with principal, deputy principal and Head of Education for Teagasc • Meetings with key staff • Review of relevant documents • Student focus group	• Analysis of student and staff surveys • Observation of teaching and learning • Examination of students' work • Interaction with students • Feedback to senior management team and college staff

College context

Ballyhaise College was established in 1906 and was one of the first agricultural training colleges in Ireland. The college is managed by Teagasc. At the time of the evaluation, it had an enrolment of 781 students, including 214 full-time students, 251 part-time students, 166 higher education students from Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT), and 150 one-day course students. The college had ten permanent teaching staff, four temporary education officers, six technicians and five full-time equivalent subcontracted staff. During the inspection, on-site lessons and practical sessions only were observed.

Summary of main findings and main recommendations:

Findings
- The college provided an inclusive and caring learning environment, supported by dedicated staff and volunteers, and structures such as the mentoring programme, education leads and an access officer.
- The principal had been very effective in maintaining and upgrading existing college facilities and in seeking additions to enhance the learner experience.
- The significant increase in enrolment over the previous five years, without a proportionate increase in staff numbers, had led to larger class sizes which, in turn, impacted on the quality of learning and educational supports available to students.
- Where the learner experience was most effective, concrete or digital resources were used to activate learners' interest in topics and well-planned collaborative learning tasks were integrated into these sessions, leading to purposeful learner engagement and successful outcomes.
- Collaboration among teaching staff was good, and some very good practice was observed in lessons and practical sessions; scope existed to further develop the sharing of best practice in effective teaching, learning and assessment methodologies.
- Leadership and management in the college was of a very high standard overall; teachers and students, through interviews and surveys, expressed high levels of satisfaction with how the college was run.
- The college worked closely with the local community and had developed strong links with local businesses, industry and farmers in the area.
- The college had demonstrated a high capacity to continually improve and develop; college staff and management had embraced opportunities for change, and they demonstrated willingness to support further college development.

Recommendations:

- Teaching approaches which facilitate a sharper focus on the development of key learning skills through active and collaborative learning should be used more widely and more practical approaches to the teaching of theory aspects of the courses should be explored.
- Initial and ongoing assessment of learners' needs, including literacy and numeracy competencies, should be more rigorous; individual learner plans (ILPs) should be created for each learner documenting all relevant social, educational, career and personal information. The mentoring system could support this.
- Teachers should share the highly effective practice found in some lessons, including effective differentiation strategies that allow students of all abilities to access the learning task, written formative feedback and the use of digital technology to support and assess learning.
- To enhance the learning environment, there should be consistent implementation of key policies related to attendance, punctuality, student engagement and participation, and mobile phone use.
- The college, in consultation with Teagasc, should expand and develop the middle management structures to support key priorities such as teaching, learning, assessment, and student support structures. Students should have access to a qualified counsellor on a regular basis to support their social and emotional needs.

Detailed findings and recommendations

1. The quality of management and leadership

Highly committed leadership and staff

Leadership and management in the college was of a very high standard. Teaching staff and students, through interviews and surveys, expressed high levels of satisfaction with how the college was run.

Day-to-day management of the college was very effective and the senior management team, consisting of the principal and deputy principal, worked very well together. Each were aware of their roles and responsibilities and often delivered lessons when teachers were absent or were engaged with other college activities. The college needed additional staff to ensure a sustainable workload for the senior management team.

There were very good communication systems in the college, and between the college and Teagasc. The use of a variety of electronic systems supported effective communication with staff, students and the community. There were regular staff meetings which provided opportunities to discuss and share information, particularly in relation to students and their needs. It is recommended that student names are not included in the minutes of meetings and that an alternative mechanism be developed to share this information with staff. Good communication was evident between teachers, technicians and farm staff, and communication was also strong with host farms, local businesses and DkIT.

Staff members felt supported and were encouraged to share good practices with one another. There was high quality collaboration between staff; including teaching staff, management,

secretarial staff, volunteers and farm staff. Due to staffing pressures, many staff members offered additional time to support the students and made themselves available to cover classes where required. Also, college timetables were modified on a weekly basis to respond to the changing needs of the college. Such practices indicated a strong willingness among staff to offer flexibility. However, such approaches are difficult to sustain in the longer term.

The farm staff provided valuable support to teaching and learning and they acknowledged the significant investment in facilities, led by the principal and with the support of Teagasc, over the past ten years. Students said they would like to work more on the farm in the evenings and at weekends; farm staff were open to this approach as it was existing practice around calving and lambing time. College management should investigate this further, as it would enhance the learner experience and would allow more opportunities for learners to apply their theory learning in a practical context.

Leading teaching and learning

The college had a clear focus on inclusion and catering for diversity; this was led by Teagasc and senior management through the open application process. The variety of courses offered at QQI Levels 5 and 6 was mentioned appreciatively by students during the focus group meeting. The students would have welcomed the provision of additional shorter courses to support their own farm work such as boom sprayer pesticide application and telescopic handler training. This is something the college should consider if staffing levels permit.

Feedback from teachers was that Level 6 courses were too difficult for some students, particularly given the significant amount of theory involved. This is something that Teagasc should review. In doing so, it will be important to consider the balance between the theory and practical elements of existing Level 6 courses. It may be the case that adjusting this balance will support students' capacity to engage successfully with Level 6 courses.

In August 2023, the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science announced the launch of two new farming apprenticeships, one of which will be offered in Ballyhaise College. This Level 6 Farm Technician apprenticeship will provide another valuable option for learners. The apprenticeship was designed to train apprentices to operate successfully within Irish farming systems, gaining skills in daily operations, compliance with industry standards and regulatory measures. This very positive development allows students to access the education they want and need, while still working on the farm. It was noted that staffing arrangements for the new apprenticeship model were challenging.

High quality teaching was a feature of many lessons and there was a need to put arrangements in place to share the highly effective practices. The college, in consultation with Teagasc, should expand and develop the middle management structures to support improvement in teaching, learning and assessment.

Management structures and leadership

Good leadership and backing from Teagasc supported the in-college management team. The Head of Education in Teagasc, who was relatively new to the position, was very proactive and had high ambition with regard to improving the quality of teaching and learning, not only in Ballyhaise, but in all of the Teagasc colleges. This was highlighted by Teagasc's collaboration with the Department of Education, in the development of this model of inspection, which provides an opportunity to affirm good practices and to identify areas for improvement, with the fundamental goal of enhancing learner experiences and outcomes.

Senior management encouraged members of staff to take on leadership roles through the post of responsibility system as well as on a voluntary basis. The post of responsibility positions were not assigned to the college but were linked to the individual staff member who had the position. This arrangement meant that the college would lose the post if the staff member left the college. An alternative arrangement, which assigns the post to the college, instead of the staff member, should be investigated to ensure adequate middle-management capacity in the college on a sustainable basis. The posts of responsibility were key to ensuring the middle management

structure was working effectively at all times to meet the needs of the students and to support college management.

A wide range of policies had been developed and implemented with support from Teagasc. The college enrolled some students who were under the age of eighteen. While the Teagasc organisation had child protection procedures in place which the college implemented to a large extent, there was a need to ensure that all child protection requirements under *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2017* were met. The college, with the support of Teagasc, should develop these processes and procedures as a matter of priority. This work should be informed by the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools (revised 2023)*. A similar recommendation had been made in the inspection report in 2013 but no significant progress had been made. Consideration should also be given to developing a vulnerable adults policy, for learners that are over eighteen years of age.

To support management at college level, and to provide an oversight function that has responsibility for the development and review of policies, Teagasc should investigate the introduction of a management authority/board of governors structure for its colleges.

2. The quality of teaching, training and learning

Meeting learner needs through effective learner experiences
All lessons observed were characterised by respectful relationships. However, in some lessons, student engagement and attendance required improvement. Where engagement was best, learners participated fully in the lesson and a variety of teaching methodologies was used. In lessons where students were passive and where teacher-led instruction was the dominant approach, learning was not effective for all students. Lesson planning should provide students with opportunities for purposeful participation in their learning, through independent and collaborative tasks, and a focus on the development of skills as well as the acquisition of subject knowledge.

Questioning was used effectively to assess students' recall and progress. When most effective, questions encouraged the use of higher-order thinking skills and deeper engagement with the content of the lesson. In some instances, teachers probed the initial response and encouraged students to extend and develop their responses. Best practice was noted when students were expected to justify their responses, sufficient wait time was given, and questions were directed to individuals rather than the whole class. Teachers should share their skills and expertise in this area.

During the focus group, students stated that they found learning most enjoyable when teachers used collaborative approaches, such as group work, practical work and quizzes, and when teachers encouraged independent note making, rather than copying notes from slides. In lessons where pair or group work was used effectively, it was set up in such a way that students of all abilities were able to take part and contribute. This was more evident in the practical farm activities than in classroom-based theory lessons. Very effective collaboration was seen when students engaged with a task that had been carefully prepared in advance. The students took responsibility for their learning and demonstrated good understanding of how to improve their work and to develop their skills. Given the benefits of this approach, all teachers should ensure a positive learning experience for students through increased opportunities for them to interact with each other through structured group and pair work.

In some lessons, digital technology was used effectively to enhance teaching and learning. An example of this was the use of visuals and videos by teachers to prompt discussion of learning. Students reported that the use of digital technology helped them understand difficult concepts in a real-world context. During some of the on-farm practical lessons, students used their phones to support their learning to very good effect. In other lessons, students used their phones for purposes unrelated to the lesson. It is suggested that the college review how mobile phones are used in lessons and investigate what role technology plays in teaching, learning and assessment. The outcome of this review should be the development of a digital learning plan

which will provide a shared vision for college management, staff and students regarding how technology can best meet the needs of all learners.

A very good focus on the development of students' subject-specific literacy was evident in a small number of lessons. In these lessons, relevant vocabulary was explicitly taught. This good practice should be used more widely to reinforce subject literacy. Relevant expertise in special educational needs (SEN) should be sought to support this work.

The classroom and farm facilities were very good and significant upgrades had taken place over the previous ten years. To support teaching and learning to a greater extent, consideration should be given to changing the seating arrangements from single desks to group arrangements that will encourage more collaborative learning. More posters, infographics and examples of student work should be displayed in classrooms to support students' numeracy and literacy skills and to celebrate students' work.

Meeting learner needs through effective teaching and training

Lessons were generally well prepared and were underpinned by very good specialist knowledge on the part of the teacher. Many of the teachers had worked in industry, in advisory roles or had undertaken relevant research which complemented their teaching role. They had also engaged in professional learning, on a regular basis, with the support of college management. Most of this learning was relevant to the content of the courses they were teaching. Further upskilling should encompass aspects of teaching and learning such as differentiation and assessment for learning. It will be important for Teagasc to take a leadership role in providing this upskilling and to build a programme of CPD that enhances the quality of teaching and meets the learning needs of all students.

Some very good assessment for learning (AfL) and assessment of learning (AoL) strategies were observed. These included effective questioning, formative written feedback on students' work and peer discussion. There was also some good use of learning intentions and success criteria. Such AfL and AoL strategies should be used more widely in lessons. Using a broader range of assessment strategies to assess, check, prompt, include and challenge, would support better student engagement and provide assessment opportunities for teachers. Planning should include tasks which are suitably differentiated to ensure all students experience elements of challenge and success. Teachers should collaborate further to share the highly effective practice.

Teacher-led questioning was used frequently and was most effective when questions were distributed among the students. In some instances, questions were answered by only a small number of students within the group. In instances where answers are not forthcoming, small-group discussion should be encouraged prior to students sharing answers with the class. This would ensure sufficient time for all students to engage with the questions.

Teachers' individual planning for lessons was good. This planning included presentation slides, the organisation of materials for collaborative work, and teacher-created worksheets. In the best lessons, planning ensured that students were key contributors to the lesson while the teacher fulfilled the role of facilitator. This resulted in students displaying initiative, self-reliance and confidence in their learning.

A sample of course descriptors, which teachers used to guide their lessons, was selected for review. These descriptors provided detail about the intended learning outcomes and the course content to be covered. Further planning for how the learning outcomes will be achieved, what approaches will best support learning and how this learning will be assessed should be undertaken. Such planning, related to improving teaching and learning, should be included among the roles assigned to the middle management team.

Identifying and meeting the needs of all students

During their first few weeks in the college, students' learning needs were assessed. Rather than using the outcomes of these assessments to inform teachers how best to support students in their learning, the assessments were used to identify students in need of examination supports,

such as readers and scribes. In discussions around the college's learning support system, staff indicated that they were well informed of with regard to students' additional accommodation needs in examinations; they were less clear on how to address the additional needs of learners in classrooms and practical work. During lesson observations, it was clear that some learners would have benefited from approaches such as group work and facilitated discussion. Such differentiation strategies allow all students to contribute to the lesson. Varying the method of lesson delivery by including a range of media, including video content, would also support the range of learning styles, as would the provision of ongoing formative feedback to students. The identification and meeting of student needs is dependent on having sufficient staffing resources, including staff with an expertise in special educational needs. The college, in conjunction with Teagasc, should seek to engage a suitably qualified teacher to support learners with additional needs, including literacy and numeracy needs. To efficiently facilitate the implementation of teaching and learning strategies across the college, this teacher would need to be a member of the middle management team.

The access officer played a vital role in the college and had responsibility for a number of key areas. The online learning platform, the attendance monitoring software, work placement, learning support and examination supports were among these responsibilities. To ensure the role of the access officer is most effective, a student support team should be established to: provide a structure around the planning and organisation of supports for students in the college; to facilitate links to the community and other non-college support services; to enable students with support needs to continue to access a full education; to assist staff to manage those students effectively; to ensure new staff members are briefed about policies and procedures relating to student wellbeing and support; and to advise college management on the development and review of student support policies and structures.

Students were supported during their transition from post-primary and an induction programme helped them settle into the college. As a part of the application process, students were invited to share any learning needs they may have had. It is suggested that stronger links are created with the post-primary schools and that the sharing of key information is mandatory within the application process. This information should be used by the college to create individual learner plans for each learner, documenting all relevant social, educational, career and personal information to ensure their learning needs are met. The mentoring system, in conjunction with a student support team, once established, would be ideally positioned to support this approach.

3. The quality of care and support for learners

The college provided an inclusive and caring learning environment for students, supported by dedicated staff and volunteers, and structures such as the mentoring programme, education leads and access officer.

From interactions with students and from observing lessons and practical sessions, it was evident that there were very good relationships between staff and students. Teachers fostered a relaxed atmosphere in their classes through the use of humour and encouragement as well as through their enthusiasm for their subject area. In some lessons, however, students arrived late to class without providing a reason, spent time on their mobile phones without permission and were not engaging in the lesson. This caused disruption for the teacher and for other students. There was an excellent learner charter in the Teagasc learner handbook that outlined expectations related to participation in learning and adherence to the college rules. This charter should be implemented consistently by all staff. It is suggested that the college create a bespoke version of this handbook to ensure that the college's context is reflected, and that greater clarity is provided around the consequences of students not adhering to the expectations. When reviewing the learner handbook, students and parents should have an opportunity to contribute to the updated version. This will create a sense of ownership and personal responsibility on the part of the students.

In the surveys and student focus group meeting, students reported that they felt safe and cared for in the college and that the mentoring system provided a positive space where they could speak with a staff member if they had any issues. There is potential to expand and develop the

role of the mentor, and there is a need to develop clearer guidance to outline the expectations around the organisation of the mentoring system. Mentors would also benefit from training for the role so they are supported in dealing with difficult issues that may arise. The use of a student journal to track students' engagement with the mentoring programme would be beneficial. This approach would provide the student with a written record of their engagement in the mentoring programme and a place to include information on their goals, progress, achievements and career paths. This, in turn, would support students' attainment, attendance and progression.

Decreased socialisation with generalised anxiety and an over-reliance on phones and social media were mentioned by college management as sources of concern. They reported that learners were experiencing difficulties with self-regulation, monitoring their learning and planning ahead for life goals. To support students' social and emotional needs, students should have access to a qualified counsellor on a regular basis.

Sport, and in particular Gaelic football, is very popular among students in the college. A large percentage of the students travel to and from the college on a daily basis, and this impacts on the number of students available to take part in activities after the college finishes. For the students that are staying in the locality or using the on-site accommodation, there is an opportunity to engage with the student council to identify other activities that may provide a social outlet for students and support their wellbeing. For example, the college, in cooperation with Teagasc, could introduce an initiative similar to the 'Green Schools' project in primary and post-primary schools with a focus on farm sustainability. This would provide the students with the opportunity to discuss and support wider farming policy such as the *Teagasc Climate Action Strategy (2022 – 2030)*.

4. The college's self-evaluation process and capacity for improvement

Ballyhaise College had demonstrated a high capacity to bring about improvement and was very open to developing its practices further. College staff and management had embraced opportunities for change and showed willingness to support further college development.

A structured approach to self-evaluation had gathered some useful evidence to support college development. In particular, the incorporation of students' and teachers' views as part of this process was noteworthy.

A college business plan for 2023 had been developed and, commendably, there were some key teaching and learning objectives and targets identified. The college should now develop an implementation plan, with clear actions and strategies to meet these targets. To grow the college's improvement capacity, a middle management structure, with sufficient staffing and post of responsibility positions, should be put in place, with the support of Teagasc.

The draft findings and recommendations arising out of this evaluation were discussed with the principal, deputy principal and college staff at the conclusion of the evaluation.

Appendix

COLLEGE RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by Teagasc

Part A: Observations on the content of the inspection report

Teagasc Ballyhaise College welcomes the findings of the WCE Report and is encouraged by the recognition of strengths in management, teaching and the positive overall learning environment. Ballyhaise College is particularly pleased with the affirmation of the college's commitment to fostering a caring and inclusive environment, supported by dedicated staff and strong relationships between students, teachers and local stakeholders. The college's willingness and focus to continually improve and develop and to embrace opportunities is also welcomed.

Ensuring full compliance with child protection procedures is accepted as a top priority. The college particularly notes the main report recommendations on collaborative learning, the sharing of good teaching practice and the consistent implementation of key policies. The recommendations on student support and middle management are also noted.

Part B: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

Teagasc Ballyhaise College is committed to addressing the recommendations of the whole college evaluation to enhance teaching, learning, and student support with emphasis on the following:

- Ensuring full compliance with child protection procedures is a top priority; Teagasc will take immediate steps in collaboration with senior management to meet all requirements outlined in the Children First National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2017.

- The college recognises the need for more interactive, practical and collaborative teaching methods to better engage students. We will explore new ways to revise lesson plans to incorporate additional discussion, group work, hands-on activities and the use of digital technologies in teaching. This will promote critical thinking, problem-solving and better prepare students for challenges they will face in their future careers. Additional resources will be sought to ensure these methods can be integrated effectively across all courses, enhancing the learning experience for all students.

- The college acknowledges the need for more thorough assessment of students' needs, including literacy and numeracy competencies. We will introduce individual student plans for students to support their learning experience. The college will enhance the mentoring system to provide ongoing support for students throughout their studies at the college. We recognise the importance of providing comprehensive support throughout the entirety of the student learning experience and will seek to secure additional qualified staff with expertise in special educational needs so that the literacy and numeracy requirements of all students are met.

- The college will work with Teagasc Curriculum Development and Standards Unit (CDSU) to develop the sharing of teaching practices, particularly differentiation strategies that cater to students of all abilities. Staff will be encouraged to make greater use of feedback through peer to peer evaluation. To facilitate this the college along with CDSU will organise workshops and peer observations to support the sharing of best practice.

- The college is dedicated to the consistent application of policies related to attendance, punctuality, engagement, and mobile phone use. These policies are crucial for creating a positive learning environment. These policies are discussed with students during course induction and the expectation and responsibility of students clearly defined. Staff are informed of the requirement for consistent implementation of policies. Guidelines and consequences for breaching policies have been developed to promote a better culture of respect, responsibility, and active participation among students.

- The college acknowledges the recommendation to develop the middle management structure to better support teaching, learning, and student support priorities. The need for additional staffing and a more structured middle management framework will be referred to Teagasc senior management for action. The college will work with Teagasc senior management to explore the possibility of providing a qualified counsellor to support student's social and emotional needs. This will ensure students have access to the necessary support for their well-being throughout their time at the college.

Teagasc Ballyhaise College is fully committed to implementing these recommendations in collaboration with Teagasc senior management. By improving teaching practices, providing comprehensive student support, and enforcing consistent policies, the college will continue to deliver high-quality agricultural education in a supportive and inclusive environment.

The Inspectorate's Quality Continuum

Inspectors describe the quality of provision in the college using the Inspectorate's quality continuum which is shown below. The quality continuum provides examples of the language used by inspectors when evaluating and describing the quality of the college's provision of each area.

Level	Description	Example of descriptive terms
Very Good	*Very good* applies where the quality of the areas evaluated is of a very high standard. The very few areas for improvement that exist do not significantly impact on the overall quality of provision. For some colleges in this category the quality of what is evaluated is *outstanding* and provides an example for other colleges of exceptionally high standards of provision.	Very good; of a very high quality; very effective practice; highly commendable; very successful; few areas for improvement; notable; of a very high standard. Excellent; outstanding; exceptionally high standard, with very significant strengths; exemplary
Good	*Good* applies where the strengths in the areas evaluated clearly outweigh the areas in need of improvement. The areas requiring improvement impact on the quality of pupils' learning. The college needs to build on its strengths and take action to address the areas identified as requiring improvement in order to achieve a *very good* standard.	Good; good quality; valuable; effective practice; competent; useful; commendable; good standard; some areas for improvement
Satisfactory	*Satisfactory* applies where the quality of provision is adequate. The strengths in what is being evaluated just outweigh the shortcomings. While the shortcomings do not have a significant negative impact they constrain the quality of the learning experiences and should be addressed in order to achieve a better standard.	Satisfactory; adequate; appropriate provision although some possibilities for improvement exist; acceptable level of quality; improvement needed in some areas
Fair	*Fair* applies where, although there are some strengths in the areas evaluated, deficiencies or shortcomings that outweigh those strengths also exist. The college will have to address certain deficiencies without delay in order to ensure that provision is satisfactory or better.	Fair; evident weaknesses that are impacting on students' learning; less than satisfactory; experiencing difficulty; must improve in specified areas; action required to improve
Weak	*Weak* applies where there are serious deficiencies in the areas evaluated. Immediate and coordinated whole-college action is required to address the areas of concern. In some cases, the intervention of other agencies may be required to support improvements.	Weak; unsatisfactory; insufficient; ineffective; poor; requiring significant change, development or improvement; experiencing significant difficulties;