

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

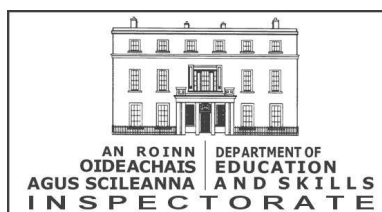
Department of Education and Skills

Whole College Evaluation

REPORT

**Teagasc Agricultural College
Ballyhaise, Co. Cavan**

Date of inspection: 17 January 2013



Whole-College Evaluation Report

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. Teagasc commissioned the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills to develop an inspection model to evaluate the quality of the education and training provision in those colleges. A Whole-College Evaluation (WCE) was undertaken in Teagasc Agricultural College, Ballyhaise, in January 2013, as part of the pilot programme of this new evaluation model. This report is based on a selection of lessons observed in a range of learning settings in the college, interaction with students and review of their work, meetings with the principal, with key staff members and with management and student representatives, completed staff questionnaires, and a selection of college documents. Teagasc and the college management were given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and their response will be found in the appendix of this report.

Teagasc Agricultural College, Ballyhaise, was one of the first agricultural training colleges set up in 1906 and it is managed directly by Teagasc. Currently, it has an enrolment of 410 students, approximately half of whom are part-time. Enrolment trends are positive, and college management have identified the additional demands on resources as a result of increasing demand for places as a particular challenge.

This evaluation focused on the following aspects of provision in the college:

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

Summary of the main findings of the evaluation

The main strengths of the college are:

- The strong leadership and management of the college
- The commitment of the teaching staff to the effective delivery of the courses provided and to supporting students' success
- The range of relevant courses, with good opportunities for students to gain accreditation at FETAC levels 5 and 6 and HETAC levels 7 and 8
- The very good quality teaching, training and learning in all of the practical learning sessions observed
- The safe environment in which students learn
- The very effective system of moderation and verification in place to assure the awards earned by students

The main areas for improvement include:

- The provision of support for students with literacy and numeracy support needs
- The development and use of strategies to encourage learners to participate in theory learning lessons
- The assessment of students' learning, both within theory lessons and at the end of the Certificate in Agriculture Level 5 course
- The development of appropriate child protection policy and procedures for the protection of students under 18 years of age
- The business planning process

The main recommendations in this report

- The college management authorities should develop a child protection policy and procedures as a matter of priority. All those who work with students under 18 years of age should be briefed on the policy and procedures as soon as they are available

- CPD should be provided for teachers in helping students meet the literacy and numeracy demands of their courses. Teachers also require upskilling in the use of appropriate strategies for teaching and learning of the theoretical elements of the courses taught
- Teagasc should engage with FETAC to address the lack of a pass requirement for the theory elements of each module on the Level 5 Advanced Certificate in Agriculture as a priority
- The student handbook should be developed to encourage more student responsibility for learning. Consideration should be given to the benefits of establishing a robust mentoring system with a focus on setting and reviewing academic targets
- A college student council should be established
- A collaborative business planning process should be implemented to identify unique aspects of provision at Ballyhaise and to include specific reference to the current teaching, training and learning challenges and the plans in place to address them.

1. The quality of management and leadership

- Teagasc has devolved responsibility for the day-to-day running of the college to the college principal and the assistant principal. This college management team is very well supported by Teagasc through, for example, regular meetings with principals from each of the seven colleges offering Teagasc courses; the provision of curriculum documentation and verification of student outcomes and through the provision of key performance metrics to support college self-evaluation.
- Teagasc have a good understanding of the performance of the college and that of students.
- The management of this college is of a very good quality. College management have overseen extension and development of the college facilities and work is currently underway to progress planned improvements to those facilities, with the support of Teagasc.
- The college enrolls some students who are under 18 years of age. There has been little attention paid to the child protection requirements under *Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (Department of Health, 2004) and *Children First: National Guidance For the Protection and Welfare of Children* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2011). The college management authorities should develop a child protection policy and procedures as a matter of priority. All those who work with students under 18 years of age should be briefed on the policy and procedures as soon as they are available. All parents of students under age 18 must be informed of the college's child protection policy as part of the enrolment of their child.
- The principal demonstrates strong leadership skills. He commands the respect of staff and students for his commitment to the college. Under his leadership, links have been established with the Teagasc farm advisory service, with other Dundalk Institute of Technology and with the Moorepark animal and grassland research programme, for example. The latter two of these links have provided direct benefit to college students.
- The principal is very well supported by the assistant principal, who very effectively manages key aspects of college provision, for example, the practical learning period (PLP) programme and course timetabling. Together, the college management team provide effective leadership to a small team of teaching staff, many of whom have accepted responsibility for, and exercised effective management of, key aspects of course management.
- A good range of relevant courses is provided. The curriculum offered provides very good opportunities for students to obtain qualifications from FETAC level 5 to HETAC level 8. The HETAC provision is provided in partnership with Dundalk Institute of Technology and it exemplifies the strong links established in the college with other providers, with the farming industry and with relevant professional organisations, to the advantage of students.
- The teaching staff, including the technicians providing practical training, is well qualified and experienced. Teachers demonstrate a high level of commitment to the effective delivery of the courses provided and to supporting students' success. In many instances, this means that teachers work with individual students outside of formal lesson time to ensure that coursework and assignments are completed successfully.

- Opportunities to share good practice are informal and depend on the very good relations which exist within and between course faculties. It is suggested that the benefits of establishing professional teaching networks across all seven colleges should be considered by Teagasc management. The identification of continuing professional development (CPD) needs is well supported through the performance review system. However, to date the focus has been on technical learning with little emphasis on teaching and learning skills. CPD which focuses on strategies to establish expectations of students' learning behaviours and on student management techniques for the classroom setting would be of benefit.
- The college's farm and facilities are well used to promote learning in farm enterprises and forestry.

2. The quality of teaching, training and learning

- Clear, coherent programme plans are provided by Teagasc to direct the work of the teaching staff. FETAC has introduced a new Common Awards System for all accredited further education awards. This involves significant changes to programme structure and content and the teaching staff is commended for their work in reviewing the curriculum materials to support the 'migration' of Teagasc agriculture and forestry programmes to the new common awards system.
- Provision for each element of the courses provided is well planned and co-ordinated.
- Rich practical learning experiences form part of the education experiences of all students in this college. The procedures by which the Practical Learning Period (PLP) programme is managed and monitored are very thorough. Students taking the FETAC level 6 courses in Agriculture, Dairy Herd Management and Forestry are provided with significant practical training through extended placements, on their home farms or with approved host foresters, as appropriate.
- The overall quality of teaching in this college is good with some excellent examples of practice observed during the evaluation.
- The quality of the teaching, training and learning was very good or better in all of the practical learning sessions observed. The teaching environment was well organised and a good range of strategies was utilised to ensure students were actively involved and learning, despite the relatively large groups in some lessons. In many lessons a very good level of discussion and questioning demonstrated the engagement of the students. It was clear that the teachers are respected by them as competent and knowledgeable.
- The quality of teaching, training and learning in the classroom-based lessons was fair. In the best instances, teachers had prepared suitable resources to supplement, rather than represent, textbook information. Questions were used to encourage students to make links between the theory being explored and their own farm experiences. In most classroom-based lessons, however, students' learning would have benefited from a more active, skills-focused approach involving group and paired activities with a concomitant reduction in the use of textbook information to guide the lesson.
- Students were not as engaged in classroom-based lessons as in the practical learning sessions and it was evident that there is a wide range of ability levels within each class group. In the case of the Certificate in Agriculture Level 5 course, the challenge faced by teachers in the classroom setting is made greater by the size of the class group and by low levels of student enthusiasm and participation in theory lessons.
- Teachers require upskilling in the use of appropriate strategies for teaching and learning of the theoretical elements of the courses taught. In order to identify the specifics of this CPD requirement, the college should clarify its understanding of its teaching remit and the roles and expectations of both the teaching staff and the students.
- In general, students' achievements and standards across all courses are good. Students in all courses acquire key practical skills and the majority successfully achieve accreditation at the appropriate level. It is noted that, historically, a significant minority of students on the AC Agriculture Level 6 course take a number of years to complete the course requirements and that the college has been taking steps, with Teagasc, to address this. Recent changes to the Farm Diary and Farm Plan requirements may support more timely completion of the course. In the meantime, the college should define deadlines for completion of course assignments so that students can be clearly identified as 'repeat' students and can receive appropriate tuition and support.

- The implementation of the changes arising out of migrating courses to the new common awards system has meant a change in assessment practice in the college. Heretofore, teachers implemented a programme of continuous assessment which quickly identified students in difficulty and facilitated remedial action where required. Currently, while teachers are systematic in their approach to monitoring and assessing students' work at the end of each semester, students are unclear about how well they are doing. Given the larger student numbers on some courses, it is unrealistic to expect that the more established pattern of assessment continue in tandem with new arrangements. However, consideration of more frequent in-house assessments is merited.
- A very effective system of moderation and verification is in place to assure the awards earned by students in Ballyhaise College. However, it is noted with concern that the requirements for achievement of the Certificate in Agriculture Level 5 award do not reflect the full range of learning outcomes required to ensure that graduates are safe and well-informed farm practitioners. Specifically, the lack of a pass requirement for the theory elements of each module should be addressed with FETAC as a priority. Measures to address the lack of student motivation and engagement with theory lessons will have little impact as long as the current situation is maintained.

The quality of care and support for students

- On enrolment, students are provided with an induction programme which covers relevant information, including information on course requirements and assessment procedures. A student handbook includes information on relevant college policies, for example, a code of behaviour, and it provides a very brief outline of the college's expectations of students. It is recommended that this section of the handbook should be developed to encourage more student responsibility for learning. Specifically, students should be required to take notes and records of all learning activities to support their study. It was notable during this evaluation that few students were motivated to do so.
- A mentoring arrangement for students is in place in Ballyhaise but it is under-developed. Consideration should be given to the benefits of establishing a robust mentoring system, together with tutorial groupings. A key emphasis in meetings between students and mentors/tutors should be on setting and reviewing academic targets, to include practical skills development.
- Students are provided with a safe environment in which to learn, with appropriate attention paid to health and safety requirements.
- The college uses annual surveys to gather the views and opinions of students in relation to course organisation and delivery. It was evident that the results of the surveys are taken into account when planning for facilities development, for example. It is recommended that a college student council should be established, to provide students with opportunities to influence relevant college decision-making and to take responsibility for aspects of day-to-day student management tasks.
- There is a need to pay greater attention to the differing needs of students and to the provision of appropriate support for students who need help with literacy and numeracy. CPD should be provided for teachers in helping students meet the literacy and numeracy demands of their courses.
- Guidance for students in selecting a Level 6 course is good. However, it is not clear what use is made of students' achievements in various modules at Level 5 to inform this process.

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

- The college business plan for 2013 is a short pro-forma document provided by Teagasc, which asks college management to identify plans within a narrow set of requirements. Its value to Teagasc as manager of a number of colleges is clear. However, its potential usefulness in guiding the work of the college is not fully exploited. There is scope, for example, to use the business planning process as a collaborative whole-staff exercise to identify a college-specific vision. This should identify unique aspects of provision at Ballyhaise and include specific reference to the current teaching, training and learning challenges. Action plans to address those challenges should be agreed and recorded in the business plan.

- Appropriate self-evaluation processes are in place at whole-college level to monitor the quality of college provision. The link between the outcomes of the current self-evaluation processes and the college business plan are under-developed. Specifically, there is little attention in the current business plan to how the long-term education objectives identified by Teagasc are to be achieved in Ballyhaise. It is noted that significant work is underway in the college in relation to review of the HETAC programme and in curriculum development for the migrated FETAC courses. However, this work is not evident in the business plan.
- Teagasc provides a range of metrics which are used by the college to keep track of its performance and, as noted above, students complete a satisfaction survey at the end of each course. Collaborative business planning, as described above, would supply additional, college-specific, metrics for use in the college self-review process.

Conclusion

- College management is committed to ongoing development. The commitment of the staff to achieving the best for students attending the college, together with the strong collegial relations evident during this evaluation, suggest that the college's capacity to address the recommendations made in this report and to develop further is very good.

Appendix

Response to the report

Submitted by College Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

Teagasc and Ballyhaise college management note the content of the Draft WCE Report (Teagasc WCE Pilot Project). The draft report profiles the strengths of the college, its management and its staff. The report affirms the very good quality of teaching and instruction in practical learning sessions.

The report indicates however that a range of factors may be influencing or impeding learning in the classroom. Also that there is a need for greater guidance to learners on their responsibilities as learners. This is a valuable insight for both Teagasc management, Ballyhaise staff and indeed all colleges and warrants further internal discussion and follow up.

Teagasc and the college management accept the points made in regard to the College Child Protection Policy, the Student Council and for a more college centred approach to business planning.

Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

1. Teagasc Ballyhaise Agricultural College will implement the draft Teagasc Child Protection Policy circulated in autumn 2012 as a priority. Teagasc will arrange a briefing for college staff on child protection statutory and best practice requirements prior to the next learner intake.
2. Initial provision has been made in the Teagasc 2013 staff training and development scheme for college staff upskilling in regard to helping learners meet literacy numeracy demands of their course. This will commence a longer term strategy of CPD and networking on teaching strategies and approaches for college staff.
3. Teagasc has flagged issues in regard to the Level 5 Cert. in Agriculture written assessment requirements with QQI (FETAC) and the issue will be discussed at upcoming College Principals' meetings.
4. Teagasc will review its learner handbook to address WCE issues raised in regard to learners taking ownership of their study responsibilities.
5. The college will establish student liaison committees and a more formal mentoring system as per existing Teagasc QA guidelines for the coming academic year.
6. Teagasc will facilitate the college to adopt a more Ballyhaise centred approach in developing future college business plans.