

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Whole College Evaluation

REPORT

Kildalton College
Piltown,
Co Kilkenny

Date of inspection: 13 October 2014



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 Kildalton College, in October 2014, as part of this 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 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.

Kildalton College is the largest of the seven Teagasc colleges in the country providing courses in Agriculture, Horticulture and Equine Studies. These courses are provided from an entry point at QQI level five certificate courses with progression in a range of courses to level seven and eight higher degree courses provided primarily in conjunction with Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) and also with University College Dublin (UCD). Some 875 students are engaged in education courses on the Kildalton Campus. Of these, currently 324 students are enrolled in Teagasc agricultural and equine courses, 44 students are enrolled in Teagasc horticulture courses while 507 are enrolled in WIT-linked courses studying agriculture, horticulture and forestry. A residential unit for eighty first-year students is also provided on the campus. A staff of forty-three, including teachers, technicians, administration, catering and farm staff, support these students in their study and other engagements in Kildalton College.

The college is set in the extensive parkland and farmland of the former Bessborough House that was originally completed in 1775. It was reconstructed in 1929 and following a period as a seminary run by the Oblate Fathers, it became Kildalton Agriculture and Horticulture College in 1971. The college has expanded significantly since its establishment in the context of courses provided, facilities, staff and student numbers, and following the development of Equine Studies, is now known as Kildalton College.

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

- The quality of management and leadership in the college.
- The quality of teaching, training and learning, including the quality of care and support for students.
- 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:

- Very effective leadership and management is clearly evident within the senior management team.
- Effective communication, administration and management structures support leadership in the college.
- An engaged and committed teaching, training, administrative and support staff share a pride in their work in Kildalton College.
- A high quality learning environment that facilitates high-quality teaching, training and learning has been developed.
- The quality of teaching, learning and training observed was of very good quality overall.
- Effective assessment structures are in place and are in line with course requirements.

- Effective supports for students' training and learning are provided through the creation of external linkages and placements.
- Support for students' care and well-being is clearly evident within the professional interactions and the positive atmosphere created within learning settings and through mentoring and other supports.
- Student responses to course specific questionnaires and in WCE focus groups were very positive relating to their educational experiences in Kildalton College.

The main areas for improvement include:

- Collaborative, college-wide, education planning arising from college self-evaluation.
- The ongoing development of pedagogy through discussion, action research and the sharing of current very good practice in a range of learning settings.
- The completion of the implementation of the *Teagasc Young Learners and Vulnerable Adults Protection Policy* and the communication of the care and support implicit within this policy to students enrolled in the college who are under the age of eighteen, and to their parents.

The main recommendations in this report:

- A strategic, focused, college-specific, education plan arising from robust and inclusive college self-evaluation should be developed to guide the short and medium-term development of the college.
- Conversations and discussions at whole-staff level, leading to action research on college-specific teaching, training and learning issues, should be initiated to further develop current very good practice in the range of learning settings observed.
- The full implementation and embedding of policy and practice relating to safe-guarding as set out in the *Teagasc Young Learners and Vulnerable Adults Protection Policy*, should be completed. In particular, the college should communicate the care and support implicit in the policy to students who are under the age of eighteen, and to their parents, and should conduct a risk assessment relating to residential accommodation for students on campus.

1. The quality of management and leadership

- Very effective leadership and management are clearly evident within the senior management team that meets formally on a weekly basis. The team comprises the college principal, the deputy principal with responsibility for agriculture courses, the deputy principal with responsibility for horticulture courses, the head of college administration and the house manager. These so-called 'diary meetings' are central to the organisation, leadership, management and communication of ongoing college initiatives.
- Relevant information and issues arising from the diary meetings are disseminated to staff members by email and through weekly staff meetings in the agriculture and equine section and in the horticulture section. These regular section meetings primarily address activities and events concerning students, course activities and assessments.
- The senior management team, led by the college principal, has overseen significant changes and developments in the college within the past fifteen years. The developments that demonstrate very effective leadership include: the engagement of very good quality teaching and training personnel; the very significant expansion in curriculum provision and the consequent growth in student numbers; the creation of a very high quality learning environment including an education centre providing a range of teaching settings, and the development of the farm, equine and horticulture facilities as high quality practical learning environments.
- The development of a policy framework in the area of student support is a further element of the ongoing improvement in the college that has been led at senior management level. Policies relating to critical incidents, anti-bullying, substance abuse, and the protection of young and vulnerable adults have been developed. The learning support structures that are provided for students are effectively organised within a limited resource provision. An extensive mentoring programme for students and more focused attention to the monitoring of students on placement and in host farms have also been developed.
- Staff members, through their engagement with the evaluation team and through their responses to an on-line questionnaire, provided as an element of this evaluation, demonstrate a clear and open commitment to the development of the college. They share and communicate a palpable pride in both their work with students and within their specific roles and areas of responsibilities. They also articulate a clear openness towards developing and improving aspects of the work of the college.
- The continuous professional development (CPD) needs of staff are provided for based on individual requests for upskilling and in line with curricular, industry and technological changes. Currently, a small number of staff members are engaged in CPD focused on pedagogy. The outcomes of these experiences should be shared with the full teaching and training staff.
- A post-of-responsibility middle-management structure is in place with allocated duties attached to each post. Staff members have also undertaken a range of other responsibilities outside of this structure in response to recent limitations in recruitment, recent retirements, and the parallel expansion of courses and student numbers. New contract and subcontracted staff have been integrated onto the teaching team and into the culture of the college through the work of the senior management team and through the work of existing staff members.
- Staff members have developed their capacity within an expanding range of subject specialisms, and their subject-specific skills, through their engagement with WIT-based courses and staff, through their work with course boards, and through their work with the Teagasc Curriculum Development Unit in the development and updating of course content and materials. They have also effectively engaged with the development, expansion, monitoring and evaluation of external links with enterprise, industry and research. The development and monitoring of the quality of host farm placements for students has been a further engagement by staff that has had a significant positive impact of students learning in practical settings. These engagements have ensured the sustainable development of the college through the challenging period of recent years.
- Management meetings, section staff meetings in Agriculture and Equine, and in Horticulture, are used to inform and advance planning within the college. The annual

Kildalton College Business Plan is the overarching instrument required by Teagasc that informs the direction and development of the college. This business plan template requires colleges to describe long-term education objectives, performance and output indicators.

- The 2014 L3 Kildalton College Business Plan is based on this template. It identifies clear long-term pedagogically-focused strategy objectives including the use of '*innovative teaching styles and methods based on best practice*', and developing '*the capacity of the student to engage in their own development*'. It also identifies specifically the expansion of '*access and student literacy support programmes*'. However, there are no specific time-bound action plans in place to develop and deliver on these strategies. A strategic, focused, college-specific, education plan should now be developed, arising from this business planning process, to guide the short and medium-term development of the college but should focus, in the first instance, on pedagogy and on the learning experience of the student in different settings.
- To harness the clear commitment of staff towards the sustained development of the college as a high-quality centre for education, a robust structure for college self-evaluation should be developed that would inform the aforementioned education plan for the college. To achieve this, a culture of whole-college self-evaluation should be embedded, that could, overtime, identify and action college or course-specific issues focused on improving the students' learning experience.
- Teaching, training and learning should be placed on the agenda for all senior management and section staff meetings. However, it is within the arena of whole-college staff meetings or staff development events that generic issues relating to students' learning experiences should be considered and set within college self-evaluation and reflective practice. Conversations and discussions at whole-staff level leading to action research on college-specific teaching, training and learning issues should be initiated to advance and further develop current very good practice.
- Attention to a number of other structural issues within the management and leadership of the college should also be addressed to further develop current practice. A review of the apparent imbalances in roles and responsibilities in the organisation and management of the Agriculture, Equine and Horticulture areas should be undertaken, with due cognisance to available resources. Similarly, and also within available resources, a review of the weighting and spread of responsibilities in the post-of-responsibility structure should be undertaken. The creation of a meaningful and representative student consultative body, as one element of student voice, should also be considered in the context of inclusive self-evaluation and education planning.

2. The quality of teaching, training and learning

- The quality of teaching, training and learning observed in a range of learning settings in the course of this evaluation was of a very good quality overall. Lessons both in large and smaller classroom and lecture hall settings, and in practical settings on the farm, the equine centre and in horticulture were well planned and appropriately prepared by individual teachers. An analysis of students' on-line course evaluation responses, and the outcomes of focus-group discussions organised as an element of this evaluation, support this overall evaluative statement as students are very positive about their learning and training experiences in Kildalton College.
- Effective planning and preparation for individual lessons facilitated the provision of up-to-date specialist learning experiences for students in both theoretical and practical sessions. Lessons were framed within the specific programme plans and parameters leading to lesson content that was up-to-date, challenging and relevant to both students' current learning needs and experiences, and those likely to be experienced within the relevant industry or employment setting. Relevant course notes, copies of presentations, access to further sources of study and links to video clips can be accessed by students through a shared drive on the college intranet.
- Very effective practice was characterised by lessons that had a coherence of structure that arose from and linked with students' previous learning within the course. These lessons also clearly linked the theoretical and practical elements as experienced by the

students in different learning settings. Lessons were also supported by appropriate visual stimuli including key summary learning points using PowerPoint and very effective video-clips.

- Lessons that provided students with a variety and range of learning activities and experience and that contained a clear balance between direct inputs from the teacher and strategies to facilitate engagement and participation by the students were observed to be very effective. Individual presentations and peer assessment by students in some lessons was observed to be particularly effective in allowing students to both demonstrate and assess their own learning.
- Practical learning settings were observed to be appropriately organised. These were engaging for students and were effectively linked to and arose from the course curriculum. Practical and small group sessions particularly facilitated student engagement and participation, and created an environment for inclusive questioning and discussion. This effective practice, observed in small classroom and practical sessions, highlighted the challenge to replicate this learning experience for students in larger classroom settings.
- Where recommendations were made following individual lesson observation they focused on: teaching, training and learning strategies to engage students in different learning settings; questioning strategies referencing the ordering, targeting and purpose of questions posed to students in lessons; the use of co-operative learning strategies and visual stimuli in different learning settings, and the potential to improve coherence in some lessons through sharing the learning intention and reviewing students' learning through the discussion of the learning outcomes achieved.
- Student assessments are positioned within course plans and are completed within course requirements. Outcomes are recorded on the college's educational management system (EMS) and students receive feedback on their achievements. These processes are in line with course requirements. Metrics generated by college management illustrate significantly strong patterns of student completion and achievement in Teagasc courses.
- Mentoring time, normally provided on two occasions within an academic year, is used mainly to review progress and achievements based on these assessments. Apart from summative assessments of learning within courses, the facility to provide formative assessment for learning to identify areas for attention and improvement for students is limited. Similarly, students in some courses were unclear about the nature and timing of summative assessments and of the receipt of feedback following their completion of particular assessments. Notwithstanding the logistical issues relating to very large course groups, strategies to provide ongoing formative assessment and feedback for students, to inform learning, progress and areas for improvement, should be progressed.
- The development of formative assessment strategies within the range of class sizes and in the variety of courses, and the challenge to engage and ensure effective participation of students within large classroom settings could be considered as agenda items within the recommended focus on discussion, sharing of practices and action research on teaching, training and learning. Specific CPD needs may emerge from engagement with this process at whole-staff level.

The quality of care and support for students

- Support for students' learning, and care for their well-being, are clearly evident within the professional interactions and the positive atmosphere created by college staff in learning settings and through the developing mentoring and access programmes. Provision for students with additional educational needs has been recently developed and has been advanced both within the college and in conjunction with practice in WIT. A member of staff, acting as Access Officer, currently manages this developing provision.
- Beyond the support provided by individual teachers to students in classrooms, extra supports are focused on individual students who have their specific learning issues identified by a relevant expert/consultant. A report from an educational psychologist is currently required from these students to enable them to access available supports within a very limited resource allocation. Beyond the provision of reasonable accommodations in

examinations, other ongoing supports currently focus on the provision of extra tuition for identified students.

- Enrolment and selection of students to courses within the college, whether provided by Teagasc or in association with WIT or UCD, follow established procedures as outlined in the college prospectus. Applicants for admission to the Teagasc Certificate in Agriculture level five course are required to sit an examination set by Teagasc Curriculum Development Unit. This examination is used in all Teagasc colleges that provide this course. Currently in Kildalton College, where this course is oversubscribed, students' examination results are used to determine offers of places. The potential of the information which this examination can provide to support identification of students who may require additional supports is underdeveloped. Given the commitment within Kildalton College to support students' learning, it is recommended that the potential use of the outcomes of this examination to identify and support students in both accessing and succeeding in this course should be further explored.
- To build on the very positive developments in the area of support for students' access and learning, provision for students who may require general learning support should be considered. The capacity and structures to provide in-house guidance and counselling for students who may present with emotional and behavioural issues should also be developed. The existing student-mentoring structure should be reviewed and developed from its current focus on achievement and progress towards Guidance, care and well-being within this context. These potential developments will require ongoing CPD and attention to the formalisation of roles and procedures relating to recording, reporting, referrals and confidentiality for the staff involved.
- A college-specific website with an all-embracing 'student zone' should be considered as the access point for the myriad of college-related student issues including course information, college policies, day-to-day activities, student supports, assessment information, and educational or progression related guidance.
- The overall implementation and embedding of policy and practice relating to safeguarding as set out in the *Teagasc Young Learners and Vulnerable Adults Protection Policy*, should be completed. In this context, a comprehensive risk assessment focused on the campus residential accommodation provision should be undertaken. This should supplement and support the implementation of this policy and related practice, particularly in relation to the provision of on-campus accommodation for students of the college who are under the age of eighteen years. The communication of this policy, and the student care and support that is implicit within it, to these students, and to their parents, also needs to be addressed.

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

- Self-evaluation and reflective practice is evident within individual planning and reflection on teaching, learning and training by teaching and training staff in the normal and routine interactions with students and colleagues. It also finds expression at section-level, in student mentoring, and at course-board level in reviewing courses, levels of student achievement and progression. These processes also inform senior management team discussion and planning, the business planning process, and the creation of individual role profiles and performance evaluation within the Performance Management Development System (PMDS).
- These elements have yet to be formalised and embedded to form a college-wide self-evaluation process that reflects on and evaluates current processes and established practices leading to time bound action-planning, target setting and review. There is a clear commitment and capacity within the staff to engage with teaching, training and learning challenges and a positive openness towards feedback from external evaluators was particularly evident. Vision and leadership is now required to translate this commitment and capacity within the staff into a robust and focused self-evaluation process to inform strategic college education planning that should focus initially on the students' experience of teaching, training and learning.

Conclusion

- The very positive findings of this report point to very good quality leadership and management, very good teaching, learning and training, and a clear concern to support students within a very good quality learning environment. The college staff, as a community of practice, demonstrate professional capacity and an openness and willingness to engage in strategies focused on continued improvement. The college community is encouraged to view the key recommendations of this reports from beyond their section specialisms of Agriculture, Horticulture, Forestry and Equine Studies, and to focus on developing an overarching shared vision, arising from college self-evaluation, that will find expression in an education plan that is grounded in teaching, training and learning as transacted and co-constructed with students in the range of learning settings provided by Kildalton College.

COLLEGE RESPONSE

The college, with its staff, will review and set out defined agreed self-evaluation measures and processes in 2015 and prepare a college education plan which will align with and feed into the 2016 Kildalton College Business Plan which is submitted to Teagasc management.

Discussions on teaching and learning best practice/methodologies will be given more formal prominence at college staff meetings commencing in 2015 to further build on the college's strength in this area. Provision will also be made for more effective cross team sharing of teaching and learning knowledge and best practice.

Teagasc will arrange in the first quarter of 2015 for a young learners' risk assessment to be carried out in respect of the care/support requirements for such learners. The college will subsequently update its existing Young Learner's Policy and will continue to update all staff on requirements.

Teagasc will review its current student consultative procedures prior to the 2015/16 academic year to ensure that learners are adequately represented in college education planning and self-evaluation processes.

In 2015, Teagasc will continue its programme of updating its education staff on best teaching and learning practice and on the effective use of assessment for learning strategies.

Teagasc will also continue to update its college access officers and other staff on support requirements and teaching strategies for learners with learning difficulties/special needs. The WCE reports observations on how existing Teagasc entrance exams may facilitate identification of additional learner supports are noted.