



Earning while learning

Four new land-based apprenticeship programmes delivered by Teagasc, are enabling a wide range of people to develop new skills and careers. And employers and industry are gaining access to a new pool of knowledgeable, skilled, and highly motivated staff, writes **Mark Moore**

I was nervous. I thought that on day one I'd be surrounded by teenagers and stand out like a sore thumb," says Cormac Strain (38) who, with a successful career in retail behind him, chose to start a horticulture apprenticeship in 2023.

"It turned out that we have a wide range of ages on the course. Another misconception I had was that apprentices must survive on a modest 'stipend'. We all receive a proper



Marcella Phelan, left, with the first Farm Management Apprenticeship class as well as Tim Ashmore Principle Teagasc Kildalton College, fourth from right, and course co-ordinator EmmaLouise Coffey, right, see also P10. \ Picture Eamon Kealy, other pictures Mark Moore

wage and one of the group drives an electric vehicle!"

According to Marcella Phelan, National Apprenticeships Programme Specialist, Teagasc completed the lengthy process of designing and accrediting four land-based apprenticeship programmes in 2023. These are the first of their type in the country:

- Sportsturf Technician (Higher

Certificate Level 6)

- Horticulture (Higher Certificate Level 6);
- Farm Technician (Higher Certificate Level 6);
- Farm Manager (Ordinary Degree Level 7);

Apprentices engage in on-the-job training with a SOLAS Approved Employer during the two-year ap-



Skills training is a key when apprentices meet up at Teagasc education centres. Paddy Smyth (foreground, left) and horticulture apprentices at a machinery session.

prenticeship programmes. (SOLAS is a government agency which manages a range of Further Education and Training programmes including Apprenticeships)

“For these higher education apprenticeship programmes there are Consortium Groups who have oversight of the occupational profile (which sets out attributes of the apprentice for the relevant apprenticeship) and the criteria for the employer/business and workplace mentor to train the apprentice,” adds Marcella.

“An apprenticeship is a full-time job with additional learning relevant to the occupation that the person wants to work in. The apprentice is paid for the duration of the programme (both on-the-job training and off-the-job periods). The apprenticeship gives the person hands-on experience, a salary, and the opportunity to gain qualifications while they work.”

While the apprenticeships only began in late 2023, those participating are already delivering feedback. We gathered feedback from one apprentice from each course.

HORTICULTURE APPRENTICESHIP: CORMAC STRAIN

A native of Dublin, Cormac Strain completed a degree in retail and service management following by a career in retail which included at one point running ‘the busiest bicycle shop in Ireland’ where he was in charge of a team assembling over 100 bikes each day.

Just before Covid, Cormac and his wife moved to Sligo where he sought work and eventually was offered a six-month work placement at Hazelwood House near the city, as an assistant to Mick Horkan the head gardener. The estate is home to a major distillery and extensive grounds.

“After the initial six month period I was glad to be offered a job. Though they were new to me I enjoyed the variety of tasks be it weeding, cutting grass, pest and disease control and other gardening jobs. I was learning

a huge amount from Mick who is a charismatic individual and a highly skilled gardener.

“I was delighted when he suggested I should consider the Horticulture (Higher Certificate Level 6) apprenticeship. I was concerned that I might be too old to be an apprentice but discovered there was a wide age range among the ten apprentices on the course: One is aged 17 and another apprentice has a 17 year-old daughter!”

Cormac says he has nothing but praise for the facilities at Teagasc Ashtown and the Teagasc College at the National Botanic Gardens. “The course goes into greater depth than I anticipated and is very enjoyable.

There is a lot of very practical skills learning and the lectures are extremely well put together.

The lecturers are clearly passionate about what they do.

“For me the huge benefit is that I am getting paid while doing the course. I couldn’t do it otherwise and I am convinced that the knowledge and skills I am accumulating as well as the networking will generate new opportunities for me in the future.”



Cormac Strain



Dan Murphy with Pat Lyne at Portarlington golf club.

TURF MANAGEMENT APPRENTICESHIP DAN MURPHY

A talented golfer Dan Murphy (31) played full time from 18-20 winning national competitions and representing Ireland. Subsequent to his golfing days Dan took a job at his club Portarlington, initially in the golf shop and ultimately as a groundskeeper.

"I always loved garden maintenance and working in the outdoors," says Dan who has completed a range of courses related to the job over the years. "The head greenkeeper here is Paul Sheeran. He got the course registered with SOLAS so that they could act as a host employer on the apprenticeship programme. Dan was the very first Teagasc apprentice and started in November 2023.

"I love the work and feel the

qualification will broaden my career prospects. Eventually I hope to be a head greenkeeper. It's great to be able to keep your job while doing the qualification.

"A good few of the 23 lads on the course are older...some in their 50s... and it's great to bounce ideas off each other. We look at football courses, race tracks etc as well as golf courses. I go to Teagasc

Kildalton for blocks of two-weeks of training, there are three blocks in the year plus there is online training every Wednesday.

"The course is very interesting and goes into great detail. We each do an apprenticeship project which is based around an idea to help our place of work. Portarlington is a 120 year golf

course and the bunkers have never been substantially renovated or re-worked. I will propose this idea to the course committee and hope they will run with it.

"Eamon Kealy who leads the course



“

A good few of the lads on the course are older...some are in their 50s...and it's great to bounce ideas off each other.

is very helpful and this is the first time such a course has been available in Ireland. There is something similar available in Scotland but you would not be earning while doing that course."

FARM TECHNICIAN APPRENTICESHIP: JAMES RYAN

James completed his Leaving Cert in 2020 and, after some time in the building industry, decided he preferred farm work: "I began working with Paidi Kelly who is leasing and farming a number of dairy farms around Charleville in Cork with his wife Aimee in partnership with James Murphy and his partner Sarah Meaney."

Once James had proven himself, Paidi Kelly suggested he might be interested in joining the Level 6 Farm Technician Apprenticeship.

"The benefit to us is that James will be with us for at least two years," says Paidi Kelly. "Though he could leave during that time." The partners have been vetted by Teagasc and hence are SOLAS qualified.

"I spend 80% of the time on-farm and 20% in class," says James. "Three days each month are at Teagasc Clonakilty plus one Friday per month doing classes on-line (Zoom). There are assignments with continuous assessment and two written exams per year." Employers receive a grant from SOLAS which helps cover the absences.

On James' course are five others from dairy farms, four from pig farms and one from a tillage unit. He will submit a project plan for the farm he is working on. "The apprenticeship gives me more access to learn first hand from the employers than if I was a farm worker," says James. "That's really valuable."

"Sitting down together with the apprentice requires commitment, but

Employer Paidi Kelly (left) says he finds the process of mentoring apprentices like James Ryan to be very enjoyable.



this is a very enjoyable process," says Paidi Kelly.

"Even if someone is going back home after an apprenticeship, they will have had two full years working on another farm, which will stand them in good stead."

"By January 2026 I will have finished this Level 6 apprenticeship and I will be qualified to start a second two-year apprenticeship as a farm manager," says James. "I'd like to do that, though I may take a break to do overseas travel in between!"



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If you want to become an apprentice or join the scheme as an employer please go to:
www.teagasc.ie/education/apprenticeships or contact Marcella Phelan at email Marcella.phelan@teagasc.ie



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FARM MANAGER APPRENTICESHIP:

LISA CLARK

"I found out about the course online. I was searching for Agri courses that would be close to home, learning farming through hands on, practical experience, and also financially feasible," says Lisa. "The Farm Management Apprenticeship covered all three as I could choose the farm myself; it is 80% working on the farm and 20% class based; and I get paid while learning new skills.

"I was looking for work on a dairy farm where there was an opportunity to grow my skillset and further educate myself rather than just be a relief milker. My employers Peter and Jenny Young have an excellent track record of working with and training Ag students and providing young people with the chance to grow their skillset. It felt like a good fit.

"When considering the position on this farm, Peter advised me that there was the opportunity to complete the apprenticeship through his farm. Prior to committing to the apprenticeship programme, I worked on the farm to get used to working with the farmer, the farm team and the farm system.

"I had previously completed a three year degree in vet nursing. The course consisted of a lot of theory and a summer placement. While it was an excellent course, I felt I could not properly put the theory that I had learned from Sept through to May into practice until placement during the summer.

"What I love with the apprenticeship is that you are your learning on the job all year round, while spending a few days in education each month in Teagasc Kildalton College and Teagasc Moorepark and where I am learning from leading researchers, specialists and industry experts as well as my class mates.

"I feel the farm manager apprenticeship teaches you how to work on a farm and raise livestock to the best of your ability but also to step out of your comfort zone by taking on more responsibility. It also teaches you to build a viable farm business by taking on board the legal, financial and economical commitments needed to run a successful dairy farm.

"For me it's a huge advantage that many of the other apprentices are from farming backgrounds and extremely knowledgeable in dairying. At first I was nervous about this as I felt I was on the back foot but after settling in to the induction and classes I found everyone to be friendly and approachable. Both I and my fellow apprentices find that the tips and tricks we pick up from each other's farms are very valuable."

In conclusion:

The success of the new Teagasc Apprenticeship Programmes is clearly enhanced by the possibility to earn while learning. The quality of the facilities and the educators in Teagasc are also key. The third vital component is the relationship between the apprentice and the employer.

So it is interesting that within these new programmes the apprentice chooses the employer (as well as vice versa) rather than being assigned to one. Careful vetting of potential employers by Teagasc/SOLAS means apprentices should have a rich learning experience over their two-year apprenticeship.



Lisa Clarke with her
employer, Peter Young