

Going the distance

Teagasc offers a Green Cert course in agriculture through distance learning to those who can't attend a college full-time. **James O'Donoghue**, Teagasc dairy advisor, Co Monaghan, surveyed graduates about their experience

The Teagasc Advanced Certificate in Agriculture Level 6 course (non-agricultural award holders) was designed to provide more comprehensive training than the 180-hour course it replaced. The course was developed in 2007 to meet the training requirements of full- and part-time farmers who have a Level 6 or higher qualification in any subject other than agriculture.

The course provides an opportunity to become a young trained farmer for those who wish to develop a farming career. Delivery of the course is through blended learning, which includes classroom tuition, discussion group meetings, skills practicals and assignments.

These courses are run largely by local Teagasc education officers with support from advisory colleagues in the areas of e-tutoring and discussion group facilitation. The e-tutors are typically Teagasc college teachers, education officers and advisers who have been trained in the use of this system.

Main findings

The major incentive attracting graduates of agricultural courses over the last number of years has been access to stamp duty exemption and stock relief. A key reason for selecting this particular online version of the ACA Level 6 was that students could hold a full time job while completing the course. Ninety percent of students on the course had an off-farm job.

The course consists of a blended learning approach and includes skills practicals, classroom teaching, discussion groups and the online Moodle

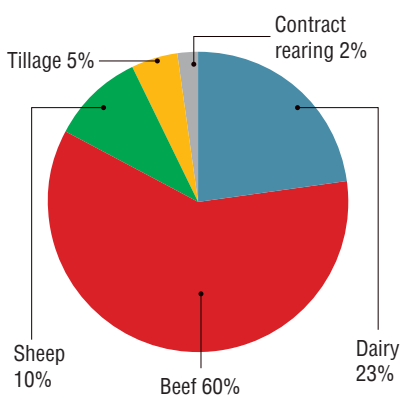
Table 1: Graduate response

	% of sample	No of respondents
GENDER		
Male	89%	193
Female	11%	24
AGE		
Mean age	28 years	217
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT		
Level 6	26%	55
Level 7/8	57%	119
Level 9/10	16%	34
WHEN DO YOU PLAN TO START FARMING?		
Have already	30%	56
Within 1-3 years	35%	65
Within 3-5 years	15%	27
Within 5-7 years	10%	18
7 or more years	10%	18
Total	100%	184*

Table 2: Farm size and status of graduates

	% of sample	No of respondents	National Average
FARM SIZE (HA)			
0-20	23%	51	27%
21-50	40%	87	49%
51-100	24%	51	19%
100+	13%	29	5%
Average	46.3Ha		32.7Ha
STATUS			
Part-time	84%	161	71%
Full-time	16%	9	29%
Total	100%	170*	

Figure 1: Farm enterprises



platform. The study found that some 99% of students were satisfied that the practicals were delivered in a safe manner and the group size was appropriate. Grassland management was identified as the most important skill that they developed to bring back to their home farms by 35% of graduates.

Satisfaction levels with the internet-based Moodle platform was high.

Conclusions

- Motivation to enrol is driven by eligibility to qualify for schemes and incentives
- Graduates said they are satisfied that 'blended learning' teaching delivery is appropriate to agricultural education
- Students from different educational backgrounds reported broadly similar experiences of the course.
- Graduates behavioural and 'practice change' in relation to their home farms was positive after completing the course.

However, the students expressed greater satisfaction with other delivery methods such as discussion groups, skills practicals and classroom learning. However, results from the graduate survey illustrated that 61% of graduates were satisfied that the course content was easily found and viewed online. This is also backed up by 62% of graduates feeling satisfied that course assignments

I completed the Teagasc distance learning course in Navan/Grange from September 2013 to September 2014. What I found most useful about the course was being able to visit many successful dairy farms at various times of the year to see how different systems were working for them. There were also practical learning days for skills such as grass measuring and body condition scoring. The course suited me as I work full time as a furniture designer. I am still in the same job and I a new entrant to dairying since February 2015.

Fergal Rudden, Co Cavan
Furniture designer



Distance education includes some classroom sessions and in-field practicals, as well as web-based learning. It is ideally suited to those who wish to earn a Green Cert while holding a full-time job.

were easily downloaded from the site.

Over 83% of graduates were satisfied that discussion group visits allowed a great opportunity to benchmark their home farm to the Teagasc benchmark farms.

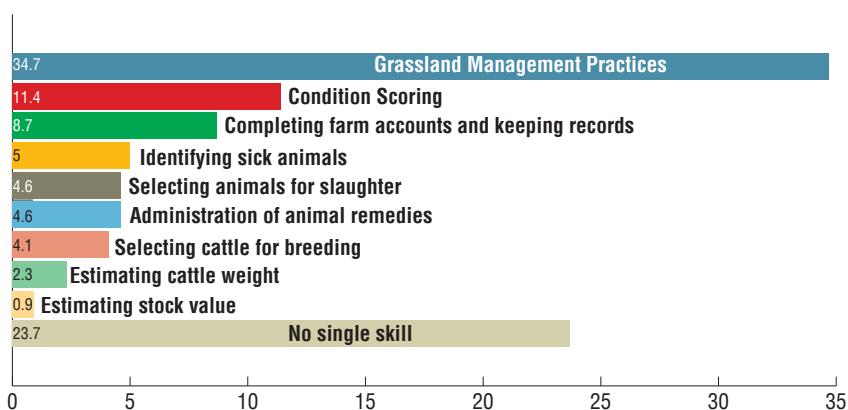
The study found that 69% of graduates agreed that their ability to solve problems on their farm had increased due to knowledge gained on the course. A change in attitude among students was found, as 83% of graduates agreed that they are now more conscious about health and safety on the home farm.

The results from management practices in the study found 61% of graduates continue to use the ICBF database, which aids farm management practices and transfers knowledge to graduates about their herd performance.

Setting targets

This study found that 39% of graduates are now more likely to set targets for their home farm. Results suggested that 31% of graduates are

Figure 2: Most important skill developed to use on home farm



now much more involved with their Teagasc agricultural adviser.

Across all enterprises, the study found that 41% of graduates wished to increase the stocking rate on the farm over the next five years.

Almost 60% of graduates from dairy farms planned to increase milk production on the farm within the

next five years. However, this may be more accredited to the removal of milk quotas.

- To find out more about this course, please contact your local Teagasc college or education centre, or visit www.teagasc.ie/training/courses/dist_ed_green_cert.asp