

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna  
Department of Education and Skills**

## **Whole College Evaluation**

### **REPORT**

**College of Amenity Horticulture  
National Botanic Gardens,  
Glasnevin, Dublin 9**

**Date of inspection: 6 February 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 The College of Amenity Horticulture, National Botanic Gardens, in February 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 they chose to accept the report without response.

The College of Amenity Horticulture is one of two Teagasc-run colleges that provide courses in horticulture. The college is operated on a dual-campus basis with additional teaching and training resources provided at Teagasc's Kinsealy Research Centre. The college provides courses in Horticulture to FETAC level 5 and level 6, Floristry to FETAC level 5 and in partnership with Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) and Dublin City University (DCU) progression routes for students wishing to study Horticulture to Ordinary Bachelor Degree and Honours Bachelor Degree level. There are currently nineteen members of staff deployed between the two college facilities. The college's mission is to provide high quality education and training in horticultural science and practice, that reflects the needs of the horticultural industry.

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 management and leadership of the college's facilities and infrastructure is effective
- Links between the college and Teagasc are very good
- Continuing professional development (CPD) is valued and embraced by college management and staff
- Students have access to a wide range of appropriate resources and facilities at various locations in the greater Dublin area
- Teachers and technicians demonstrate a high level of commitment to the effective delivery of the courses provided and to the students in the college
- The quality of teaching observed ranged from good to very good
- Students' terminal assessments scores are recorded and managed effectively but students' access to on-going formative assessment information is limited
- A very effective Practical Learning Period (PLP) programme is provided for students to help prepare and equip them with essential practical skills
- Overall student achievement and progression rates are very good

The main areas for improvement include:

- The college's approach to strategic planning and self-evaluation
- The use of assessment as an integral component of the teaching, training and learning experience of students
- The structures and systems for student support and educational guidance

### **The main recommendations in this report**

- College management should initiate the development of a more robust and collaborative strategic planning process that is specific, measureable, achievable, realistic and time-bound (SMART)
- Formative assessment practices should be incorporated into all students' experiences of teaching, training and learning
- A more formal approach to student educational support and educational guidance should be implemented throughout the college

### **1. The quality of management and leadership**

- The College of Amenity Horticulture, led by the principal, is effectively managed in the areas of curriculum, student management, resources and facilities. The latter is a considerable challenge due to the college's location on two separate campuses, the planned transition from Kinsealy to a newly developed facility at Ashtown, and an on-going building project in the National Botanic Gardens. To support these developments, college management should explore the possibility of providing a management presence at the Ashtown facility particularly during the transitional and initial stages of the transfer.
- Good levels of responsibility and leadership are devolved to staff in some areas of college management. This is evident in the areas of developing and embedding the college's virtual learning environment, student attendance tracking and monitoring and the organisation of the Practical Learning Placement (PLP) programme for students. To further strengthen the in-college management structures, consideration should be given to identifying course leaders for the FETAC level 5 and level 6 horticulture courses.
- Links between the college and Teagasc are very good. Regular meetings of all college principals are convened by the Teagasc Curriculum and Development Unit (CDU). These meetings facilitate dialogue between principals and Teagasc management. The college's business plan is submitted on annual basis and quarterly reviews take place to ascertain the levels of progress achieved.
- A significant number of college priorities have been identified including: maximising human resources, managing student intake at FETAC level 5 and developing links with FETAC level 4 and 5 providers in the greater Dublin area. There is however scope for development in the area of managing and monitoring the implementation of identified strategies at college level. Teagasc's Statement of Strategy 2012-2015 also identifies a number of long-term educational objectives. The college's business plan should identify clearly the alignment between these objectives and the college's own strategic development plan. The coherence this would provide would support the identification of college-level strategies to achieve both.
- Effective communication systems enable discussion and dialogue between management, staff, students and other stakeholders. These systems include a college intranet, recently introduced quality assurance meetings with teachers and technicians, a text messaging system, a social network presence and regularly convened staff meetings. To strengthen the student voice in the college consideration should be given to student representation at course planning meetings and a student representative council.
- Currently students apply directly to the college for the FETAC level 5 and 6 courses and all applicants, with very few exceptions, are successful in achieving a place. College management have identified the need to review the admissions process for level 5 courses so that the aptitudes and abilities of applicants are considered more carefully. A key intention of a proposal to limit the number of level 5 course places available is to improve successful completion rates for these courses. To support this objective the college should identify clear admissions criteria including minimum entry qualifications. The admissions criteria should be fully inclusive and identify the route through which students with special educational needs can access these courses. Consideration should also be given to recognising the prior experience of mature students.
- A clear code of behaviour has been developed to inform students of the expectations set by the college. The message expressed in this code should be more closely aligned to

the Teagasc charter of student rights and responsibilities and framed within the standards expected at industry level.

- Teachers and technicians are well qualified and highly experienced. They demonstrate a high level of commitment to the effective delivery of the courses provided and to the students enrolled in the courses that they help to deliver.
- Continuing professional development (CPD) is valued by management and staff as an integral component to the college's professional capacity. Staff are actively engaged in professional development on an individual and collective basis. This is facilitated through the college's PMDS system, on-going support from the CDU, whole-college CPD in the area of educational support and through informal peer-supported CPD initiatives. This is a key strength of the college.
- The potential of the links with WIT and DCU should be better developed to diversify the CPD opportunities at the disposal of the College of Amenity Horticulture and support the development of professional teaching capacity. This approach would help the college to more effectively share the skills, capacities and competencies of the combined teams.
- The College of Amenity Horticulture has access to a wide range of appropriate facilities and resources. These facilities are accessible to students in the National Botanic Gardens, Kinsealy Research Centre and through the various links with Dublin City Park and Garden Services and the Office of Public Works (OPW). This combination of facilities provides students with a wide range of appropriate learning experiences. However, the fact that these facilities are spread throughout the greater Dublin area also presents challenges for students, particularly in relation to access to information and communication technology (ICT), recreational areas and library resources. Potential solutions should be explored with the recommended student representative council, to reduce the challenges that students face and to improve their overall experience.
- A wide range of appropriate links and partnerships has been made to support the college in its primary role of horticultural education. These links include the Joint Kildalton/Botanic Horticultural Education Consultant Group, University College Dublin (UCD) and the Golfing Union of Ireland. Work is on-going to refine and expand the host horticulturalists database and plans to utilise Teagasc links to develop stronger partnerships with large-scale industry groups should be progressed within the recommended strategic planning framework.

## **2. The quality of teaching, training and learning**

- Clear and coherent planning informs and guides the college staff in their delivery of the various programmes. Preparation for learning activities was good and the required teaching and learning resources were prepared in advance. This was particularly evident in practical learning settings.
- The quality of teaching observed ranged from good to very good. Scope for improvement was identified in the area of student participation in some instances. Students expressed satisfaction with the level of tuition and support provided by the college staff and with their exposure to opportunities to apply their acquired skills and knowledge.
- Effective teaching methodologies were employed in most learning settings. Good practice was observed when questioning was utilised to reinforce learning and to challenge students' understanding. Direct questioning techniques, often used during practical learning settings were applied skilfully and enhanced students' engagement in the topic at hand.
- Opportunities were taken to promote self-directed learning through practical skill development in a number of instances. This good practice should be incorporated into all learning situations, where appropriate.
- Pair and group activities were also used effectively particularly in plant propagation, pruning, floristry and landscape construction and maintenance lessons observed. These approaches maximised students' engagement and participation and created active and enjoyable lessons. These approaches should be incorporated throughout all of the various modules and courses offered in the college.
- Students received very good levels of formative feedback in most of the practical lessons observed. This enabled them to ascertain their skills' levels and to identify areas for improvement. In theory lessons there was less use of formative assessment and this

resulted in reduced levels of student accountability for their learning. To improve the teaching and learning in theoretical lessons, teachers and tutors should identify and share methods that would help to incorporate formative assessment into theory lessons.

- The PLP programme is co-ordinated effectively and helps to provide students with good quality practical learning experiences. Students receive very good levels of support prior to, during and following their placements. Pre-placement briefings take place with students, PLP diaries are compiled as part of the reflective element of the placement and de-briefing sessions help to identify issues and challenges that the students experienced. Staff members visit students on their PLP and work closely with host employers to manage the students experience effectively.
- Students enrolled in the HETAC level 7 and level 8 Horticulture courses are assessed in accordance with the procedures determined by WIT and DCU. Curricular and assessment issues are discussed at course board and examination board meetings in both higher education colleges. The college has identified personnel to liaise with these institutions in order to provide a conduit for on-going assessment, curricular and student issues.
- Records of the progress of individual students are very well maintained and recorded by staff using the central Education Management System (EMS). However these records are not adequately used to identify students experiencing difficulty with learning or progress or to regularly communicate progress reports with students. This deficit should be addressed as a priority with an initial focus placed on providing staff CPD in the area of assessment for learning.

#### **The quality of care and support for students**

- The practice of assessing students' literacy and numeracy abilities on entry has recently been discontinued. Students are now asked to report any special educational requirements to the college in order to develop a tailored education plan. Plans are in place to incorporate assistive technologies and to implement some of the strategies discussed at recent CPD that was facilitated by the Association of Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD). It is now timely for the college to review its practices in relation to including students with additional educational needs. This should be addressed by primarily focusing on identifying and developing strategies to further include students presenting with high incidence special educational needs and those who may have issues in relation to literacy and numeracy.
- With the exception of the 2012-2013 academic year where a significant minority failed to complete the course, most students complete the FETAC level 5 course in horticulture. Of these students the vast majority receive a pass mark or higher. Student completion rates in the FETAC level 6 course in horticulture are good with very good achievement rates overall. Students' skill levels are well developed and they exhibited the relevant enterprise and employability skills commensurate with their programme of study.
- In almost all instances students were focused, enthusiastic and committed to their studies.
- The responsibility for providing students with impartial careers advice and educational guidance is shared among staff. While most students expressed satisfaction in relation to the quality and accessibility of progression and course information available to them, a more formal and structured approach should be introduced in the areas of mentoring, academic monitoring and educational guidance.
- The college has clear policies and procedures in place for the safeguarding of learners. These procedures are outlined in the student handbook and in the safety statements for both the National Botanic Garden and Kinsealy campuses.
- A designated liaison person and a deputy designated liaison person are identified in the college's child protection statement. College management should ensure, on an on-going basis, that all college and host staff are provided with a copy of this policy and made aware of both their responsibilities and of established practice in regard to child protection matters.
- The development of a Critical Incident Policy is recommended.

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

- Formal self-evaluative procedures have yet to be embedded in the college's planning structures. This is not however an indication of a failure to plan as a significant number of college priorities have been identified and strategies are in place to achieve many of them. The recent introduction of quality assurance meetings, together with the recommendations in this report, may now enable the college to formally identify areas in need of improvement and to implement a strategic plan. That plan should be built on a SMART planning model to initiate a more rigorous improvement planning programme. The collaborative development of strategic and operational action plans, guided by Teagasc's over-arching educational objectives should then help to develop a greater sense of ownership and college identity particularly in the context of the planned move to the Ashtown campus.
- Through Teagasc the college gathers views and opinions of students on the FETAC level 5 and Level 6 Horticulture courses and the Level 5 Floristry course in relation to course organisation and delivery. While it was reported that the outcomes of these surveys are reviewed, it was not evident that any systematic in-college analysis takes place to inform college planning or to address any deficits in the area of teaching and learning. As part of its future self-evaluative practices these valuable insights should be used to inform future policy decisions particularly those that directly affect students.

### **Conclusion**

- College management and staff are committed to providing the student body with high quality education and training in horticultural science and practice. The principal and college staff are well placed to bring about the identified improvements necessary in a measured and planned manner. This process will be further supported and enhanced by the inclusion of the views of all stakeholders. In doing so, a shared vision can be achieved for the continued improvement and development of the College of Amenity Horticulture.