

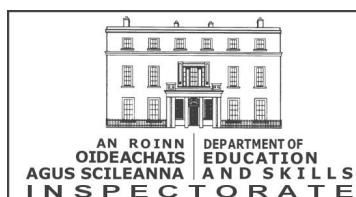
**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills**

Whole College Evaluation

REPORT

**Clonakilty Agricultural College
Darrara
Clonakilty
Co Cork**

Date of inspection: 12 October 2015



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 Clonakilty Agricultural College in October 2015, 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.

Clonakilty Agricultural College is located in an extensive dairying area in West Cork and has provided agricultural education since 1905. The college campus is centred on a 130-hectare farm comprising dairy, suckler, and sheep enterprises that support teaching, training and learning. The college currently has twenty-four staff members combining education, administration, support and farm staff.

The college provides the following courses: Level 5 Certificate in Agriculture; Level 6 Advanced Certificate in Dairy Herd Management; Level 6 Specific Purpose Award in Farm Administration; Level 6 Advanced course in pig production, and a distance education programme set at level 6. Level 7 and level 8 degree courses in Agricultural Science and a level 7 degree course in Horticulture are offered to students in partnership with the Cork Institute of Technology. A level 7 degree in Agricultural Science is also offered in partnership with the Institute of Technology, Tralee.

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

- Management and leadership in the college are of very high quality.
- College staff members demonstrate very effective teamwork focused on developing and maintaining a very high quality learning environment for students.
- Very effective administration and management structures support leadership and development at all levels in the college.
- The quality of teaching, training and learning observed in learning settings ranged from good to excellent.
- A high quality learning environment that facilitates a high standard of teaching, learning and training, has been developed.
- The college's internal Assessment Management Information System is both effective and innovative.
- Levels of retention and progression of students are significantly strong.
- Support for students' care and well-being is evident and effective.
- The college's current and developing self-evaluation processes are very effective and inform change and improvement in the college.

- Research initiatives, combining with agricultural education and with external partnerships, have created a vibrant learning community within the college.

The main areas for improvement include:

- The development of a strategic plan with a central focus on developing the teaching, training and learning experiences for students.

The main recommendation in this report

- A strategic plan to sustain and expand on current very good practice should be developed, based on a professional dialogue that should include the outcomes of staff review, self-evaluation and consultation, with a clear and central focus on developing the teaching, training and learning experiences of students.

1. The quality of management and leadership

- The principal and assistant principal provide very high quality leadership and management for the college. Both have clear roles and responsibilities and as a team they are innovative, dedicated and hardworking in ensuring the effective management and co-ordination of the wide range of activities of the college. A clear vision for the college is articulated in the context of: providing a high quality experience for students; expanding enrolments; developing staff skills and capacity in relation to agricultural developments; developing facilities, and enhancing linkage and communication with stakeholders including local discussion groups, benchmark and host farmers.
- An engaged and committed teaching, training, support and administrative staff, join with the senior management team in demonstrating a loyalty to the work of the college and a pride in their own work. It is clear that staff members share high expectations for the students. Student questionnaire responses provided by students as they complete their various level 5 and level 6 courses indicate very positive experiences both within the classroom and within the college as a whole. Staff responses to an on-line questionnaire, provided as part of this WCE, were equally very positive and supportive of the work of the college.
- Weekly senior management meetings are a key focus for the on-going management of the college. The principal, assistant principal, the office manager, farm manager and the house manager attend these meetings. Detailed minutes provide insight into the efficacy of these meetings, and a detailed set of actions, and clarity in relation to those responsible for these actions, are recorded. Progress is reported in subsequent meetings.
- Education staff meetings are also a key mechanism for the educational management of the college. Discussions primarily concern curricular organisation, assessment, and student engagement and progress. Teachers report on and discuss issues relating to particular courses and issues relating to student attendance, progress, assessment and achievement. It is very positive that student-centred issues arising from these meetings are used to inform the mentoring process that involves periodic meetings between individual students and an assigned staff member.
- Much informal communication and discussion informs the management of the college and the development and delivery of initiatives and ongoing processes. Daily interactions, an electronic shared-folder system, and regular email contacts are the main modes of communication between staff and college management. The responses to some specific questions on communication provided by the aforementioned staff questionnaire should be further explored with a view to enhancing existing procedures.
- The absence of a post of responsibility structure has contributed to a culture of volunteerism that has facilitated staff members to lead particular aspects of the work of

the college. Equally, the contribution of staff to key college events such as the annual open day and meetings with host farmers in the college is positive and demonstrates an esprit de corps, collegiality and shared vision for the college among staff. Continuing professional development (CPD) is availed of by staff and supported by college management, as appropriate.

- A number of specific initiatives point to strengths in management and in leadership in the college. In response to the identified need college staff have developed a very effective college-specific Assessment Management Information System to track the attendance, achievement and progression of students. The clear communication to staff and students of data from the college-based grassland research project and data from the farm enterprises, for discussion and application in learning settings, is very positive. Also the development of a college specific student-voice initiative is a further significant initiative. Questionnaires are now provided to students during their courses, in addition to those provided on completion of courses. The outcomes of these questionnaires are used to inform change and improvement.
- Particular attention is paid to the allocation of placements for students during the range of practical learning periods required by the different courses provided. These processes are very well organised in the college and the recent strategy to improve the process of engaging with host farmers when they visit the college is designed to further enhance the quality of these placements. Similarly, the recent inclusion of some college staff members on local agricultural discussion groups and feedback to the college on developments arising from these interactions, is very positive in continuing to keep college theory and practical lessons in line with what students may experience on placement.
- An effective distance education programme is provided and staffed by the college. Students taking this course attend the college for their skills training and assessment for a number of designated days within the duration of this course. Consideration should be given by Teagasc to the sharing and co-ordination of best practice across the agriculture colleges that provide this developing service.
- Facilities in the college are of very good quality and are very well managed to provide a range of learning settings for students on different courses of study. The college facilities, including the farm enterprises, provide: practical learning settings for Certificate of Agriculture and Dairy Herd management courses; provide a research setting in grassland management, and host a range of externally based bodies including the Institute of Technology based degree courses.
- It is clear that the senior management team is engaged in ongoing planning for the college through developing initiatives and through addressing and reacting to issues as they arise. The Teagasc annual business plan is the formal structure in place to channel and to articulate planning on a yearly basis. To build on and to sustain current very effective structures in the college, a strategic plan should now be developed, based on staff review and consultation, with a clear and central focus on developing the teaching, learning and training experiences of students.

2. The quality of teaching, training and learning

- The quality of teaching, training and learning observed in learning settings ranged from good to excellent. Thirteen classrooms and practical learning settings were evaluated. Three students were visited on host farms during their practical learning period. In some lessons, lecture style and very large classrooms were used for lessons. Practical lessons are normally up to two hours and thirty minutes in duration.
- The very good practice observed centred on very well planned, structured and paced lessons and practicals that were linked to previous learning and pointed students to

further topics or skills. These lessons and practicals had a clear and observable coherence from a clarity of the learning intention to the development of knowledge, skills and understanding, through appropriate tasks and opportunities to consolidate and to review learning.

- Strategies to actively engage students which were observed in some lesson settings during this evaluation included: effective questioning strategies to support and scaffold learning and skills development; well planned, designed and positioned student tasks; the provision of opportunities to practise skills; the very effective integration of visual materials, and the linking of theory to the students' home or host farm experiences. These strategies represented very good practice.
- Recommendations made in feedback to individual staff members concerned: the need to design and incorporate appropriate student tasks into lessons to limit passivity and to actively engage students in their own learning particularly in large classroom settings; the need to develop questioning strategies; the need to integrate opportunities in lessons to develop students' numeracy skills, in particular, but also opportunities for literacy development; and the need to develop differentiated teaching and learning strategies that were clearly evident in practical settings but not so in more theoretical settings.
- Assessment processes in the college are clear and well organised. Assessment procedures for degree courses, are set out in course outlines, and are organised in conjunction with institutes of technology staff, and course boards. Assessment of learning in the lessons observed was evident in theoretical settings primarily in the context of questioning and discussion for the lesson topic. The facility to discuss topics and to practise skills in practical settings facilitated ongoing assessment for learning due to the provision of immediate feedback to students and evidence of success or scope to further develop particular skills and understandings. It is very positive that the college has focused more formal assessments for Level 5 and Level 6 students in Certificate of Agriculture courses into a number of assessment weeks spread throughout the duration of the course. Practical and written assessments are concentrated within these periods and students are given timely feedback on their achievements in these assessments. Outcomes are recorded in the Assessment Management Information System and are shared with students particularly in the context of the mentoring system. Levels of retention, achievement and progression in these level 5 and level 6 courses that are fully based in the college and provided by college staff, are significantly strong.
- A professional dialogue on issues of teaching, training and learning is recommended to education staff and management in the college. This dialogue should focus on teachers' individual positioning, leading to an overall college position, on the nature of pedagogy in different learning settings in the college. It should also concern differentiation to maximise student engagement and participation; the need to support students with high incidence learning needs in mixed-ability contexts, and the need to integrate literacy and numeracy development into lessons in all settings. The outcomes of this dialogue should inform the strategic plan with its key focus on developing the teaching, training and learning experiences of students in the college.
- Some of the issues identified to support this dialogue relating to teaching, training and learning within Clonakilty Agricultural College may also require discussion at the level of Teagasc. These issues include discussion of the nature of pedagogy in different learning settings, differentiation to support students with high incidence learning needs, literacy and numeracy integration and, additionally, the potential to modify and develop the current admissions test to Certificate in Agriculture courses to become a more diagnostic instrument to identify students who may need some additional supports as they engage with and progress in these courses.

3. The quality of care and support for students

- It is clear from interactions with students, staff and from examination of student response metrics on their experience of courses, that students are very well cared for and supported while attending the college. This primarily emerges from the nature of the positive and mutually respectful relationships that exist within the college community. Students are known by name, and through interaction, staff become aware and share with each other as appropriate any particular social, economic or emotional needs that students may have with a view to supporting them. Mentoring adds further and effective formality to these interactions. A range of student-support policies is available and these are referenced for students in the very good quality learner handbook. Routine and effective procedures relating to attendance recording and monitoring clearly complement other student-support initiatives.
- A clear structure is in place, and a newly allocated staff member takes responsibility for the support of students in Certificate of Agriculture and Advance Dairy Herd Management Courses presenting with additional educational needs. In line with Teagasc policy, this support is currently focused on students who voluntarily present with an assessment report. This small number of students is supported primarily in the context of assessment and progression. Mentoring and some one-to-one meetings with students also assist in supporting the retention, achievement and progression of these students.
- To build on current effective structures, strategies to formalise practice are recommended. Clarity in relation to recording, the sharing of information, communication and confidentiality should be discussed and procedures formalised in the context of a policy document. The focus of support should also extend, within the limitations of available resources, towards classroom focused differentiated strategies. The aforementioned development of the current admissions test as a diagnostic instrument should also be considered in this context.
- The college has clear policies and procedures in place for the safeguarding of learners. A designated liaison person and a deputy designated liaison person are identified in the college policy document and learner handbook. Staff members are aware of these procedures, as are students, through the inclusion of the college's *Young Learners & Vulnerable Adults Protection Policy* in the learner handbook. The inclusion of an early visit by a staff member to the small number of students, who are under eighteen years of age while on practical learning placement, should be considered as an additional safeguard to those already in place.

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

- Informal, yet effective, self-evaluation and review processes are evident across college activities. These are evident within the student-voice strategies already established, through the development and actioning of significant initiatives involving host farmers, local discussion groups in the development of assessment management, and through the communication of ongoing research and farm-based data to classroom and practical learning settings. The staff Performance Management Development System (PMDS) and the Teagasc business planning process also contribute to college self-evaluation. All of these initiatives and activities are currently informing change and improvement in the college.
- The college staff and management demonstrate a clear capacity to effectively develop and lead continued change and improvement based on current practice and developments. The outcomes of current self-evaluation processes should now be reviewed, refined and formalised into the recommended longer-term strategic plan that should centre on developing the teaching, learning and training experiences of students.

Conclusion

- Clonakilty Agricultural College provides a very well organised, ordered and calm learning and social environment for students. There is a clear concern for the needs of the individual student coupled with high expectations for students' participation and progression. High levels of professionalism and mutual respect inform interactions between staff and students. The pillars of research and agricultural education that combine with an expanding range of external partnerships are maintaining and developing a vibrant learning community within the college. A professional dialogue and subsequent strategic plan focused on further developing the teaching, training and learning experiences of students will further enhance these evident aspects of very good practice.

COLLEGE RESPONSE

Area 1: Observations on the content of the Inspection Report

Teagasc Clonakilty College Response:

The College very much welcomes the very positive findings of the WCE Report. The college notes the strengths identified in regard to the quality of teaching, training and the learning environment and self-evaluation processes provided at Clonakilty.

The college particularly notes the main report recommendation for the College to build on existing very good practice at Clonakilty through the development of a strategic teaching and learning plan with a central focus on developing the teaching and learning experiences of students.

Teagasc Response:

Teagasc very much welcomes the findings of the Teagasc Clonakilty WCE Report and many key strengths identified. In particular Teagasc notes the very high quality learning environment and very high standard of teaching, training and learning identified in the Report. The Report provides valuable informed comment on the need to encourage and enable professional dialogue to further develop pedagogical approaches and methodologies to suit the many education contexts Teagasc operates in and on the on-going need to further enhance specific learning needs supports. This is applicable to the overall network of Teagasc colleges and linked private colleges. The concept of a strategic teaching and learning plan for each college will be actively pursued in 2016 with College Principals.

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

Clonakilty Actions:

The college notes and will address in the course of 2016 general recommendations re:

- Potential improvements to internal communications
- Incorporation of methodologies to actively engage students in the context of large classroom settings
- Promote professional dialogue at college staff level re the appropriate mix of pedagogical approaches and methodologies for different learner settings to maximise student engagement and participation and to support student's specific learning needs in mixed ability contexts.
- The College will initiate the development of a strategic College teaching and learning a plan/policy for 2016/17 academic year.

Teagasc Response:

1. Staff CPD: A comprehensive staff in-service training programme has been drawn for 2016 for all education staff (Teagasc and Private College) including College Access Officers. This programme incorporates both technical and teaching and learning CPD.

2. Teagasc will proactively encourage Colleges to stimulate professional dialogue on pedagogic approaches and methodologies to further in class learner engagement and participation, to identify and address specific learning difficulty needs and to encourage the further development of colleges' self-evaluation processes.