Apps keeping Teagasc and agricultural college students engaged

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Completing the academic year during a lockdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has seen lecturers and students adopt new ways of working. Rural broadband challenges aside, the level of engagement from students has been very strong.

Teagasc Kildalton College says 112 students out of 125 had logged in to the Moodle app and completed a revision quiz within three days of being asked. "Students' online engagement is being monitored and each first year agriculture, horticulture and equine student in Kildalton is receiving phone calls from an allocated teacher each week, to make sure they have no issues," said Tim Ashmore, Kildalton College principal.

College principals have said it's been a challenge to convert a very practical course to online learning, but students and staff have risen to the challenge. Keith Kennedy, principal at Clonakilty College, said: "We've a young group of teachers that are very enthusiastic and willing to try out new technologies."

Jon Parry, principal at Gurteen College said: "Students are keen to keep in touch with activity on the college farm and have responded well to online learning material that links to ongoing activity at Gurteen farm."

Changes
Some final exams have been converted into online Multiple Choice Question (MCQ) assessments, while others are being turned into assignments for students to complete at home. Short quizzes and study guides are being developed by staff in lieu of classes, with revision exercises for exam preparation being made available to students.

Contingency plans are also in place for students with poor, or no, internet connections. All courses are currently aiming to finish within the timeframe originally allocated before the coronavirus outbreak.

The online platforms that colleges are now using are new to both the teachers and students, but seem to be working well. John Kelly, Ballyhaise College principal, said that students "are eager to engage on their phones, so for any software we use, we have to ensure there is an app available for them to download."

Online resources colleges are using include the following:

Moodle
Moodle is a worldwide learning platform that allows educators to virtually engage with students. Lecture notes, text books, videos, quizzes, assignments, along with question and answer sessions are uploaded by the lecturers. In turn, students can upload their completed assignments for the lecturer to grade. MCQ exam quizzes, in lieu of final written exams, are also being carried out by the colleges using this platform. Moodle is the main platform that Teagasc students are currently being engaged through. All Teagasc students, including distance and part-time learners, have been set up with accounts.

Zoom
Zoom is an online video and audio conferencing tool, Teagasc has a corporate version, which could potentially be used in education. However, freeware versions of Zoom are also available, which allow a lecturer to set up a class or tutorial for a specific time and send out an invitation to the students, who are required to join.

Class notes are being uploaded to Moodle or emailed out to students before the Zoom class. Lecturers are able to turn on their video so students can see them, as well as share their screen with students and work down through class notes, as would normally be done in lectures.

Students can verbally ask questions if the lecturer chooses to allow the student microphones to be on, or they can type in a question, which will appear for the class to see. Zoom classes can also be recorded for students to look back on.

Discussion groups are also being carried out using zoom, where both the teacher and the students have their videos turned on and can see all the other participants.
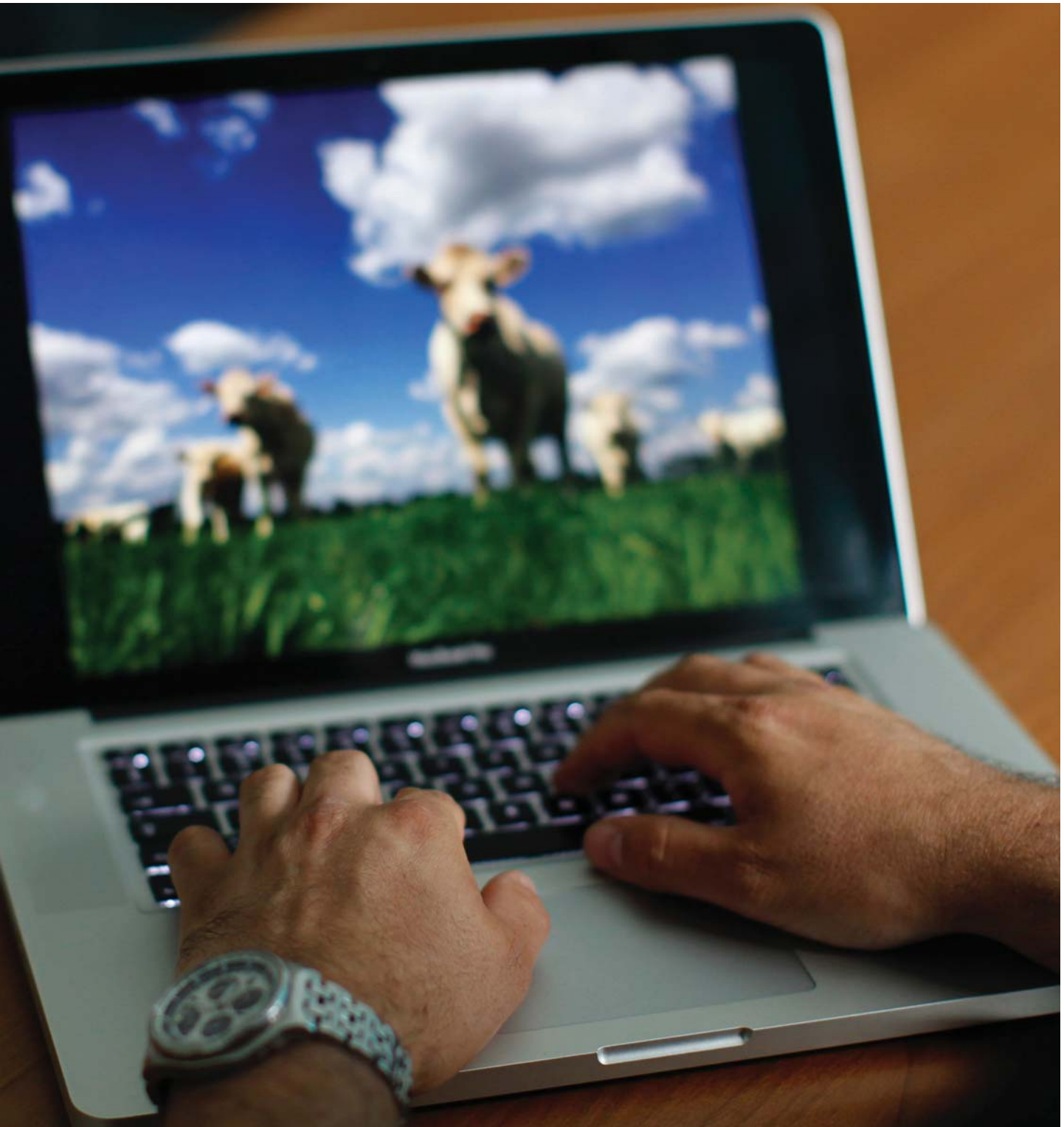
You Tube
As recorded lectures or tutorials can be quite large in size in terms of data, they are being uploaded to a private You Tube channel and the link to these videos can be sent out to students or uploaded to Moodle. Students can watch these videos in their own time or can use them as guidance to work through assignments, playing and pausing as they come to each assignment section.

Kahoot
Kahoot is a game-based learning platform. "Kahoots" are multiple choice quizzes that allow lecturers to create challenges for students and set specific times that they must be carried out in. These quizzes are mainly

being used as revision, but some colleges are also using them to assess students.

Google Classroom
Google Classroom is another online learning platform, similar to Moodle, where presentations, notes and articles are uploaded before Zoom classes. Students can also use this platofrm to ask questions about class material or assignments, which can be answered by lecturers or other students.

Everyone linked to the group can see the questions and answers, which saves multiple responses from the teacher to individual students, who may have had similar questions.

Mental health
A group of 15 equine students started two Zoom classes a week with 15 minutes of mindfulness, including Pilates-type stretches. This energises the students at the start of the classes and keeps them involved, according to their teacher Joan Lenihan.

"Their mental health is the most important part of their education at the minute," she said.

"Colleges are mindful that online learning and undertaking online assessments are a big change for many Teagasc learners," concludes Tony Pettit, Head of Education in Teagasc.

"It requires a greater degree of learner self-motivation and may prove challenging to some. Colleges are aware that not all learners have equal access to smartphone, computer and broadband and are taking this into account."