

Teagasc alumni groups

These groups are proving popular with graduates who enjoy the networking opportunities, camaraderie, and technical support they offer to young adults early in their careers

Patrick Browne, Aoife Healy, Peter Doolan, Teagasc advisors in Donegal, Cork West and Laois.

It's Friday evening at the Teagasc office in Letterkenny and a group of young women and men are engrossed in reviving a life-size plastic dummy from a heart attack.

"The group chose this topic as the focus for this meeting," says Caroline O'Hara. "First aid can be vital on a farm and while we have a bit of craic, we take it seriously."

Caroline and the other members of the group are all alumni of Teagasc Green Cert courses.

"Donegal alone is graduating 100 – 130 part-time and distance learning course students a year and the same for Sligo/Leitrim," says Teagasc advisor and facilitator of the group, Patrick Browne.

"The idea of students forming a group to maintain the momentum and exhilaration of completing a course is often mentioned during graduation ceremonies. But I noticed that this rarely came to fruition and I set about finding out why, as part of a Teagasc national initiative called The Green Cert Graduate programme."

"The programme was initiated by Teagasc to provide a service for young trained farmers, who have recently completed their agricultural education, to network with other graduates and avail of a knowledge transfer facility," says Dermot McCarthy, head of the Teagasc Advisory Service.

Right across the country, Teagasc staff are running alumni groups under the programme, but how these groups are formed can vary greatly.



Keith Burchill, Aoife Healy and Michael Lordan.



The Donegal alumni group with Peter Browne to the right.

In Donegal, Patrick Browne contacted alumni and found that students were naturally sceptical about joining a group without knowing what was in it for them.

"What I did was I got them together for a grassland/silage meeting out at one of the graduated students' farm, where we talked about silage quality, fertiliser requirements and fertility.

They enjoyed the meeting and could see the benefits of joining a group of like-minded young people. Since then, we have had a Drainage Event in Kilcar, First Aid Tonight and a vet is organised to meet the group in January."

Unlike typical discussion groups, which centre on a geographic location or enterprise with members from a

proving to be popular

relatively small area, alumni discussion groups can draw members from further away.

"We have visited members' farms all over the county, from Convoy – Ballybofey – Donegal – Bundoran – Ballyshannon, all the way to Glencolmcille, often with different enterprises and systems on the farms," says Patrick.

As well as a programme of technical meetings, the Donegal group plan to attend the Scottish Highland Show together and visit a lowland/hill sheep farm or suckler/beef or finishing unit on their travels.

At the opposite end of the country in west Cork, it was a group of three local farmers who had the idea to encourage a discussion group among existing dairy students in Clonakilty College.

"The farmers wanted to 'give something back' by encouraging the students," says Teagasc advisor Aoife Healy, who currently facilitates an alumni group that is essentially a continuation of the in-college group with a link to Carbery Macra.

"It's great to be in a discussion group when all the learning is fresh in your head and you're also farming and surrounded by colleagues of a similar age to yourself," says Keith Burchill, a member of the group. "And if it's full of people you were together with in college, everyone knows everyone from the start."

Michael Lordan completed the Teagasc Level 6, Dairy Herd Management course at the same time as Keith.

"We had a really great group when we were in Clonakilty and we wanted to continue it after we graduated. We were all enthusiastic and willing to travel long distances to go to some of the meetings, but it still needed someone like Aoife to pull it together."

According to Aoife, an advisor at the Skibbereen office, participating in a group consisting of former student colleagues can be more attractive than joining an existing discussion group.

"You're naturally going to be a bit intimidated if, as a recent college graduate, you're joining a group of highly experienced and established dairy farmers.

"In November 2018, the Green Cert Graduate programme was introduced in the Teagasc Laois/Kildare/Louth/Meath Dublin Region," says Teagasc advisor Peter Doolan.

"There are currently two groups meeting - one based from the Navan



Peter Doolan with the alumni group based on the Teagasc office in Naas.

Teagasc office and the other from Naas Teagasc office.

"In the Kildare/Laois alumni group, there are approximately 30 graduates from a variety of backgrounds and farming enterprises, including drystock, dairy, tillage, equine and horticulture, who meet to share their varying interests through themed meetings and events.

"Local Teagasc advisors initially made contact with all recent graduates in the region individually, to introduce themselves and the service and arrange a complementary on-farm visit. From this initial contact, graduates on the cusp of taking over the family farm, were identified and encouraged to participate in the programme.

"For many students, the Green Cert is the first step in the farm succession plan, however as the tricky part of taking over the farm comes next, continuing support is important at this stage."

The meetings alternate between indoor sessions and on-farm tours. In an introductory session, the graduates were able to highlight topics that they found interesting or relevant to their current situations. Therefore, the first evening meeting discussed issues such as entitlements, land leasing and land use options for new farmers. Outdoor sessions proved very popular.

"In July, the group visited the award-winning farm of beef farmer

Ronan Kavanagh from Mountrath, and discussed farming sustainably into the future. The most recent night-time event took the graduates to the farm of a new dairy entrant, who is running a highly automated operation and works off-farm.

"Graduates to date are engaging well in the programme and equally, the local advisors have enjoyed the opportunity to give foresight and advice at this early stage of a farmer's career."

Teagasc Distance Education Green Cert Course

- Teagasc Agricultural Colleges and Regional Education Centres are now taking applications for the Distance Education Green Cert course for non-agricultural award holders.
- This course meets the training requirements of graduates from other non-agricultural award programmes who are interested in farming and who will inherit a farm over the coming years. The course duration is 15-20 months and applicants must be the holder of a Level 6 or higher major award in a non-agricultural discipline. Interested applicants can apply online at www.teagasc.ie.
- Kildalton Agriculture College will commence this course in late February 2020.