

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

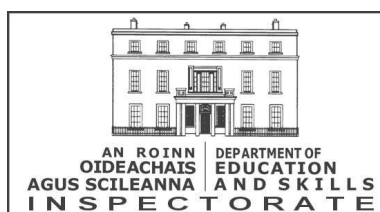
Department of Education and Skills

Whole College Evaluation

REPORT

**Mountbellew Agricultural College
Mountbellew, Co. Galway**

Date of inspection: 19th March 2015



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 Mountbellew Agricultural College in March 2015. This report is based on a selection of lessons observed in a range of learning settings in the college, interaction with learners and review of their work, meetings with the principal, with key staff members and with management and learner 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.

Mountbellew Agricultural College is a privately-owned agricultural training college. The college was founded 1904 by the Franciscan Brothers; this heritage is still tangible in the college's learner-centred approach and its recent links with agricultural education projects in Africa. The college is a registered charity and operates as a private limited company under the management of a board of directors. A college principal has been appointed by the board as have a number of staff members. Other staff are employed directly by Teagasc and are assigned to work in the college. The college underwent a significant refurbishment in 1975 and the resulting building forms the majority of the college's current classroom facilities. Since its foundation, learners in the college have studied the National Certificate in Agriculture, now commonly known as the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) level 5 Certificate in Agriculture (CIA), and more recently the FETAC level 6 Advanced Certificate in Agriculture (ACA). In 1985 the college developed links with Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology enabling learners to progress to FETAC level 8 courses in Agri-business and Agri-science. The college provides educational and training opportunities for the farming community in the Border, Midlands and Western (BMW) counties through full-time, part-time and distance learning programmes.

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 learners.
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 board of directors and the college principal's high quality leadership and management skills.
- The college's well-developed strategic plan.
- The learner-centred approach that permeates the college's procedures and protocols.
- The very good links and partnerships that have been developed within the higher education and farming sectors.
- The standard of teaching, training and assessment practices.
- The quality of the college's systems of support for learners.
- The levels of learner achievement and progression.

The main areas for improvement include:

- The further development of the college's self-evaluation practices.
- The college's policy framework.
- Learner attendance during classroom based activities.
- The learner's experience and engagement in classroom learning environments.
- The interaction, engagement and assessment strategies utilised in the distance learning programme.
- The college's class tutor system.

The main recommendations in this report

- To enhance the college's strategic plan, time-bound and measurable strategies should be identified, actioned and reviewed as part of the college's self-evaluation process, particularly those that will have a tangible positive effect on teaching, training and learning.
- The board should review the college's key policy documents.
- Efforts should be made to reduce the level of student absenteeism during classroom-based activities.
- Whole-college continuing professional development (CPD) should be accessed and availed of in the areas of active and collaborative learning methodologies and questioning strategies in order to improve learner engagement.
- The distance learning programme should be developed to increase the opportunities for greater levels of learner interaction, engagement and assessment.
- The academic and support role of the class tutor should be reviewed and agreed to ensure consistency of experience for all learners.

1. The quality of management and leadership

- The college's board of directors provide high quality leadership, direction and guidance for Mountbellew Agricultural College.
- The principal's leadership and management skills inform the boards' strategic vision for college development and structure the implementation of ongoing college projects and priorities effectively.
- There is no formal middle management structure in place in the college. Many of the duties associated with such a structure are currently being carried out voluntarily, and this is laudable. To sustain the quality of management and leadership, middle management positions should be created and supported as resources allow.
- Decision-making procedures are clear. The board of directors, in collaboration with the college principal, identifies strategy opportunities. This occurs in a consultative and collaborative manner where staff are given the opportunity to contribute. Resulting decisions are progressed with staff consensus where possible. To reinforce the already inclusive approach to decision-making the board of directors should explore the possibility of a representative role for staff at board level.
- Learners on the degree course are afforded the opportunity to provide input into their courses at course board meetings. Learner voice mechanisms, particularly for CIA and ACA learners should equally be developed in order to effect and enhance existing partnerships with college leadership and management.
- The college has a well-developed strategic plan that incorporates strategies for the development of the college's curricular programmes, public relations and learner welfare.
- Admission to the college's level 5 CIA course is in line with Teagasc practice. Applicants sit an assessment test used in all colleges offering Teagasc courses and places are allocated based upon their achievements in this examination. Currently this course is operating at maximum capacity. In order to ensure transparency in the case of over-subscription, the college should review and publish its admissions policy and entry criteria.
- While practical learning situations were well attended in general, learner absenteeism was noted in most of the classroom-based settings observed. This created difficulties for teachers as ensuring continuity of learning was sometimes challenging. A more systematic approach to monitoring and promoting positive attendance is required and should be developed at college level.
- Members of the college's staff have availed of opportunities to attend CPD courses in the area of pedagogy. To ensure that all staff have access to focused and ongoing professional development, whole-college CPD needs should be identified and addressed. Initially this should focus on the specific areas of pedagogical development identified in this report. The college's self-evaluation practices should identify any additional training needs and support planning for meeting these.
- The timing, duration and organisation of some teaching and learning engagements require review. Sessions scheduled for up to two hours and those that had up to ninety

learners allocated to them are in particular need for review. This kind of setting is not conducive to the creation of meaningful and highly engaging learning activities. Alternative classroom layouts and designs should also be considered as the systems currently employed do not lend themselves to collaborative interaction or structured group activities. A more considered approach to scheduling should now be taken in order to reduce or eliminate these issues where possible.

- At the time of the evaluation the college library was closed and learners' access to information and communication technology (ICT) was minimal. These key facilities should be restored and made available to learners when practicable as they help to contribute to the development of learners' independent learning skills.
- Resources and teaching aids were utilised effectively particularly in practical learning situations. ICT resources were incorporated into classroom based lessons and provided very good opportunities for subject-specific imagery and information to be displayed.
- Overall college facilities are good with scope for development in specific areas. The college has fostered very good links with local host farmers and practical learning period (PLP) placement hosts. There is some opportunity for development in relation to partnerships with local farmers. This strategy could be employed to ensure learners are exposed to the most modern techniques and equipment in a cost effective manner.
- The long-established links with GMIT and other higher education providers in the BMW region has resulted in a variety of positive results including college staff working closely with higher education providers and ongoing engagement and review in course board meetings. The current research proposal submitted in collaboration with the National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG) indicates an innovative approach to partnership and a mutually beneficial engagement with other education providers in the region.

2. The quality of teaching, training and learning

- Teaching, training and learning was good overall with some examples of very good practice observed.
- Where practice was observed as being good or very good lessons were well structured, teachers demonstrated very good awareness of learners' needs, theory was linked with practical knowledge and learners' experiences and learning activities were reinforced through structured use of scaffolding tasks such as worksheets and prepared notes.
- The planning and preparation required to deliver course content was very good overall. Some scope for development was identified in the organisation and planning for the ACA distance learning programme. A centralised and co-ordinated approach to developing course materials for core and specialist modules would be more efficient and provide staff with greater scope to develop supplementary assessment and research-based tasks for learners.
- A positive rapport exists between teachers and learners. This has resulted in the creation of an atmosphere conducive to positive teaching, training and learning. Teachers made every effort to make learning relevant for learners through the use of examples and grounding course content in learners' home farm experiences.
- In some instances classroom practice could have benefitted from a more multi-faceted approach, this was particularly the case in relation to engaging learners in discussion, dialogue and collaborative activities. Questioning, while utilised regularly, could also be developed further to have a greater impact on learner engagement. Whole-college CPD should now focus on these key aspects of college provision.
- The practical learning period (PLP) and work placement programmes are well organised. Teachers visit learners and monitor their progress periodically. Learners complete placement diaries and teachers ensure that these diaries are utilised as a learning tool. Host farmers were acutely aware of the educational aspect of placements and contribute to learners' development effectively through regular discussion and guidance with their assigned PLP learners.
- In a few instances opportunities to reinforce learners' literacy and numeracy skills were missed. Examples of where this could have been improved include the presentation of numerical data in various forms including tabular and graphical form and the extended use of subject-specific print and online materials as research and discussion documents.

- Practical skills are being developed in a coherent and comprehensive manner to promote best practice and employability. Where appropriate, learners were given good opportunities to practise new skills and to apply their learning. In these situations learner engagement was good but improved questioning strategies would have been beneficial in some instances.
- Terminal assessment procedures are clear and communicated effectively with learners. Very good quality assessment practices were observed in all learning areas with the focus placed by the college on the provision of on-going and formative assessment observed as a significant strength.
- Learners' assessment results are circulated in a timely manner enabling teachers and learners to identify areas for development and to address learning issues promptly.

3. The quality of care and support for learners

- The college has clear policies in place for the safeguarding of learners. Staff have been made aware of safeguarding policies and training has been availed of where appropriate. A critical incident policy has been developed but is in need of review to reflect current personnel and recognised best practice.
- Practices to support learners' educational inclusion are developing well. The common college entrance test administered to rank learners could be enhanced. It could include a diagnostic element that would help to further inform staff regarding the additional educational needs of learners. This would help support staff plan the most appropriate interventions and supports necessary.
- The college also offers the Special Purpose Award in Agriculture programme for learners with specific educational needs and this helps the college cater for a small number of learners for whom the conventional ACA is not a viable option.
- A class tutor system is outlined in college documentation. In practice, this system is not operating as outlined in the policy document. There is a need to formalise practices in the area to ensure consistency of experience for learners.
- Guidance support and advice is provided for learners prior to and during their programme of study. Initial guidance and advice occurs at open days and information sessions held in the region. Guidance is provided throughout the programmes with very clear instruction around possible progression routes outlined for learners. A good level of information is provided for learners interested in progression to higher education particularly through the Links programme and the Central Applications Office (CAO) requirements.
- The ACA distance learning programme provides the college with the opportunity to maximise learners' independent learning potential. Areas for development in this area include more regular interaction between teachers and learners through prescribed tasks and research-based projects.
- College-based learners exhibited good skill levels and self-confidence through a wide-range of task-based activities. Employability skills are good but there is scope for a more progressive approach to the planning, development and adoption of new technology and approaches and to how the farm is used as a teaching and learning resource.
- Overall learner achievement is very good, with some scope for development in relation to learners' completion of the ACA course. Recently, achievement has improved on this course and continued efforts should improve the situation further.
- Overall progression is very good with pathways identified to higher education in GMIT or University College Dublin with a very diverse range of opportunities available to learners wishing to progress to level 8 qualifications.

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

- The college has made very good steps to initiate a self-evaluation process and staff are committed to improving the quality of provision. Focus should now be placed on the collection, interpretation and use of reliable data to further improve outcomes for learners.

- The college's well-developed strategic plan requires some enhancement in the identification of specific, measurable and time-bound strategies, particularly those that will have a tangible positive effect on teaching training and learning.

Conclusion

- The college community demonstrate the capacity and commitment to engage with reflective practice and college self-evaluation based on identified priorities. We recommend that the priorities for development outlined in this report should be progressed through a time-bound action-planning cycle with a whole-college approach to the evaluation of outcomes.

APPENDIX

COLLEGE RESPONSE

Observations on the content of the inspection report:

Mountbellew Agricultural College Response: *The management and staff of MAC wholeheartedly accept the findings and recommendations of the recent WCE and thank the inspectorate for the professionalism and fairness with which the evaluation process was conducted.*

MAC was already aware that it had some key strengths in agricultural educational programme delivery but it was rewarding to have an outside agency identify these and, in particular, to pinpoint areas for improvement.

MAC is already preparing to implement the recommendations of the WCE and will consult with Teagasc, GMIT and other stakeholders to implement measureable improvements that will help provide excellent quality assured educational programmes in the future.

Teagasc Response: Teagasc welcomes the findings of the Mountbellew WCE Report and the key strengths identified. In particular Teagasc notes the learner centred approach adopted, the standard of teaching and the quality of support to learners and the levels of learner achievement and progression.

Teagasc will work closely with and support Mountbellew Agricultural College in implementing the main recommendations of this report.

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

Mountbellew Agricultural College Response:

In response to the WCE, the Board of Directors of MAC has already initiated the process of preparing a Strategic Development Plan (SDP) for the 2016-2020 period. The terms of reference have already been set and include coverage of the recommendations of the WCE.

As an outcome of the SDP, time-bound and measureable strategies will be identified and implemented in the areas of college self-evaluation practices, policy framework, learner attendance and engagement strategies and the class tutor system. These areas will also be consistently raised at future staff meetings.

In consultation with Teagasc, staff development training opportunities have already been identified and made available to staff. Staff development will receive a high priority every year and will be continually raised at staff meetings.

A major part of the SDP will relate to a review of college educational facilities and farm training facilities. The SDP will also suggest how the facilities can be improved and propose funding mechanisms that will ensure success in this area. Teagasc has already conducted a review of farm training and demonstration facilities which will be fed into the SDP.

Teagasc Response:

1. Staff CPD: A comprehensive staff in-service training programme has been drawn for 2015 for all education staff (Teagasc and Private College). This programme incorporates both technical and teaching & learning CPD.
 - a. Technical in-service updating for 2015 includes: agri-environment, dairy, beef, sheep and financial management as well as standardization days for certain modules e.g. Crop Production Science and Leadership.
 - b. National Teagasc staff conference for all education staff on 30 June 2015 re innovation in teaching practice and future curriculum requirements
 - c. An opportunity to pursue a Level 9 part time postgraduate diploma in Teaching in Further Education is being made available to education staff as of autumn 2015.
 - d. Recently recruited staff (including at Mountbellew) who are delivering Teagasc part time and distance education 'Green Cert' programmes completed an accredited minor award programme in Teaching Strategies for Adult and Further Education in May/June 2015.
 - e. Monthly or bimonthly standardization and information sharing workshops are being held for recently recruited staff including Mountbellew) who are delivering Teagasc part time and distance education programme.
2. A Teagasc-college management review of farm enterprises at Mountbellew was conducted in March 2015 with view to ensuring that the farm enterprises are maintained and leveraged as effective, relevant progressive teaching and learning platforms for young farmer education and training. Teagasc will work closely with the College in developing a three farm enterprise plans that set out key farm performance targets and technology adoption necessary.
3. Teagasc will pro-actively assist and support Mountbellew in the updating of college policies including admission policies and the development of its self-evaluation capabilities as the Report recommendations.

Teagasc will request the college in the course of the 2015/16 academic year to actively monitor attendance levels and to identify patterns of absenteeism across courses and report on the measures adopted to reduce excessive absenteeism should it arise.