

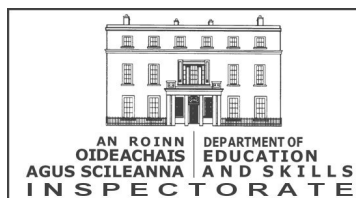
**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**  
**Department of Education and Skills**

**Whole College Evaluation**

**REPORT**

**Salesian Agricultural College**  
**Pallaskenry, Co. Limerick**

**Date of inspection: 10 March 2016**



## 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 Salesian Agricultural College, Pallaskenry in March 2016. 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.

Founded in 1920, the Salesian Agricultural College, Pallaskenry is a privately owned agricultural training college. The college's mission statement states that it is, "Dedicated to the spiritual and educational development of staff and students" and many aspects of the Salesian tradition underpin the college's mission to address the needs of learners and provide them with employment opportunities. There have been significant changes made to the college's management structures recently including the formation of a board of governors and a full review of the college's senior and in-college management systems. The current college principal was appointed within the last 18 months and oversees the day-to-day management of staff members directly employed by the College Board and those who are employed by Teagasc and are assigned to work in the college. Recently, at the college management's request, the college's management structures were reviewed by Deloitte. Teagasc has also undertaken a separate review of the college's farm operations. The findings of both of these reviews have since been published and are being reviewed by college management.

Learners in the college study courses in both agriculture and agricultural mechanisation. These courses include the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) Level 5 Certificate in Agriculture (CIA), Specific Purpose Certificate in Farm Administration FETAC Level 6, the FETAC Level 6 Advanced Certificate in Agriculture (ACA) Dairy Herd Management, the FETAC Level 6 ACA Agricultural Mechanisation and the Higher Certificate in Engineering in Agricultural Mechanisation run in partnership with Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT). In addition to these courses the college also provides a distance education course in the FETAC Advanced Certificate in Agriculture Level 6 for 150 learners.

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 has set appropriately high expectations for the quality of education provided in the college
- A number of essential areas for improvement have been identified across all aspects of the college
- A clearly defined management structure has been incorporated and is currently embedding in the college
- Recent developments, led by the principal, have improved learners' educational experiences in the college
- Teaching staff demonstrated a high level of commitment to learners

- There are strong and developing industry links particularly within the Agricultural Machinery area
- Overall the quality of teaching, training and learning was good with some examples of very good practice observed

The main areas for improvement include:

- The development of a strategic planning process and a subsequent plan that will help to guide and achieve college improvement
- The college's communication systems and protocols
- The learners' educational and recreational experiences in the college
- The scheduling and planning of learner activities
- Developing learner care and support structures

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

- The board should, in a consultative manner, develop a robust and inclusive strategic plan that will map the college's improvement over the short, medium and long term.
- Improved communication systems and protocols should be developed to ensure that all stakeholders have the opportunity to play an active role in the college's ongoing development
- Learners' experiences in theory lessons should be improved through greater use of active and engaging teaching methodologies
- The quality of learner facilities should be addressed
- A more structured and systematic approach to the scheduling and planning of taught farm practical sessions should be introduced
- A more cohesive approach should be taken to improve learner support and care structures in the college

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

- A new organisational and management structure has been identified and implemented at college level. This structure is explicit and has been communicated among stakeholders. In order to further embed this structure effectively, clear protocols and procedures around the operation of this management structure should be clarified for all members of the college community.
- The board has developed a clear vision for the college. A core element of this vision is achieving evident best practice across all aspects of the college's provision. However, as of yet, this vision has not been communicated effectively to all staff. The board should now initiate dialogue among all stakeholders. As part of this communication strategy all stakeholders should develop a shared understanding of this vision.
- All recommendations made in the external reviews that have taken place to date, should be discussed and developed as part of this dialogue. Particular emphasis should be placed upon areas that will improve and enhance learners' experiences, wellbeing and their educational outcomes.
- Once formal priorities have been identified, specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound (SMART) strategies should then be adopted to achieve them. The board should facilitate college staff and management in achieving these goals and in monitoring their progress periodically.
- The quality of communication between the various stakeholders is uneven with scope for improvement identified at all levels. The board should consider adopting agreed reports for all stakeholders following its meetings. Staff, in-college management and support-team meetings should be formalised to ensure that appropriate agendas are set, accurate minutes taken and resulting tasks clarified at the end of meetings. These protocols will help to improve communication and ensure clarity of purpose for all involved. The adoption of this form of systematic approach will be essential in progressing strategic objectives.

- Recently there has been a concerted effort to improve teaching, training and learning in the college. The principal has been central to the progression of these improvements by upgrading classrooms and developing the college's information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure. These developments, made within a relatively short period of time, are founded in a desire to improve learner experiences in the college. The key challenge now facing the principal is to lead and manage the college's improvement agenda in the medium to long-term.
- There is effective curricular leadership of both the machinery and agricultural courses. This is achieved through the identification of relevant and appropriate responsibilities for the course leaders who manage various aspects of the organisation and delivery of the courses that they are responsible for. One specific example of curricular leadership is evidenced by the potential development of a Level 7 Agricultural Machinery course in conjunction with LIT. However, the in-college management team as a whole require greater clarity in relation to their leadership roles and potential development opportunities. Greater empowerment of this team should be prioritised to bring about sustainable development and improvement at college level.
- Admission to the college is carried out in a clear and transparent manner. All applicants who apply for FETAC courses are allocated a place, while learners who apply for the Higher Certificate Machinery course apply directly through the Central Applications Office (CAO).
- Learners were engaged and actively participating in course-related activities throughout the course of the evaluation. A clearly defined code of behaviour exists; however the college should implement a review of the code of behaviour with specific reference to the expected behaviours within the learner accommodation and associated sanctions.
- It is clear that there is a shared responsibility to prioritise the outcomes for learners as the core work of the college. However, leadership is required to maximise the learners' experiences through greater planning. A more structured and systematic approach to the scheduling and planning of taught farm practical sessions should be introduced. This system should provide greater clarity for learners in relation to their practical sessions and, with application and some experimentation, should become routine and operational within the unforeseen limitations imposed by inclement weather and routine farm operations.
- It was reported that the availability of continuing professional development (CPD) has improved recently. There is significant scope for greater engagement in CPD focusing on the areas of teaching, training and learning. There should also be a focus placed upon whole-staff and specialised support-staff training in the area of learning support. The principal as instructional leader should explore the possibility of developing external links for the college, particularly by fostering a community of learning where peer-to-peer links could be forged and developed. The potential benefits of engaging with school management and teachers in the adjoining Salesian secondary school on the campus, in relation to pedagogy, could also be explored.
- The farm is used as a learning setting for the completion of practical skill tasks and to practise skills on a day-to-day basis. A classroom has been added in the upper farm yard to further facilitate and consolidate practical learning. This is a positive educational development as it reinforces the concept of the farm as a learning environment for learners and provides teachers with a classroom where theoretical content can be taught and integrated with practical skill-based learning. There is however a need to ensure that changing and washing facilities are available at this location for learners to maintain effective bio-security measures and to promote good practice.
- Learners expressed their dissatisfaction with the quality of the college's accommodation, recreational and dining facilities. The dissatisfaction focussed primarily upon the quality, age and décor of amenities available to them and the lack of any sustained extra-curricular opportunities on the campus during the evening. The development of facilities for learners should be included as part of the recommended strategic plan with the learners' voice represented through their engagement in an appropriate forum.
- The college has forged a number of appropriate links and partnerships, both in Ireland and abroad. These links include those with industrial and educational bodies that enhance learners' experiences through work placements in machinery and agricultural

settings, and through associated educational supports available through LIT. To strengthen and reinforce current industry best practice, greater links should be developed with the Teagasc Advisory and Research unit to help the college to realise its goal of becoming a visible demonstration of best practice.

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

- During the course of the evaluation, teaching, training and learning was observed in practical and classroom settings in all courses with the exception of the Level 5 CIA course. Two learners on this course were visited on their practical learning placements (PLP) on local host farms. In addition to these visits, inspectors attended an ACA Knowledge Transfer Discussion Group and interacted with learners carrying out self-directed practical task-work on the college farm.
- The quality of teaching, training and learning was good overall, with some examples of very good practice observed. Learner engagement, participation and interaction when observed in practical learning settings, was very good with scope for improvement identified in these areas in the majority of classroom based settings.
- Planning for all learning activities observed was effective with elements of collaborative planning evident. There was good use of ICT in the planning, preparation and delivery of lesson content. Shared local network drives have been developed to facilitate collaboration among staff. The use of ICT among staff is good, particularly in the context of limited CPD and a relatively new college ICT infrastructure.
- Theory lessons were generally characterised by the delivery model. This resulted in learners remaining mainly passive for the duration of the lesson with relatively few interactions and an over-reliance on teacher inputs. In these settings there were a number of opportunities missed to engage learners more effectively and to promote task-based collaborative (group) work. The quality of presentations developed by teachers was high with very good use of imagery and judicious use of accompanying text.
- In practical settings, learners were in almost all instances fully engaged and a high work ethic was evident throughout the lessons observed. Assigned tasks were current, relevant and applicable to their chosen field. The knowledge transfer discussion group held on a local host farm provided learners with a valuable learning experience and an engaging topic for discussion.
- Where recommendations were made to teachers, they included the incorporation of strategies to engage learners to a greater extent, the use of collaborative learning techniques such as think-pair-share, pair and group work, the use of enhanced questioning techniques, greater use of appropriate ICT audio-visuals and animations, and the identification of key learning moments in practical settings.
- Learners enrolled in the college's distance education programme attend theory and practical assessments in the college on 23 separate occasions amounting to 150 in-college hours. This course is well subscribed and three members of staff oversee its delivery to a cohort of learners who all have a minimum Level 6 or Higher Major Award in a non-agricultural discipline. To date, there has been an initial development of online resources using the college's virtual learning environment (VLE). This is welcome and should be further developed through the identification of collaborative links with other colleges offering this course. Specialists in topics and modules could then be identified and high quality interactive resources developed and made available to learners to complement the good quality skills-based videos currently available to learners online. This development would help the college deliver a high quality course to an ever-growing learner cohort.
- Learners are assessed formally as per individual course requirements. Records of these assessments are maintained using the Educational Management System (EMS). This system should be complemented through the development of a local assessment management system that all members of staff can access, review and update. This system would prove most beneficial in ensuring that learners' progress is monitored continually thereby supporting more regular feedback. This system would also help to

identify effective learning supports for learners who do not present with a recognised psychological report.

### **3. The quality of care and support for learners**

- While some development work has begun in the area of care and support systems for learners there is some scope for further improvement in this area in the college.
- Learners are assessed prior to enrolment using a Teagasc-developed standard assessment. It was reported that this assessment is of limited value as a diagnostic tool.
- Additional educational supports are provided for learners who present a recognised psychological report. It is very positive that the college also endeavours to identify learners who may not present a psychological report and where possible and within their resources, provide learning support for these learners also.
- Individual learner profiles have been developed by the support team. These profiles outline learners' specific learning needs and identify supports that would be beneficial for them. Teaching staff have not yet accessed this information or received CPD in relation to how they can best support learners' needs. This shortfall should be addressed.
- In order to develop the current system, it is recommended that regular meetings are scheduled between the learning support staff and the teaching staff. These meetings could serve to help identify learners who may be challenged by the course content and to identify strategies that could be incorporated into mainstream, tutorial or individual / group withdrawal or tutorial lessons. The development of the recommended assessment management system should progress in parallel with this recommendation.
- Guidance support for learners occurs in an informal manner. Staff and learners identified this as an area for development. The college should explore methods that would improve learners' access to vocational, educational and personal guidance possibly through the incorporation of a structured mentoring system developed in line with the proposed assessment management system.
- The college has clear and effective policies and procedures in place for the safeguarding of learners. The college has an up-to-date Child Protection policy, Vulnerable Young Adults policy, Critical Incident policy and all staff members have been Garda vetted, have received appropriate training, and are aware of the college's child protection protocols. Notwithstanding these measures, a focused risk assessment should be undertaken on the campus' residential accommodation particularly in relation to the provision of on-campus accommodation for learners of the college who are under the age of eighteen years.

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

- The Salesian Agricultural College has recently undergone a number of external evaluations and reviews. These evaluations have provided the board with a sound foundation for self-evaluation to inform future strategic decision making. The significant challenge now facing college leaders is to develop the aforementioned collaborative strategy to bring all elements of the college forward in unison. This strategy should be developed using a SMART model of planning with a clear focus on improving the educational experience of learners.

### **Conclusion**

- If the key requirements to achieve college improvement that have been identified in this evaluation and by previous reports are prioritised and planned for collaboratively by the board, in partnership with college senior management and staff, using a SMART planning model, the college has the collective capacity to bring about meaningful improvement to sustain the development of a quality learning setting for all learners.

## COLLEGE RESPONSE

### **Observations on the content of the inspection report**

**Salesian Agricultural College Response:** The Board of Governors, College Management and staff of the Salesian Agricultural College welcome and embrace the findings and recommendations of the recent WCE. In particular, we wish to thank the inspectorate for their professionalism, thoroughness and fairness with which the evaluation process was conducted. Of notable significance and appreciation by staff was the manner in which the inspectorate provided constructive criticism and feedback during the WCE.

Salesian Agricultural College had already recognised, supported by previous external reports, that it had a number of key strengths in agricultural educational programme delivery. However, it was rewarding to have an outside agency identify these and, in particular, to highlight areas for improvement.

Salesian Agricultural College is already preparing to implement the recommendations of the WCE and in consultation with Teagasc, LIT and other stakeholders, plans to implement measureable improvements that will facilitate the provision excellent quality assured educational programmes in the future.

**Teagasc Response:** Teagasc welcomes the findings of the Salesian Agricultural College, Pallaskenry WCE Report and the strengths identified, in particular the strong commitment of college management, staff and of the board of management. The full engagement of learners in practical skills instruction classes is also noted. Teagasc notes carefully the number of areas identified for improvement and the accompanying recommendations. Teagasc will work closely with and support the Salesian Agricultural College Pallaskenry 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**

#### **Salesian Agricultural College Response:**

In response to the WCE, the Board of Governors of the Salesian Agricultural College has already initiated the process of preparing a Strategic Development Plan (SDP) for the 2016-2020 period. 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 teaching methodologies. These areas will also be consistently raised at future staff meetings.

Consultation has already taken place and agreement reached with the Salesian Secondary College to commence peer to peer review of class teaching starting September 2016. This should help teaching staff of the Salesian Agricultural College to gain a better understanding of active and engaging teaching technologies.

College residential accommodation and students common room area is undergoing renovation work in summer 2016 with a view to improving learners' education and recreational experiences.

A more structured and systematic scheduling and planning of taught practical sessions will be introduced from September 2016, facilitated by newly assigned course co-ordinators.

Learner support and care structures will be further enhanced, through a more comprehensive induction week commencing Sept 2016, thereby increasing the awareness amongst students of the structures available and the role of the student mentor.

#### **Teagasc Response:**

1. Staff CPD: A comprehensive staff in-service training programme is in place for 2016 for all education staff (Teagasc and Private College). This programme incorporates both technical and teaching & learning CPD.

- a. Technical in-service updating for 2016 includes: agri-environment, dairy, beef, sheep and financial management as well as standardization days for various modules.
  - b. A Teagasc national staff conference for all Teagasc and private college education staff was held in April 2016 and included workshops on changing education needs for the land based sector and an inter college exchange of innovations in teaching and learning.
  - c. A Level 9 part time postgraduate diploma in Teaching in Further Education is now available for Teagasc and private college teaching staff and the Salesian Agricultural College will be encouraged to nominate staff to this course for the coming academic year.
  - d. Recently recruited temporary education staff (including at the Salesian Agricultural College) who are delivering Teagasc part time and distance education 'Green Cert' programmes are required to complete an accredited minor award programme in Teaching Strategies for Adult and Further Education.
  - e. Monthly or bimonthly standardization and information sharing workshops are being held for recently recruited temporary education staff (including those at the Salesian Agricultural College) who are delivering Teagasc part time and distance education programmes.
2. A Teagasc-college management review of farm enterprises at the Salesian Agricultural College was conducted in 2015 with a 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 continue to work closely with the Salesian Agricultural College in developing/monitoring a three year farm enterprise plan that sets out key farm performance targets and technology adoption necessary.
  3. Teagasc will pro-actively assist and support the updating of college policies and the college's self-evaluation capabilities.
  4. Teagasc will request that a focused risk assessment of the college residential accommodation be conducted in the context of residential learners who are under 18 years of age. This assessment to be conducted in advance of the 2016/17 academic year.