

# The Teagasc UCD Michael Smurfit course in business strategy

The best defence against the increasingly volatile environment in which farmers must operate is to have your own unique strategy which will ensure you remain focussed on what you and your family really want out of your business...and life.

Emer Howard, who farms beef and other enterprises near Fermoy, describes how she and her husband were waiting, a little anxiously, to put a business proposal to their banker. "What transformed the situation was that we had a written strategy and we were able to talk about it in the banker's language," she says. "Another advantage is that we had negotiation skills which resulted in us getting virtually everything we wanted from the discussion."

Emer credits the Teagasc/UCD Michael Smurfit course in business strategy with helping her develop skills in investment appraisal, negotiation, and in particular strategy formulation which have benefitted her farming business.

Tommy Cooke, a dairy farmer, near Thurles identifies negotiation skills as the greatest benefit he got from the course. "As farmers we negotiate a lot and we often feel we are expert negotiators but there are skills and techniques which I certainly didn't know about before doing the course," says Tommy.

"By learning about my own strengths and weaknesses I was able to take steps to counter them and my farming and other business activities have benefitted substantially."

This is not a course in production farming. It aims primarily to give participants the skills to formulate a strategy which will benefit not only

their businesses but their family lives too. "The idea is for participants to identify where they want their businesses and their lives to be in say three, or five years' time," says Prof. Pat Gibbons of the UCD Michael Smurfit Business School.

"And that might include what kind of work/life balance they and their families want. The course gives participants the tools to create their own unique, strategy to get them from where they are now to where they want to be. Teagasc advisors assist participants to interpret the course material for their own unique situations, but the farmer does the work."

Managing, communicating and interacting with people whether family or employees is crucial to the success of any strategy. "Everyone is unique in how they see the world and how they react to different work and social or family situations," says Helen Brophy, Director, Director, Smurfit Executive Development. "Participants on the course complete a detailed, and completely confidential, questionnaire which is analysed and gives them an insight into their own personalities and how that might influence how they interact with others."

"As farmers we are all interacting more with employees and students as well as family stakeholders," says Frank Clare who farms near Navan in county Meath. "I felt that part of the course was extremely interesting and practical."

There is no requirement for academic qualifications to join the course providing you have been farming in your own right for ten years or more. Participants must complete a written strategy for their own business.



Alumni of the Teagasc UCD Michael Smurfit course in business strategy.

They will gain the skills to do this during the course and will be supported by Teagasc mentors between the course modules. The two modules are residential, in order to enable participants to get away from day to day chores and get the very most out of the course.

"It's nothing like I remember from school," smiles pig farmer Jason McGrath. "This is really a discussion between farmers as business people about business issues, facilitated by really top lecturers. I found it really useful and there was excellent networking and interaction between the participants. It was also a very enjoyable experience."

Almost 100 farmers in five cohorts have now graduated from the fully accredited course and earned the level 8 certificate from UCD. Each participant must develop their own strategy and this involves discussing the future of the business with other stakeholders, particularly family members.

All ages and enterprises have been represented. Last year Darren and Kalinda Healey from county Wicklow became the first married couple to do the course together. "My father Eamon did the course himself and recommended that it might be useful for us too," says Darren.

"It meant that we were learning

Module 1	
Introduction	Tues 25 September
Day 1	Wed 26 September
Day 2	Thurs 27 September
Module 2	
Day 1	Tues 16 October
Day 2	Wed 17 October
Finale Day	Tues 27 November

working on the strategy together which proved really useful."

The cost to participate in the course is €2,400. The course is not restricted to Teagasc clients but they do receive a €200 discount. The fee covers the

course itself and also accommodation and food etc during the course. Some participants have been able to secure support from IFA Skillsnet. "Farmers never fear to spend money when there's a return to it," says Tommy Cooke. "Like every other profession we need to be constantly challenging ourselves and moving forward if we want to be competitive."

A number of farmers have already signed up for the next course which will take place in the autumn (see dates in fig.1) but places are still available. If you would like to know more or to register your interest please contact me at Mark.moore@teagasc.ie or call 087 4179131.