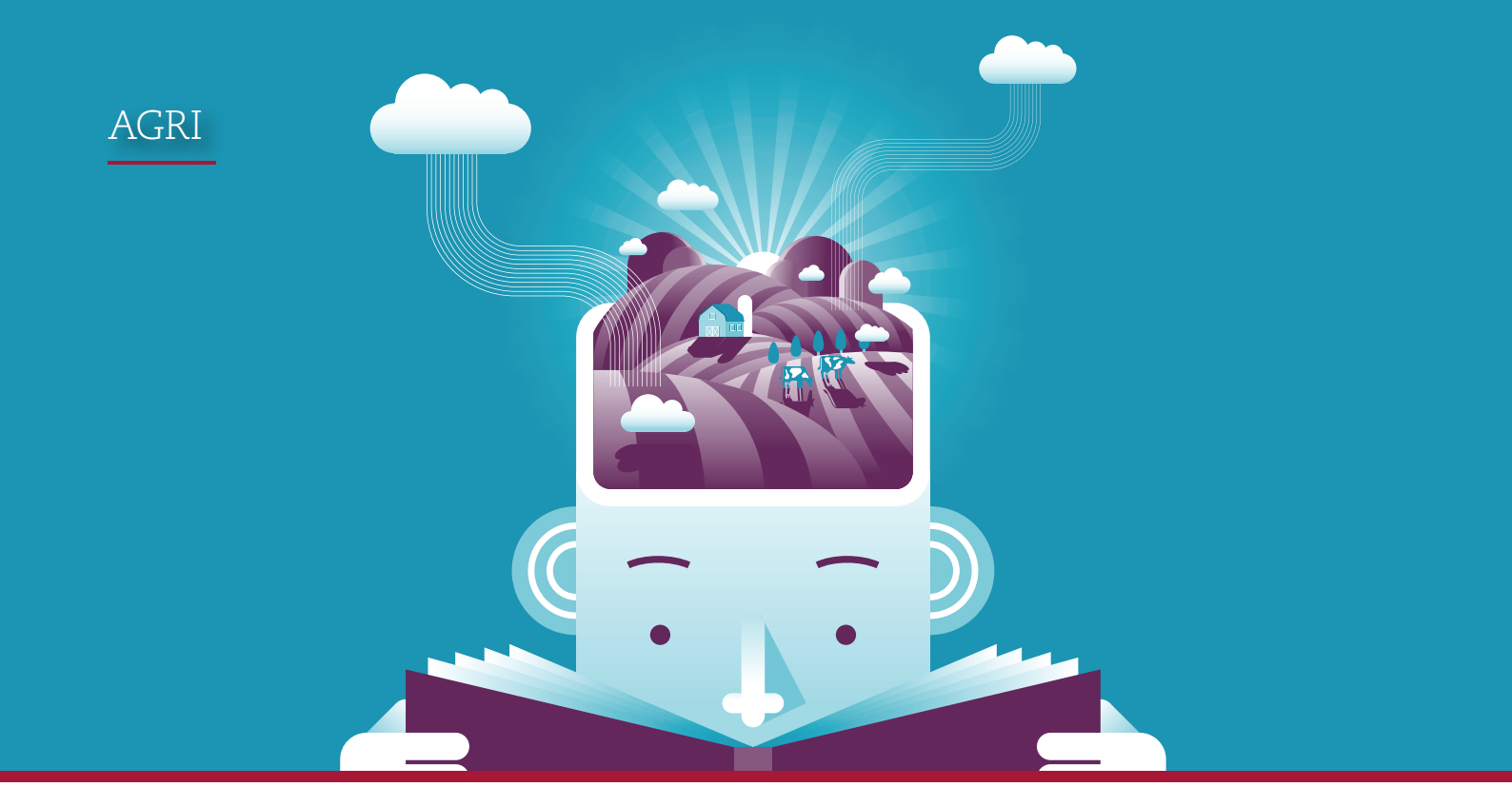


Finding future farmers

TEAGASC research is looking at secondary school students' perceptions of and attitudes towards a career in dairy farming.

The availability of a constant supply of highly skilled young entrants is among the main challenges common to dairy industries worldwide. In Ireland, the requirement for energetic and skilled entrants is amplified by the growth in the dairy sector in recent years. Although Irish grazing systems are considered simple in design when compared with more intensive and confined systems, the seasonal workload and specific challenges of a grazing system require uniquely skilled individuals. Recent reports indicate that there is a major skills shortage within the sector, and the dominant perception remains that it is necessary to be from a farming background and to be designated as a successor to consider a career in dairy farming (Deming *et al.*, 2019). Changing such perceptions is imperative to attract new entrants from farming and non-farming backgrounds alike, and this has led to increased interest in understanding the factors that influence the occupation choice of school leavers.

To ascertain the perceptions and attitudes of adolescents towards careers in dairy farming, a survey with 35 closed-ended questions was devised. The target population was students who were registered to attend one of three agri-information events held in March 2017, November 2017 and March 2018 at Teagasc, Moorepark, Co. Cork. The students surveyed were from urban and rural schools in Munster, where dairy farming is more prevalent than in the rest of Ireland. All students were surveyed before the events started, and hence were not influenced by the events.

Description of students surveyed

Of the students surveyed (240 females and 246 males), the average age was 17 years and students were in fifth year. The majority of students (342; 84 %) were studying agricultural science for their Leaving Certificate. A total of 61 % of the students surveyed were from a farming background, with dairy farming the most common farming enterprise (49 %). Of the students living on a farm, 56 % reported having had a discussion on the future ownership of the farm with their parents.

> Increasing public understanding of the complex relationship between agriculture and climate change will ultimately lead to more informed decisions and policies around agricultural sustainability and the environment in the future.

Results

Over half of the students surveyed (53 %) had decided on their preferred career choice and only 31 % had considered a career in dairy farming. The people who had the greatest influence on student career choices are presented in **Figure 1**. Student perceptions of dairy farming are presented in **Table 1**. Additionally, 52 % of the students thought the work/life balance was inferior compared with other careers, while 12 % thought it was better than other professions. The workload of dairy farmers was thought to be hard or very hard by 82 % of the students. Some 47 % of respondents thought the salary in dairy farming was similar to what was achievable in other careers.

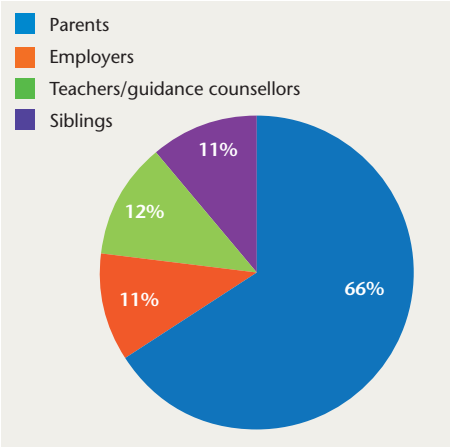
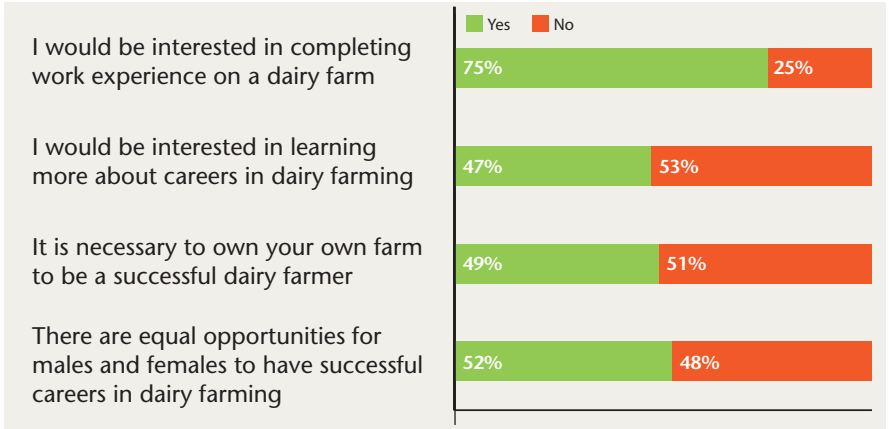


FIGURE 1: Main influencers of students' career choice.

Table 1: Students' perceptions of dairy farming.



Impact of studying agricultural science on career perception

Of the 342 respondents studying agricultural science, 188 (56 %) had decided on their careers, with 37.6 % considering a career in dairy farming. More male students (38.3 %) were interested in a career in dairy farming compared to female students (18.5 %). When asked if they were interested in learning more about careers in dairy farming, 56 % of male students and 52 % of female students said yes. The majority (83 %) were interested in completing work experience on a dairy farm (86 % for male, 79 % for female).

Implications

There is an opportunity for the Government to give increased attention to agriculture in school curricula. This could be timely in the context of greater public interest in food, agriculture and climate change, and could generate greater interest among adolescents in primary food production, especially if combined with a work experience element. This could provide adolescents and their parents with a better understanding of opportunities in primary agriculture. Increasing public understanding of the complex relationship between agriculture and climate change will ultimately lead to more informed decisions and policies around agricultural sustainability and the environment in the future.

Conclusion

New entrants to dairy farming are critical for generational renewal and to facilitate innovation and growth within the sector. Hence, understanding student perceptions of dairy farming careers, and the factors that influence prospective recruits, is essential. The values traditionally associated with farming (love of the land and hard work) are no longer sufficiently attractive to 21st century adolescents. Coupled with inadequate knowledge and understanding of dairy farming, students are dissuaded from considering it as a career option. Work–life balance, career development opportunities and flexibility are all important to adolescents. For the dairy industry to attract a sufficient number of high-quality recruits, significant additional efforts must be made to address negative perceptions by better educating both students and parents about the benefits of dairy farming careers. One option to increase students' knowledge of dairy farming is for a short work placement to be incorporated into the school curriculum.

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