

Education powers careers in the dairy farming sector

Due to the growth in herd size, more dairy farms require non-family labour. The ability to attract and retain labour is fundamental to the success of many dairy farm businesses.

Emma-Louise Coffey
Teagasc Education Coordinator, Moorepark.



Martina Gormley
Teagasc Dairy Specialist, Athenry.



John and Carmel Butler farm near Templetuohy, Co Tipperary. They grew their dairy herd the hard way, building their skills, consolidating the grazing platform and purchasing quota. They went from 54 cows in 2005 to 200 in 2016.

Today, they milk 210 cows and rear youngstock on a separate grazing block (60 0-1 and 1-2 year olds). Both agree that work/life balance is increasingly important.

Farm labour

Until 2015, John and Carmel completed the majority of the farm work themselves. Relief labour helped at weekends. During the summer, family members were involved; an agriculture student was available for 12 weeks during the spring.

"We recognised the need for full-time labour to help manage the additional workload associated with the growing herd," says John.

"We began hosting 12-month students from the Teagasc Level 7 Professional Diploma in Dairy Farm Management (PDDFM) course in September 2015 and have been fortunate to have worked with excellent students since then."

Currently, the farm team includes year two PDDFM student Jack Ryan and PDDFM graduate Michael Boland, who was placed on the Butler farm and is now employed as assistant manager.

Teagasc' Professional Diploma in Dairy Farm Management course

- Gold standard in dairy farm man-

Emma Louise Coffey, Carmel Butler, Front, from left, Michael Boland, John Butler, Jack Ryan.



Dairy farming as an attractive career

Ruth Nettle from the University of Melbourne outlined what employees want based on an employment survey completed in Australia at the Teagasc labour conference in 2018.

"While wages play a role in attracting staff, the conditions of employment and how staff are treated are key in retain-

ing and motivating staff," says Ruth.

The most common practices appreciated by employees included:

- Flexible working hours.
- Rostered time off.
- Autonomy and responsibility.
- Opportunities for training and development.
- Recognition for a job well done.

agement training.

- Two-year paid placement on approved host farms.
- Pay: at least minimum wage, per hour worked.
- Typical roster: 11/3 or 5/2 - 40-48 hour working week.
- 20 course days, delivered in Teagasc

Moorepark and Kildalton College.

- 20 days paid annual leave.
- Optional six-month placement abroad.
- Eligibility: Level 6 Advanced Certificate in Agriculture or equivalent.
- Course validated and certified by UCD.

Michael Boland

Prior to agricultural college, Michael's only farming experience was a brief amount of time spent on relatives' farms during family visits.

"This left an impression on me," says Michael. "When it came to deciding what to do after school, I chose to go to Teagasc Kildalton College to complete the Level 5 Certificate in Agriculture and the Level 6 Advanced Certificate in Agriculture (Dairy), rather than my other preferences of an ag science degree or a trade in carpentry."

Michael says he viewed dairy farming as a career where he could work outside and in time become his own boss.

Introduction to dairy farming

"I was very lucky to be placed with excellent host farmers throughout my education," says Michael.

"They were all patient and willing to answer my many questions (Figure 1). I was extremely 'green' starting out. The placements, with the lectures, practicals and experience in Kildal-

Figure 1: Michael Boland's dairy experience



ton, gave me a great base to start my dairy career."

PDDFM course

Following Kildalton College, Michael applied for the Level 7 PDDFM course.

"Not coming from a farm, this was the next best thing to expand my knowledge base and get experience on farms over a 12-month period," he says. "Being away from home on the placements boosts your self confidence and independence."

Michael completed the PDDFM course in August 2021 and chose to take up the role of assistant manager on the Butler's farm. Michael explains: "I am totally invested in what is going on here and when you get the opportunity to work alongside someone like John, you learn a lot.

"Everyone works best where they are appreciated and treated well, given responsibility in different aspects of the business and the farm facilities are good – this farm ticks all those boxes."

Jack Ryan

Jack, from Toomevara, Co Tipperary, gained a keen interest in agriculture from farming with his parents on their dairy and beef farm. After school, Jack enrolled in Teagasc Kildalton College to complete the Level 5 and 6 course "to take a practical approach to my education in agriculture," he says.

Learning how to measure and allocate grass and breeding management to ensure compact calving were highlights, he says.

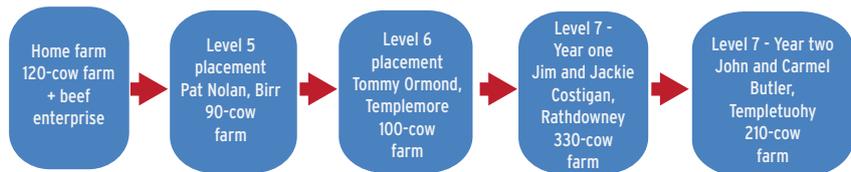
Jack also completed the DIY AI course through the college.

PDDFM course

Following this, Jack took up a place on the PDDFM course. "Since joining the course, my knowledge and capabilities have doubled," he says.

"I now understand how management decisions can impact financial performance and how work organisation can achieve high productivity

Figure 2: Jack Ryan's dairy experience



while allowing all farm staff a good work-life balance."

"I have defined start and finish times and while things were busy in springtime, this doesn't mean the length of the working day dragged on. We had a plan, worked hard and finished timely everyday."

Jack appreciates the experience he has gained from his placements with Jim in Year one and John in Year two

(Figure 2). He recalls situations where he asked John a question in the yard during the working day and how they often have a follow up discussion around the table at lunch to work out the answer.

Completing the PDDFM course is about the learning opportunity for Jack: "I'm not coming here to work every day for a pay cheque, I'm coming for the experience."

Learnings from students in the PDDFM course

John and Carmel highlight the addition that the PDDFM students have made to the farm: "Their course days at Teagasc mean they are well informed of the latest research and best practice and they bring that to us and challenge us to be the best we can."

The farm has impressive figures, in-

cluding a six-week calving rate of 84% and milk solids at 515kg in 2021, steadily increasing from 470kg in 2015.

How we have changed?

"In 2015, taking on and managing a full-time staff member for the first time was a steep learning curve," says John Butler.

"We needed to manage our expectations because employees have a life outside of the farm. We structure the

work, especially evening milking time, so there is a consistent start and end to the working day."

John and Carmel encourage constructive feedback from students on how they can improve the farm business. As a result, they have investment to improve facilities, which includes extending the milking parlour to 24-units as well as automation, cluster removers, auto-drafting and automatic calf feeders.