



Macra na Feirme

Teagasc Student Placement Proposal

The following document outlines the position of Macra na Feirme regarding the Teagasc Student Placement system and programme within Teagasc Agricultural colleges and related programmes. It is formulated in the context of a changing programme and the reality experienced by members and former members of the on-farm placement programme. Macra na Feirme's ambition is that a programme regarding student placement succeeds in providing a relevant breath of experience for the student of farm enterprises while also ensuring active engagement from host farmers. Above all the programmes must develop the student and impart a true experience reflective of farming and allow for the development and growth of the student.

Ascertaining Students Preferences

With the proposed changes about the timing of the placement, Macra na Feirme would like to see Students allowed to engage more proactively in outlining their preference for learning outcomes that they wish to achieve in the host farm. Macra na Feirme's view is that there must be clear learning outcomes assigned to the placement experience. These learning outcomes must be based on the practical implementation of the theory taught throughout the course. Students must be invited to outline their preferences in descending order in terms of learning outcomes. Some learning outcomes must be core to the placement while others may be additional requirements but meet a minimum number. For example, five core learnings in placement one and five additional selected by the student and a similar arrangement in placement two.

Support for Placement Officers

The system of assigning students to their host farm varies from college to college. The experience of the placement officer also varies and the changes in the system may not be regularly updated so a placement officer can find it difficult to sort out host farmers according to possible learning outcomes. Having the burden of decision-making residing solely on one person's shoulders may also be a factor which could be assisted for easier management. Macra na Feirme would like to see the following,

- The establishment of a placement panel in each college to assign students to their host farms.
- The placement panel would assess the suitability of the student to the farmer and assign them accordingly.
- Consistency across colleges will also be important to ensure fairness across courses, a panel to ascertain consistency across colleges would also be a benefit and would be an overall panel should there be issues in specific colleges.

The monitoring of experience

Feedback received by Macra na Feirme has highlighted that the experiences received on farms vary from student to student. It is obvious that no two placements are going to be identical, but some measures could be included to establish a standard platform for monitoring and the creation of expected learning outcomes whilst on placement. Macra na Feirme would like to see the following with regards to monitoring,

- Develop a clear set of expected learning outcomes for the student whilst on placement.
- Establish that every host farmer is aware of the expected learning outcomes and has the required knowledge and skills to impart the relevant knowledge and training.
- Establish a core set of learning outcomes as outlined above and allow for the student to identify elective areas for learning while on placement, (similar to university format, in practice, this translates to approx. ten core learning outcomes and five elective learning outcomes that the student has chosen).
- Develop a skills base of host farmers that can be aligned with core learning outcomes and the elective outcomes chosen by the student themselves.
- Mid-Term placement reviews with both the student and the host farmer are also necessary to ensure that the overall placement experience is being delivered and that learning outcomes are being progressed throughout the placement.
- The Mid-term placement review could be conducted by the placement panel or a combination thereof to assure consistency across the college(s).

Variety of Farm Experience

Macra na Feirme raise the issue of the options afforded to students about the variety and type of farming enterprises that can be used as host farms and the duration of each host farm. It is recognised that to get a full experience of farming that one specialised farm system may not provide the learning opportunities that a student desires. This aligns with the statement above about elective learning outcomes that a student may choose, in the regard Macra na Feirme would request the following be investigated for consideration,

- Potential for placement to be broken into different blocks based on students' desired learning outcomes (4 weeks Dairy, 4 weeks Beef, 4 weeks Sheep etc),
- Increase opportunities for several types of systems within a specific area on each placement (upland sheep, lowland sheep, grass-based milk production, indoor system etc),
- The opportunity of inclusion for exposure to farm experience's relevant to farming (Discussion Group meetings, Teagasc Open days etc),
- Farm safety exercise conducted on host farms that is consistent with best practice to ensure students are not placed in dangerous circumstances unnecessarily,
- The creation of a farm walk buddy system between students on placement (every two weeks a student and host farmer host a farm walk for the students and host farmers near the farm) This can also help ensure consistency across host farmers and placement experience.
- Option for the completion of training courses specific to farm practices (Grass measuring, Hoof-care, AI, stockmanship etc).

Facilities and provisions on Farm

Consistency across all host farms with regards to facilities is required, students have expressed to Macra na Feirme that the level of facilities across farms varies widely and in many circumstances is not appropriate for a placement experience, the following must be considered as minimum requirements,

- Basic toilet facilities which are easily accessible and maintained,
- Rest area provided for breaktime and lunchtime,
- Provision of basic PPE for students for farm tasks they are expected to carry out,
- Provision of facilities for eating, which is clean and maintained,
- Agreed decision on provision of food supplied or not by host farmer with no direct impact on the remuneration package afforded to the student,
- Adherence to break time provision as agreed in line with good places to work,
- Agreed start and finish time and adhered to as a matter of consistency (clearly there will be on occasion a late finish)
- Clear agreement that the remuneration is linked directly to expected hours and anything hours worked above the agreed hours is paid work in line with standard pay.

Host farmer

Macra na Feirme would like to see the addition of several actions that can be used to define the criteria and used as a screening tool for potential host farmers. These include,

- Mandatory peer educator training to be undertaken by all host farmers.
- Training about the expected learning outcomes from the placement for the students.
- Creation of a new list of host farmers in all colleges which is updated regularly to ensure that placement panels have a live list of host farmers.
- Profile creation of host farmers in terms of skills and terms of farm enterprise and activity.
- Assessment of suitability of farms to deliver on learning outcomes.
- Expectation setting for the standard of students that will be on placement and the expectations surrounding working hours and time off.

It must be the responsibility of the college to outline the roles and expectations to the host farmer and student. It must also be the college's role to monitor performance and ensure standards are maintained as much as possible. The student should not be left to enforce the delivery of learning outcomes given the reliance on positive feedback from the host farmer regarding placement.

Conclusion

The overall ambition of the student placement must be to ensure that the experience is consistent across farms and that both students' and hosts' farmers' expectations were met. Delivering on learning outcomes across the entirety of the placement is crucial while also affording students the options to broaden their experience in different sectors and enterprises. Macra na Feirme welcomes engagement with Teagasc on this matter and has had positive feedback. We also welcome future



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engagement as given the age demographic of the active farming population in Ireland all actors need to use the full array of tools at their disposal to ensure a high standard across the student placement programme.