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Maynooth University

Independent evaluation of the Diploma and Degree in Rural Development across National University of Ireland universities

Breandán Ó Caoimh and Kathy Walsh

2021

Ollscoil na hÉireann
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Foreword

Having learned some valuable lessons from the review commissioned by NUI of the short-lived Uversity project*, it struck us in NUI that there might be even more to be learned from a review of the Diploma/BSc in Rural Development offered in collaboration by the four NUI constituent universities. This ran for almost twenty years and produced over five hundred graduates. There were so many aspects of the programme that were ground-breaking: the partnership model; the interdisciplinarity; the non-traditional student body; the blended learning experience at weekends across four campuses and off-campus; the involvement of external stakeholders.

Apart from its innovative character, the Rural Development programme was always particularly special to us in NUI. Uniquely the programme spanned our four constituent institutions. We got to know the programme co-ordinators well through their meetings in our building over the lifetime of the programme. We could see at first hand their huge enthusiasm for the programme and their commitment to the students. The positive interaction between the team members was palpable. While there were some changes in personnel over the years, all of those who contributed to the success of the programme deserve commendation for what they achieved.

The programme was introduced in the year before the Universities Act 1997 redefined the university sector, modernising governance structures and emphasising strategic planning, accountability and quality assurance. The Act engineered a major restructuring of the National University of Ireland, creating four autonomous universities and loosening the ties within the federal university. Since then, in redefining its own role, an important part of NUI's mission has been to act as a focus for collaboration; the Rural Development programme resonated well with that.

When the programme eventually ran out of steam and was discontinued after 2015 for lack of funding and the other reasons identified in this study, we felt that something valuable had been lost. This study provides a deep analysis of the programme and the difference it made to the careers both of the graduates and also of the academics involved. It highlights the strengths of the programme while pointing to the key factors that made it unsustainable in the long run. We are happy that the review captures the essence of the Rural Development programme and its particular contribution to individual personal development, to rural development and to higher education. We are grateful to Dr Breandán Ó Caoimh and Dr Kathy Walsh for the insights they have provided into this unique programme and we hope that the findings of the review will be of value for the future progress of rural development policy and education and for partnership initiatives across the higher education spectrum.

NUI greatly appreciates the financial support received from our four constituent universities and from the Department of Rural and Community Development for the commissioning of the study and the publication of the report. Our thanks are also due also to the members of the Steering Group which guided the research project to successful completion: Associate Professor Pádraig Wims and Dr Karen Keaveney, UCD; Michael Kenny, Maynooth University; Dr Mary O'Shaughnessy, UCC; Dr Marie Mahon, NUI Galway and Aisling Penrose, Department of Rural and Community Development.

Dr Attracta Halpin
Registrar NUI

* Uversity was an NUI recognised college involving partnership between twenty-four higher education institutions on the island of Ireland. It provided a Master of Arts degree programme awarded by NUI to international students from 2014-2017. The review of the programme is available at http://www.nui.ie/publications/published-Materials.asp

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Executive Summary

I Introduction

The Diploma/BSc Degree in Rural Development, which operated between 1996 and 2015, was an innovation in higher education. The four universities involved in its development and subsequent delivery were Maynooth University (NUI Maynooth), University College Cork (UCC), University College Dublin (UCD) and NUI Galway (formerly University College Galway – UCG).

This independent review, which was commissioned by the National University of Ireland (NUI) and researched by Drs Kathy Walsh and Breandán Ó Caoimh, provides an evaluation of the programme and captures some key learning.

II Programme overview

The review found that the programme provided a distinctive and valuable offering in rural development education. It combined the strengths and resources of the four participating universities, such that the whole was significantly greater than the sum of the parts. The programme was rolled out and sustained, over almost two decades, by strong and committed experts – academic and administrative – in the four universities. It engendered a positive learning experience, and enabled students to progress professionally and as active citizens and community leaders. The modes of delivery were tailored, reviewed and refreshed in line with student needs, emerging technologies and best practices. The programme had a positive impact on elements of the rural development policy and practice landscapes. Over the course of the programme, 563 students successfully completed the diploma. Notwithstanding its significant outputs and achievements, the programme was not sustained beyond 2015. The review found that its demise was associated with a lack of embeddedness within formalised university structures, an over-reliance on key individuals and an absence of a mainstream funding mechanism.

III Key learning

This review captures relevant learning in relation to six key areas as follows:

- The inter-university partnership model;
- Engagement with policy and practice stakeholders in rural development;
- Teaching and learning experiences;
- Student progression and their impacts;
- Funding;
- Policy impacts and implications.

The inter-university partnership emerged and was consolidated at a time of burgeoning activity in rural development. The EU White Paper on Rural Development (1987) and subsequent reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) brought about a shift away from the dominant focus on agriculture that had pertained up to then, and it identified the potential contributions of other sectors and actors, including civil society, to the development of rural areas. New approaches to rural development implied a need for new skills and expertise, and a Teagasc review of rural development training (1993) articulated the need for a diploma in rural development. The four universities responded quickly and constructively, and four well-established academics, one from each university, designed and compiled a programme that drew on, and fused, the strengths and expertise of each contributing partner. These individuals, all of whom were subsequently involved in the programme's delivery, brought personal energy, drive and commitment to the programme.

While individual expertise, enthusiasm and altruism ensured the delivery of a largely seamless programme that was populated by modules that addressed contemporary issues in rural development, the review found that academic collaboration was not accompanied by a corresponding cross-university administrative arrangement. Thus, when members of the core group of leading academics (comprising the original pioneers and their colleagues, who subsequently became involved) either retired or were assigned to other duties, there were challenges in terms of replacing them and/or replicating the extent of their contributions. The universities acknowledge that were an inter-university collaborative programme to be put in place today, it would be underpinned by a memorandum of understanding (MoU) or other formal inter-institutional agreement. Moreover, the academics involved would be obliged to report to, and to formally garner the support of university management.

The programme did not seek to come up with one common philosophy or academic lens; rather, it worked to present a plurality and diversity of approaches to rural development. There was also, importantly, parity of esteem between the senior academics involved. They established an academic board to oversee the programme's delivery. The NUI played an enabling role in bringing the universities together. It provided meeting facilities for the academic board and external examiners, and it awarded a top-student award (on the BSc) over a number of years. Despite their collective efforts, each of the universities persisted with their own exam papers, academic calendars, student registrations and learning platforms. Thus, while collaboration was a hallmark of the programme, individualised practices persisted in parallel.

Engagement with policy and practice stakeholders gave the programme a number of distinctive features and provided students with learning and progression opportunities beyond those offered to most third-level students. The universities promoted the programme and recruited students through community groups, LEADER companies and rural organisations. These conduits also proved to be significant in terms of funding the programme and in providing students with supportive learning environments and progression pathways. The universities also engaged with various government departments, and while they received support from some of them, financial contributions from the exchequer failed to put the programme on the financial footing that was necessary to grow and sustain it.

The universities jointly appointed external examiners, and these examiners played a valuable role in quality assurance and in encouraging a deepening of inter-university collaboration. Their recommendations, in respect of a more fused and streamlined collaborative model, were largely, but not fully, taken on board, and these remain as a useful set of pointers for developing any future inter-university collaborations, not just in rural development, but in any discipline.

The teaching and learning experiences were characterised by high levels of innovation and collaborative relationships between academics – internally and across universities. Classes took place at weekends, on-campus and in some cases in community facilitates. Lectures and tutorials were supplemented by field studies and practitioner inputs. All students, from the four universities, met at least annually, on one of the four campuses. Some students hosted their entire class, in their community/workplace, thus providing their peers with practice insights. Students were also enabled to undertake work placements. Thus, the programme had a strong applied dimension. Continuous assessment, rather than terminal exams, pertained. The degree (BSc) was designed and developed as a response to student requests for a formal progression route from the diploma, and this became fully operational from 2004 onwards. The sixteen taught degree-level modules were delivered on campus. In each case, the respective module was delivered by the academic who had developed it, and the delivery took place on his/her campus. The degree content was formally reviewed in 2011, and re-structured in 2013, as a result of inputs from the external examiners who suggested that the modules needed to be reviewed and that the programme needed to consider issues of wider environmental sustainability in particular.

The programme's evolution paralleled the emergence of an increased range of new technologies, which the universities embraced. Thus, its strong face-to-face components were gradually complemented by modes of blended learning, and the programme can be seen as pioneering in that regard. Student feedback on their learning experience was universally positive, although a student survey dealing with their experiences is somewhat limited, due to the historical nature of student records and limitations on the researchers' access to students' personal data. Students reported positively on the programme staff's care for them and on their commitment to ensuring they received a formative learning experience.

Student progression and impacts were manifest professionally and in their personal lives. All were adult learners/mature students, and many had never anticipated 'going to college'. Several reported transformative experiences based on personal journeys, and they recounted that their peers, lecturers and university staff enabled them to grow, while also ensuring they acquired valuable insights into rural development. Staff collegiality and the positive nature of staff – student engagements were found to be significant contributory factors in ensuring a productive learning environment and the delivery of learning outcomes. Students universally reported that they had gained and/or refined their skills and aptitudes in respect of critical thinking, research, analysis and report writing. Students attributed their career progression, mainly in local development companies, to their participation in the programme. Several also reported that the confidence they gained and the knowledge and skills they acquired enabled them to make valuable contributions to their local communities and to voluntary organisations.

Advances in technology, over time, facilitated inter-student contacts and networking, and strong friendships remain, but this collective knowledge capital was never formally captured. Thus, there may have been a missed opportunity to fully harness graduates' collective ability to contribute more coherently and effectively to shaping rural development policies and practices.

Funding proved to be a challenge in terms of growing and sustaining the programme. The availability of LEADER funding, over the course of approximately ten years, cemented collaborative relationships between the universities and local development companies, and it enabled individual students to access bursaries that covered their tuition fees – either in full or part. However, the precarious and stop-start nature of LEADER meant that it was not a fully consistent or reliable source of funds, and the bursaries it provided seldom covered more than tuition costs. Indeed, the absence of a dedicated mainstream funding source, similar to those provided to core university programmes and to many professional formation pathways, proved to be a significant factor in the programme's demise. The funding shortfall mitigated against the mainstreaming of the programme, and it put pressure on both academic and administrative staff, who were continuously stretched, as they performed multiple tasks/roles.

While stakeholders acknowledge grants received from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and funds raised through university offices, they note that the programme suffered from the absence of a business plan and fundraising strategy. The ensuing lesson for any future programmes, including any inter-university initiatives, is that a business case needs to be made and supported.

The programme's impact in terms of policy and its implications for rural development have manifested themselves through significant personal contributions from individual academics and students, rather than through a formal shared position paper or inter-university platform. Academics, students and graduates have made various submissions to the EU, national government and regional and local authorities that have informed the formulation of policies and strategic plans. Indeed, several continue to be active in promoting best practice in rural development. In this regard, consultees pointed to the importance of further valorising endogenous and area-based approaches to development that promote more diversity and innovation and reduce bureaucratic burdens on local actors. The programme content emphasised the value of local social capital and inclusive practices, and consultees contended that such principles ought to universally underpin policy and practice. The external examiners had pointed to the importance of the green agenda and sustainable development, and their recommendations in respect of these issues, have become increasingly manifest across university programmes and in public policy over recent decades. Ensuring their application requires more concerted efforts across society.

In conclusion, this inter-university initiative, which the NUI enabled and supported, has made significant and positive contributions to education and to enhancing policy and practice in rural development. Its achievements are associated with the expertise and drive of key individuals in the four participating universities. The pooling of their collective knowledge, ability and commitment generated an imaginative, relevant, comprehensive, robust and high-quality programme that was characterised by innovations in delivery and high levels of student engagement and progression. This experience manifests synergies and added value associated with inter-university and cross-sectoral collaboration, and its impacts could have been greater, and its delivery may have been sustained had it been more formally embedded in institutional structures and supported by a dedicated and secure funding stream.

1 Introduction

The collaborative Diploma and BSc (Hons) in Rural Development were established and delivered by an inter-university partnership made up of UCC, UCD, NUIG, and MU during the period 1996-2015. This partnership was supported by the NUI. Due to a change in funding arrangements and other factors, both courses (referred to hereafter as the programme) terminated in 2015. The final cohort of students graduated from the BSc (Hons) Rural Development in the 2014-2015 academic year.

In 2020, following a competitive tendering process, the NUI commissioned this independent review of the diploma/degree programme to examine its effectiveness in respect of student/graduate progression, inter-university working and implications for rural development education and policy.

1.1 The National University of Ireland (NUI)

NUI was established by charter and statute, in 1908, as a federal university structure. It has four constituent universities in Ireland, two recognised colleges and a number of other higher education institutions linked to the constituent universities. NUI provides value-added services to its member institutions, and it undertakes a range of activities to promote higher education in Ireland, and to advance academic distinction and scholarship across its member institutions.

Under its 1908 Charter, NUI is empowered to recognise colleges of higher education and award degrees and other qualifications in those colleges. In addition, under the terms of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act (2012), NUI is a designated awarding body (DAB) with the authority to accredit taught and research programmes leading to NUI qualifications in the recognised colleges. NUI's mission is to serve the interests of its member institutions, and one of its current strategic goals is to act as a forum for collaborative activities and shared learning.

NUI's role in relation to the Diploma and the BSc (Hons) in Rural Development was one of active encouragement and support for the collaborating academic schools and departments of the four constituent universities. The Diploma and BSc (Hons) programme was launched in the NUI building on Merrion Square in Dublin city-centre. To facilitate the four university partners, NUI also provided a convenient city-centre Dublin location for meetings of the inter-university academic board (effectively the programme steering group) and external examiners. In alternate years from 2012 onwards, NUI offered a €2,000 student scholarship in Rural Development, recognising the achievement of the top student on the BSc (Hons) course.

1.2 The university partners

The four universities involved in development and subsequent delivery of the Diploma and BSc in Rural Development were MU, UCC, UCD and NUIG.

Maynooth University (formally The National University of Ireland, Maynooth)

Maynooth University was formally established as a constituent university of the NUI in the Universities Act in 1997. Prior to this, St Patrick's College, Maynooth, had a long association with the National University since its foundation, and the origins of St Patrick's College can be traced back to 1795. Maynooth University had just over 13,000 students in the academic year 2019-20, and offers a range of programmes at undergraduate, master's and PhD levels.[1] The development and delivery of the Diploma and BSc (Hons) in Rural Development was situated within the Department of Adult and Community Education in the Faculty of Social Science.

1 Student numbers sourced from the Higher Education Authority's Statistics archive. Accessible here: https://hea.ie/statistics/

University College Cork (UCC)

UCC was established in 1845 as one of three Queen's Colleges. It became University College, Cork, under the Irish Universities Act of 1908, and subsequently a constituent College of the National University of Ireland federation. The Universities Act 1997 renamed the university as a constituent university (not College) of the National University of Ireland.

UCC had over 21,000 students in the academic year 2019-20, and it offers a range of programmes at undergraduate, master's and PhD levels. The development and delivery of the Diploma and BSc in Rural Development was situated within the Department of Food Business and Development at Cork University Business School.

University College Dublin (UCD)

UCD was formally established in 1908 under the Irish Universities Act, but had its origins in the Catholic University of Ireland established in 1854. Under the 1997 Universities Act, UCD, like UCC and NUI Galway, changed from constituent college, to an autonomous constituent university, of the National University of Ireland. Like UCC, NUIG and Maynooth, UCD students are awarded degrees of the NUI.

UCD had 27,000 students in the academic year 2019-20, and it offers a range of programmes at undergraduate, master's and PhD level. The development and delivery of the Diploma and BSc in Rural Development was situated within the Department of Agri-Business and Rural Development within the School of Agriculture and Food Science.

National University of Ireland, Galway (NUI Galway)

Originally known as Queen's College Galway and subsequently as University College Galway – UCG), NUI Galway was founded in 1845. The 1908 Universities Act brought University College Galway into the NUI federation as a constituent college of the new National University. Under the Universities Act in 1997, NUI Galway – along with UCD and UCC – gained autonomy as a constituent university within the loose NUI federation.

NUI Galway had a student population of over 19,000 in the academic year 2019-20. It is similar to the other three universities in that it offers a range of programmes at undergraduate, master's and PhD levels. The development and delivery of the Diploma and BSc in Rural Development was situated within the Department of Economics in the College of Business, Public Policy and Law. The programme also drew on expertise in the College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Sciences.

1.3 Aim and objectives of the review

The aim was to review and evaluate the Diploma and BSc (Hons) degree programme, and in particular:

1. The nature of the inter-organisational partnership model established between the four universities themselves and between the universities and government departments, state agencies, LEADER Local Action Groups and other community and voluntary organisations that were involved in programme delivery;
2. The universities' experience (including the staff experience) of inter-institutional teaching and student support collaboration across the different academic disciplines, in terms of curriculum development and delivery via e-learning and the wider impact of this collaboration on the participating academic schools/departments;
3. The funding model for the programme and the issues affecting programme sustainability;
4. The high-level student experience of the programme and key indicators about the student and graduate profile, such as progression and completion rates;
5. The personal and professional (i.e. career) impact of the programme on the alumni and, additionally, on the rural communities where they lived and the rural organisations in which they worked; and
6. The impact of the programme in terms of contribution to rural development policy formulation.

The review does not include an academic quality review of the Diploma and the BSc (Hons) degree programme, since such reviews were undertaken during the lifetime of the courses.

1.4 Methodology

This study was undertaken using a mixed-methods approach. Methodologies used included:

1. A review of secondary programme level data

   The evaluators reviewed the anonymised secondary data (provided by the four partner universities and by NUI) on the programme participation.

2. Consultations with academic partner organisations

   See Appendix 2 for details of the academic related partner consultations completed.

3. Consultations with key external stakeholders

   The final list of key stakeholders to be interviewed at part of the evaluation was agreed with evaluation steering committee. See Appendix 3 for details of the key stakeholder interviews completed.

4. Consultations with the course participants

   Making contact with course participants was always going to be a challenge because of the historical nature of this review and the likelihood that course participants business contact details were likely to have changed. General Data Protection Guidelines (GDPR) also posed challenges in terms of the universities' ability to share this type of personal data without explicit agreement from the course participants. In the absence of a centralised list of programme participants two key methodologies were used to consult with former course participants. The first was an online survey with the link to the survey circulated widely via:

   - Community Exchange;
   - Pobal internal staff newsletter and social media accounts;
   - The NUI social media accounts;
   - Various Irish Rural Link Newsletters;
   - The National Rural Network Sept 2020 newsletter;
   - ILDN and all Local Development Companies;
   - Public Participation Networks (PPNs) and The Wheel; and
   - Local authorities and the Local Government Management Agency
   - Some members of the Review Steering Committee also invited participation via their social media accounts and by email to graduates with whom they are still in contact.

Survey participants were able to indicate whether they would be prepared to participate in a focus group. A total of 34 survey responses were received broken down as follows: Maynooth University (NUI Maynooth) (5 responses); NUIG (3 responses); UCC (14 responses); UCD (11 responses) and 1 unknown. Just thirty of these responses were valid (i.e. consent was confirmed).

The survey was supplemented by three virtual focus groups (held on the 22nd September (2) and the 26th November (1) a total of fourteen (n=14) graduates attended. Ideally, the evaluators who have liked to have had more programme participants engage in the evaluation process, but recognise that the historical/ retrospective nature of the review was always going to make this challenging.

5. Preparation and finalisation of the full draft report

   A draft report was prepared by the evaluators and reviewed by the Rural Development Review Steering Group which meet regularly throughout the review process. See Appendix 4 for details of the membership of this group. The report was finalised following their input and feedback.

1.5 Study limitations

The fact that the collaborative diploma began over twenty-five years ago, and ceased more than five years ago, presented a challenge in accessing both the diploma and the degree programme records. This was further complicated by the fact that the programmes were delivered in four different universities, each of which had variable levels of data to hand, and none of whose databases were in the same format. Thus, the evaluation lacks universal data on overall completion and progression data.

Contacting graduates was also an issue given that their details were likely to have changed since they graduated. Moreover, graduates had not given prior consent to their details being shared for evaluation purposes. As such, no comprehensive list was available. Instead, the evaluators had to find other ways to highlight the survey among graduates. The focus group participants reported, and the evaluators found, that graduates who are still involved in rural development were more likely to both have known about the survey and to have responded than were others who may now be working in different areas. This, in turn, places some limitations on the representativeness of the survey sample and the ability to extrapolate fully from the findings.

2 Findings

2.1 The background and evolution of the programme

2.1.1 Background

The Rural Development diploma was conceived and launched at a time when there was a very strong interest in rural development at both the European and national levels.

At European level, the first pilot European Union (EU)-funded *Liaison entre actions de développement de l'économie rurale* (LEADER) Programme ran from 1991-1993. The purpose of the LEADER Programme was to support rural development projects initiated at the local level in order to revitalise rural areas and create jobs in designated disadvantaged rural areas. This pilot programme was quickly followed by the LEADER II Programme (1994-1999), which was expanded to cover a greater number of designated rural areas.

At national level, in 1994, the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) published 'New Approaches to Rural Development', which identified the three main elements of rural and local development as: '1) pre-development (the animation of local groups and the generation of a capacity to work purposefully in collective action; 2) reduction of social exclusion; and 3) enterprise development' (1994: xiii). The LEADER groups (subsequently re-named Local Development Companies), around the country, were very identifiable, and were actively engaged in several aspects of community and local development. Both of these developments raised the profile of rural development and placed a strong emphasis on the need for local animation and capacity building. Rural development was a 'hot topic' and academics and practitioners working/volunteering at a local level alike, began to see that while there were opportunities with the sector, there were limited educational or indeed certification opportunities.

The specific origins of the programme can be directly traced back to a strategy for Rural Development Training produced by Teagasc in 1993. That strategy report identified a need for three new training programmes with appropriate certification. One of these training programmes was a Diploma in Rural Development, which was to be targeted at practitioners working in rural development in a professional or voluntary capacity. A Rural Training Advisory Committee (RUTAC) and a special priming fund were identified, by this strategy, as the key vehicles to ensure effective co-ordination of the three programmes (O'Cearbhaill, 1997). The RUTAC Committee was formally established in 1996. Membership of this group included representatives from relevant government departments, Teagasc, Macra na Feirme and various universities.

2.1.2 Evolution of the Diploma

Four senior academics (from Maynooth University, NUI Galway, UCC and UCD respectively), who were members of RUTAC, took on the responsibility of working collectively, and they moved quickly and enthusiastically to establish and develop the Diploma in Rural Development. These four individuals came from different academic disciplines and backgrounds. The content of the diploma was largely influenced by their collective skills, knowledge and expertise and those of their immediate departmental colleagues. NUI Galway personnel were, for example, strong in relation to economics, while UCC offered particular expertise in cooperative structures, food and marketing. Maynooth focused on adult learning and sociology, while UCD had particular skills and expertise in relation to agricultural extension, the LEADER methodology and capacity building. The course design was also informed by individual academic's experiences, which, in one case, included delivery of other adult education programmes and specifically the learning arising from an extra-mural community development and leadership outreach course run from St Patrick's College, Maynooth. The finalisation and ultimate approval of the collaborative diploma, within the four institutions, was supported by the reputation of the four lead academics, who were all well-established senior academics within their respective institutions.

The four academics, who led the establishment of the diploma, also collectively approached the NUI to seek their support for the concept of a collaborative Diploma. The NUI responded positively, and went onto provide a venue for the regular meetings of the academic board (steering committee) and a venue from which the external examiners could work.

2.1.3 The Diploma in Rural Development

The diploma was made up of eleven modules and a research project delivered over two years – initially, by distance learning and later by blended learning. Each institution prepared 25% of the distance-learning modules. Course participants were expected to have engaged with the course materials in advance of their formal meeting sessions. Meetings with students and their lecturers took place at weekends (generally Fridays into Saturdays). The various modules were delivered by lecturers locally, which meant that lecturers were regularly facilitating the delivery of modules they had not developed.

Diploma students generally only met on the campus where the student was based, at the beginning of their courses. Thereafter, their Saturday sessions were generally held in a variety of community facilities – often linked to groups and organisations with which the students were involved. There were no formal exams; instead, students had to complete assignments for each module. The entire intake of diploma students met collectively at least once a year.

The diploma was specifically targeted at mature students/practitioners (paid employees and volunteers) active in the development of rural areas. It was designed to facilitate individuals in the sector to undertake education and training, and to obtain certification. A leaving certificate qualification was not required. The idea of the diploma was to educate into rural areas rather than educate people out of rural areas. The course content and delivery methods were reviewed and updated in 2004. The content of the diploma was also reviewed in 2013 (Rennie, 2013). The first intake of diploma students took place in 1996, and the first diploma students graduated in 1998, while the last intake was in the academic year 2014-2015.

2.1.4 The Degree in Rural Development

The degree was designed and developed as a response to student requests for a formal progression route from the diploma. This development was facilitated by the awarding of a €210,000 grant by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) in 2003. The degree was made up of the eleven diploma modules and a research project plus an additional sixteen modules and a research project (See Appendix 5 for details of these various modules). Responsibility for the development of these additional modules was (as was the case with the diploma) divided up equally among the four institutions. Each of the four universities had to seek formal academic board approval for this new programme, as the degrees were conferred by the four individual institutions. Additional work also had to be done to ensure that the examinations held as part of the degree were scheduled simultaneously across the four universities.

The sixteen (degree-level) modules were were remotely delivered, using CDs. In addition, there was one on-campus workshop for each module. In each case, the respective module was delivered by the academic who had developed it, and the delivery took place on his/her campus. The course was an outlier programme, running as it did at a time where most parts of the universities were closed. The delivery modes required all degree students to travel to one location for each session. Sometimes, students organised small study groups where they met locally to discuss and prepare for modules and to complete assignments. These student-organised groups were sometimes attended by the one or other of the (four) programme co-ordinators, if and when students requested some additional inputs were requested.

Supervision for the research projects undertaken by degree students was provided by the parent Department of the institution with which the respective students were registered. A research project presentation seminar was held annually, rotated across the four universities.

The degree programme course was also subject to external examination, with a number of UK-based academics appointed to play this role over the years. These external examiners provided the course organisers with useful inputs on both the quality of the programme and potential future content. In general terms, the focus of the degree programme was wider than the diploma, and the content covered national and the European contexts. Some of the academics involved in the development of the degree modules had hoped that, over time, the course could expand to include a greater global and international perspective, but this did not happen.

The degree content was formally reviewed in 2011, and re-structured in 2013, as a result of inputs from the various external examiners, who suggested that the modules needed to be reviewed and that the programme needed to consider wider environmental issues, sustainability in particular.

Delivery of the degree programme began in 2004, and the last intake was in the academic year 2014-2015.

2.1.5 Distance Learning/Blended learning

The concept of distance learning was very innovative, at the time the diploma was launched. Initially, the diploma course module materials, which accompanied the lectures, were provided in a paper-based format referred to as *the green book*. As one academic recalled, 'We didn't really have any resources for distance learning in the beginning. We were working on a shoe string. We were printing out stuff on paper. It was a challenge in 1996 to get people to a computer.'

As technology progressed, the programme successfully navigated its way, and the universities developed distance-learning materials with the support of various small grants (including €6,000 from the UCC Quality Improvement Fund in 2006). The course manual was then supplemented and accompanied by course lectures (presentations accompanied by voice overs) on CDs. At a later stage, the presentations/lectures were provided as MP3 files. The course notes/manuals and lectures formed the basis for the day-long, in-person meetings and facilitated discussions between lecturers and students, in a blended-learning type model (one meeting per module).

2.1.6 The discontinuation of the Programme

Over the period 2011-2015, the sustainability of the collaborative programme was gradually undermined by a combination of factors that adversely affected its organisation, financing and staffing. In 2011, Maynooth University discontinued delivering the BSc programme, because as a small university department, it was necessary for the Department of Adult and Community Education to re-deploy the co-ordinator to lead another professionally accredited programme.

The fall in numbers participating in the courses can be partially attributed to the fact that bursary funding to attend the programme was no longer available from the LDCs as a result of changes to LEADER Programme funding rules.

The departure of Maynooth University, in 2011, left the other three universities delivering the programme. NUIG withdrew from the programme at the end of the academic year 2014/15. As had happened in Maynooth, this decision was associated with personnel changes, including retirements.

UCD and UCC attempted to run (or at least advertise) the programme for the academic year 2015/2016 but it did not materialise, due to a lack of applications. After that, because of the twin issues of lack of applications and the difficulty of two institutions delivering a programme that had been designed to be delivered by four (and the associated problems of trying to develop and deliver modules in which the two remaining universities did not have adequate competence) the programme did not run again.

2.2 Inter-organisational partnership model

2.2.1 Programme management strategies

The design, development and delivery of the joint diploma and, at a later stage, the degree required a lot of joint work and coordinated management. These were facilitated by the appointment of a part-time Programme Co-ordinator and Academic Director in each university.[2]

The part-time Programme Co-ordinators were responsible for the day-to-day operation, as well as the majority of the administration work related to the programme (They also all had other research/academic roles and responsibilities within their respective departments). The absence of any dedicated administration support for the Programme meant that the Programme Co-ordinators had to be very flexible, as one Co-ordinator described it 'we did what needed to be done.'

The programme was managed by an academic board, made up of the Academic Directors and Co-ordinators from each institution. It met every two to three months. Every two years, the Chair of this academic board rotated between the different institutions. While it was suggested that these meetings would rotate between the different universities, participants decided that it was more convenient to meet in Dublin. The NUI's provision of their meeting facilities, at no cost, copper-fastened that decision. Travel costs were borne by the respective universities.

The NUI decision to host academic board and external meetings facilitated a level of ongoing informal contact between the universities and the NUI that might otherwise not have happened. In addition, to the formal academic board meetings, the co-ordinators also met, as required, and were in regular contact with one another.

With this course targeted at mature students, recruitment was an ongoing activity throughout the lifetime of the programme. The programme co-ordinators were responsible for student recruitment, as this course was not accessible via the Central Applications Office. For recruitment purposes, and in order to avoid any unnecessary duplication, the country was divided up, with each university allocated a certain number of counties from which they recruited. Once a student was recruited, he/she could choose to attend whichever university was most convenient to them. As part of this process, the co-ordinators established contacts with various local development companies who often agreed to host meetings, so that individuals interested in the programme could attend to find out more about it. Under the LEADER II Programme (1994-1999) and LEADER+ (2000-2006), LDCs were also able to make bursaries available to support and facilitate students to attend the programme.[3] This funding was not available under the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 (LEADER) or under current LEADER funding programming period (2014-2020).

2.2.2 Supports for the Programme

The programme clearly benefited from the expertise, seniority, personalities and enthusiasm of the four academics who came together to establish the programme. As one stakeholder noted, 'The individuals involved at the outset were senior; they were professors with a strong commitment to the rural development agenda.' These individuals designed the programme in such a way that it was able to accommodate the different universities' approaches to the study of rural development.

The programme did not seek to come up with one common philosophy or academic lens; rather, it worked to present the plurality and diversity of approaches to rural development. There was also, importantly, parity of esteem between the senior academics involved in the programme. One contributor recalled, 'everybody was treated as an equal – regardless of who was the Chair or what role they had in their university.'

2 The academic directors consulted as part of the review were of the opinion that the programme absorbed between 10 and 20% of their time. In Maynooth, the Head of Adult Education took on the role of Academic Director.

3 LEADER+ generally operated in the south and east of Ireland, while the National Mainstream Rural Development Programme (NMRDP) also operated there and in the western and border regions. The LEADER+ operating rules and budgets provided more scope for LEADER funding of bursaries than was permissible under the MRDP.

The programme also benefited from the enthusiasm, commitment and flexibility of the four co-ordinators in relation to the organisation and delivery of the programme. As was noted, 'with the professors involved in the programme pulled in various different directions, it fell to the Co-ordinators to deliver the programme on the ground.'

The programme also profited from the longevity of some of the key co-ordinators, many of whom were attached to the programme for long periods of time, and, in one case, from its inception to its demise. One consultee stated, 'the co-ordinators in each university were country people, and they were involved in their communities and were deeply committed to the programme.'

Academics also noted that those involved in the programme always tried to support their colleagues in other universities. In the words of one of them, 'we always supported one another e.g. putting statements in minutes, so that our colleagues in the other university would have a bit of leverage when they needed it.'

The programme also appeared to be supported by the nature of the students it attracted. In the words of one review participant, 'the students who attended the programmes were different. They had come for a reason into the programme. They were so motivated, committed and enthusiastic to learn.'

The academics involved in the delivery of the programme also commented on the lack of competition and sense of collegiality among the students, linking this to the fact that they were all mature students, juggling a variety of responsibilities and keen to support one another to succeed.

The involvement of the NUI, particularly in relation to the establishment of the diploma and hosting of the Academic and Exam Board meetings, respectively, was identified as a useful and practical support. Furthermore, the instigation, in 2012, of the NUI Award for the Best Student also served to raise the programme's profile.

2.2.3 Challenges to the partnership approach

Management overheads and the need for champions

The challenge for a partnership approach is that it has significant management overheads in terms of the time required to provide the necessary coordination and oversight. The reality is, therefore, that collaboration cannot be progressed without individual champions prepared to advocate for the collaboration and, who are committed to putting in the time necessary to make it work. The courses were fortunate to have attracted a number of committed individuals who took on the role of champions for the programme with the four universities. The challenge for these individuals was that the programme was just one of the initiatives in which these individuals were involved.

An over-reliance on particular individuals and personalities

The programme was very reliant on the senior academics who has established them. Moreover, it was reliant on the enthusiasm and commitment of the co-ordinators as well as the constructive relationships between the academics and co-ordinators. While individual and collective commitment stood the programme in good stead, in many respects, the reliance thereon posed particular challenges when these individuals moved on from the programme (either through retirement or redeployment), and suitable replacements had to be found. In some instances, the transitions between academics were smooth. In other instances, academics were appointed whose main teaching and research interests lay outside rural development. One of the individuals who was highly embedded in the programme remarked, 'it should not have been so reliant on personalities, that was not the case with other programmes and courses. We were constantly battling. If another lecturer in economics retired or got another job, they were replaced, but not in rural development.'

Staff turnover, fit and seniority

NUI Galway appears to have had more staff changes than the other universities. In some instances, the university appointed replacements who were a good fit with the programme, while in other instances, individuals were appointed who had limited interest in rural development, although they excelled in other fields. Thus, personnel mismatches posed challenges for a collaboration structure and approach that required equal commitment from the four partners. Not surprisingly, therefore, some of those who become involved in the programme, over time, may not have had the same understanding or level of commitment or passion as its pioneers. It is also the case that some of the academics appointed to the programme may not have had the same clout within their respective universities as the academics who conceived the programme. There was also a view that as the programme progressed, many of the academics involved in it 'got pulled into other activities', and the co-ordinators were left to deliver the programme. Thus, personnel/ human resource issues were a driver of both the programmes development, and their demise.

The absence of a planned research programme to accompany the diploma and degree programme may also have contributed to the drift of academics away from the programme. This appears to have been exacerbated by the pressure on academics to publish in peer-reviewed academic journals in order to progress their academic careers.

The resource-intensive nature of the programme – linked to its targeting at mature students

The resource-intensive nature of the courses themselves (focused as they were on mature and part-time students, some of whom were returning to education, and required a lot of support) placed considerable demands (including pro-bono evening and weekend work and a lot of networking activities in relation to recruitment) on the academics and particularly on the co-ordinators directly involved in the programme. Again, it is a testament to the personalities that they provided the significant levels of support to students that they did. When these individuals moved on it was hard to replace them.

The cost of running the programme

The part-time nature of the courses, with a relatively small number of student participants (none of whom because of the part-time nature of the course, were eligible for free tuition fees) made the resource-intensive programme relatively speaking, challenging to run.

The inability of any diploma or degree level programme designed exclusively for part-time learners to access state-subsidies for tuition fees, makes the business case for these programmes challenging and the programmes economically vulnerable, unless other external funding can be found. In relation to the Diploma and Degree, LEADER funding, was used to support the programme, for a time, but when that option was withdrawn students were left having to pay the tuition fees themselves or get their employers to do so.

Limited engagement with policy and with the Department responsible for the rural policy agenda

The individuals behind the programme's establishment proactively sought, and got some, initial support and resources from the then Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. Thereafter, there was limited support for the programme and limited engagement by the universities with the various government departments responsible for the rural development agenda.[4] This was a shortcoming considering the opportunities the programme provided in respect of access to insights and on-the-ground experiences and the scope to connect practice to policy.

4 The current Department of the Rural and Community Development was established in 2017. Prior to this responsibility for rural affairs had rested with the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (2016-2017), the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government (2011-2016), the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. 2002-2010), the Department of Agriculture Food and Rural Development (1999-2002) and provision to it was the responsibility of the Department of Agriculture and Food (2007-2009) and the Department of Agricultural, Food and Forestry (1993-1997).

Lack of visibility of the programme

The part-time nature of the programme and that fact that the students were rarely on campus, except at the weekend, posed challenges in terms of its visibility within the four universities. As one university representative remarked, 'we realised quite early on that the students do not want to attend various universities. It was easier to bring the lecturer to the student, rather than expect the students to bi-locate.'

Administrative challenges

There were a lot of practical administrative challenges. Stakeholders identified the following:

- The use of different registration formats;
- The absence of (initial) clarity on whether students would need more than one registration card to access services (e.g. libraries) in the different participating institutions;
- Variable semester and exam dates (e.g. before or after Christmas) among the four universities;
- Variations in exam board dates between institutions – this necessitated the scheduling of an additional exam board to facilitate collaborative programmes;
- Variable learning platforms (e.g. Moodle and Blackboard) across the universities
- A lack of dedicated admin support.

Governance issues

The programme operated without the existence of a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the four universities. According to one consultee, this was possible because 'the academic councils of the 1990s were much less concerned about governance.' The ability of the programme to continue to operate without an MoU was seen by many of the consultees to be a testament both to the relationships between the individuals involved and a reflection of a time, in university management, when governance issues were regarded as less critical for small-scale collaborative programmes.

The absence of a formal MoU, while having the benefit of limiting the bureaucracy, meant that there was a low level of senior university management engagement and oversight of the programme relative to other university initiatives/collaborations. Several consultees noted that were a similar collaboration to be progressed in 2021, an MoU was the minimum requirement together with a document detailing how the new collaboration would work in practice. Some consultees also noted that, for new programmes, a business case would need to be developed – to show how the collaboration could be self-financing (with additional costs associated with preparing the modules for delivery by distance/blended learning). The view was that, in the current economic climate, 'wider university ownership' depends on whether a collaboration is cost effective. The reality remains that generating cost effectiveness is challenging for any part-time undergraduate course, given part-time undergraduate students are not eligible to access state subsidised tuition fees. Notwithstanding this, the key question for universities remains how many full-time-equivalent (FTE) students will/can be accommodated on the basis of the resources that are available.[5] Therefore, while an institution could decide to fund a particular post to support a particular course, 'this can only ever 'be a kick-starter'; ultimately courses need to be self-financing in order to be sustainable.

5 In Maynooth University, for example, 25-27 FTE students justifies one full-time staff member, while 25/40 part-time students justify one staff member. The reality is, however, that courses require a range of inputs from a range of staff members.

2.3 The universities' experience

2.3.1 Impacts of the collaboration on the academics and faculties involved

Impacts for those directly involved in the Programme

Relationships

The impact of the collaboration was most closely felt by the academics and co-ordinators who were directly involved, from the outset, in the development and delivery of the programme. These individuals identified a number of positive impacts, which include the development of strong positive relationships between the core group involved in the programme. As one remarked, 'I think the relationships between all those involved at the beginning were positive. Everyone got on, and good relationships were built up.' Another stated, 'without the programmes I might not have met and developed such strong relationships with the other co-ordinators or academic directors.'

Job satisfaction

The individuals directly involved in the programme were very positive about the role and uniqueness of the programme, thereby providing them with a very clear sense of job satisfaction. As one of them recounted, 'rural development is a very under resourced sector and the diploma and degree filled a massive gap in learning, it was just a shame it did not get the numbers.' Another remarked, 'each of us had our own specialisms. Working to our specialisms allowed us to offer something unique to students. We were able to do something together, that individually would not have been either possible or viable.'

Learning from students

The individuals directly involved in the delivery of the modules also reported that without exception they had really enjoyed working with and learned a lot from their engagement with the diploma students in particular. One contributor recalled, 'I really enjoyed meeting the students and learning from them and about their various projects. It was exciting time they challenged us and made us think.' Another university staff member recalled, 'it was the best learning ever, I still even now remember some of those debates with and among the students.'

Distance-learning approaches

Those directly involved in programme delivery also spoke at length about delivering the programme content by distance learning and, later, by blended learning, which emphasised the face-to-face learning. The following summative quotes are indicative of their observations:

> Delivering the programmes by distance learning was a challenge. There was a lot of learning in relation to what formats worked and what didn't. Time management was key, as was ensuring the students had engaged with the materials before we met them.
>
> Writing materials was a big step, especially up front. We understood that and we knew we were experimenting. We had had to get that message across at Department level. Deputy Jimmy Deenihan was Minister for State at that time, and he really got it. He was committed, and was able to support the LEADER groups in committing to it.
>
> I learned that distance learning is very resource intensive. We had to be available for our students when they needed us. It is more interactive and it required us to be more available to our students. We provided not only academic support but also pastoral support. Thinking about it, I think there is a lot of learning from that time that could be useful to lecturers delivering courses online in a time of COVID.
>
> We worked our way through massive technological change. We didn't have any resources for distance learning in the beginning. We were printing out stuff on paper. In the beginning it was a challenge to get people to a computer. We have come a long way since then.
>
> At the time, we didn't realise how innovative we were.

Enlarged rural development networks

The academics and co-ordinators involved in the programme indicated that they had benefited from their contacts with local development companies, and in many cases, they went on to strengthen and deepen good linkages with these companies as well as with the wider rural community and voluntary sector through both programme participants and graduates respectively. As one remarked, 'because of the programmes, I developed good relationships with the local partnership companies, and used these contacts to good effect in other work that I was doing.' The collaborations between academics and practitioners are indicative of the applied-learning approach that characterised the programme and of the aforementioned commitment, among the key university personnel, to supporting rural development practice. The consultations with university and rural development personnel suggest that while relationships were beneficial, they tended to be bilateral (i.e. between a university/academic and a number of LDCs) rather than universal (extending to all sets of practitioners) or systematic. Indeed, there was no formal attempt to engage practitioners in module design or student assessment, although several LDCs staff and board members were invited to deliver workshops/talks to students.

Impact on academic career

None of the academics who were directly involved in the programme believed that their roles in the programme had a positive impact on their academic careers. Some, in hindsight, believed that time spent on the programmes was time that might have used for the writing of academic papers. As one senior academic stated:

Being involved in the programme did not have much academic impact, as I already had a research profile. Thinking about it, now, it's true that this involvement probably took me away from the writing of academic papers. Perhaps, in hindsight, we should have seconded somebody to do some writing. You could not underestimate the energy we all put into the programmes. In contrast, our colleagues in the likes of Queen's University Belfast, were able to put their energies into research and publishing, and they probably got more out of that from an academic perspective.

Learning from academics in other institutions

A small number of review consultees also indicated that they had benefited from engaging with, and having to deliver, other academic materials in the context of the delivery of the diploma course. As one academic noted, 'I got to see perspectives from other institutions. I got to see that they were doing in other universities. I added bits to my lectures, based on what I learned from the materials prepared by colleagues in other universities.'

Inter-disciplinarity within faculties/schools

The impact of the collaboration within the wider faculties/schools involved, appear limited. Review consultees reported limited interaction and limited opportunities for interaction between those directly involved in the programme and their wider faculty colleagues. They reported that engagement in the programme was generally limited to the small group of academics directly involved in it. As one acknowledged, 'there was little attempt to bring in other internal expertise.' Others stated the following:

> I don't recall much interaction with other academic staff. There could have been value in the academics engaging more in workshops with one another. This could have led to a sharing of ideas, case studies and more joint publications.
>
> Disappointingly, limited attempts were made to draw on wider experience. It would have been useful if the local lead person had consulted in a more proactive and structured way with other departments in their faculty/school.

Some consultees regarded the lack of wider engagement with other academic colleagues within their facilities as a 'missed opportunity'. Interestingly, those most closely involved in the programme's delivery spoke about 'trying to involve others' but noted that it was 'not an attractive option to be involved in, because it ran on weekends with no extra pay, and was not very visible.'

2.3.2 Impacts of the collaboration on the university partners

Inter-disciplinarity within individual universities

The programme had little or no discernible impact on inter-disciplinarity within the individual universities, as its promoters did not seek to involve other faculties in the development, rollout or indeed the subsequent revisions of the programme.

Mainstreaming

The view, among the majority of consultees, was that while the four university partners were 'reasonably well disposed' to the programme (focused, as it was, on mature students and using distance learning), the part-time nature of the programme (which required students to either fund their tuition fees or get their employer to fund their fees) made is difficult to attract sufficient mature students and to justify the associated costs. The reality was that the course ultimately cost too much, to justify significant consideration by the universities. As one university staff member noted, 'I think they (the programmes) occupied too small a space in the considerations of the various universities.'

There was also a view among some consultees that because the programme largely functioned outside the university system (i.e. it was not the subject of a formal MoU, students were part-time (and therefore not eligible for free tuition fees) and not visible on campus and funding came from a variety of external sources) contributed to the lack of senior management buy-in and awareness of the programme. As one remarked,

If we were running the programmes now, there would be a lot more bureaucracy involved, linked to the increased levels of governance and compliance required now. This would be challenging, but would also ensure the programmes would be more visible to senior management, and that could be a positive thing.

Another staff member wondered 'if the rural development programmes had been more mainstreamed, would they have lasted longer and attracted more interest from the universities.'

2.3.3 Impacts on the collaboration on relations between the universities

Practical research collaboration

A positive example of an inter-university research collaboration generated by the programme was the publication, in 2006, of an extensive study (with n=1,249 participants) of life in rural Ireland. The then Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs Mr Eámon Ó Cuív TD who launched the study described it as 'a valuable contribution to our understanding of the changes and pressures being experiences by rural communities in a time of radical change.' The survey, which was the central plank of this study, was conducted by students of the programme, and its launch was preceded by a seminar featuring addresses by academic experts in rural development from each of the four universities.

A joint degree or a jointly delivered degree?

The programme had limited impact on relations between the universities. Each university individually awarded the degree, leading one review consultee to remark that it was not 'a joint degree, it was a jointly-delivered degree.'

2.3.4 Impact of the NUI

The NUI was supportive of the programme 'on an ongoing informal basis.' They provided the Academic Board and the external examiners with a venue for their meetings. When the programme was being set up, the Senate (to which the NUI executive reports) was very interested in it. At one point, the Senate voiced concern in relation to the management of the programme, and suggested, to the NUI universities, that it could be managed by a single project manager. The four institutions did not believe that this was necessary, and took it upon themselves to manage the programme.

University consultees reported that having the NUI label attached to both the diploma and the degree was useful in respect of fostering relationships with relevant government departments. They contended that this demonstrated the universities' commitment and capacity, thereby strengthening their case to government in seeking funding. University consultees noted, however, that after Maynooth and Galway left the collaboration, there was more explaining required to show the programme's value as an NUI initiative.

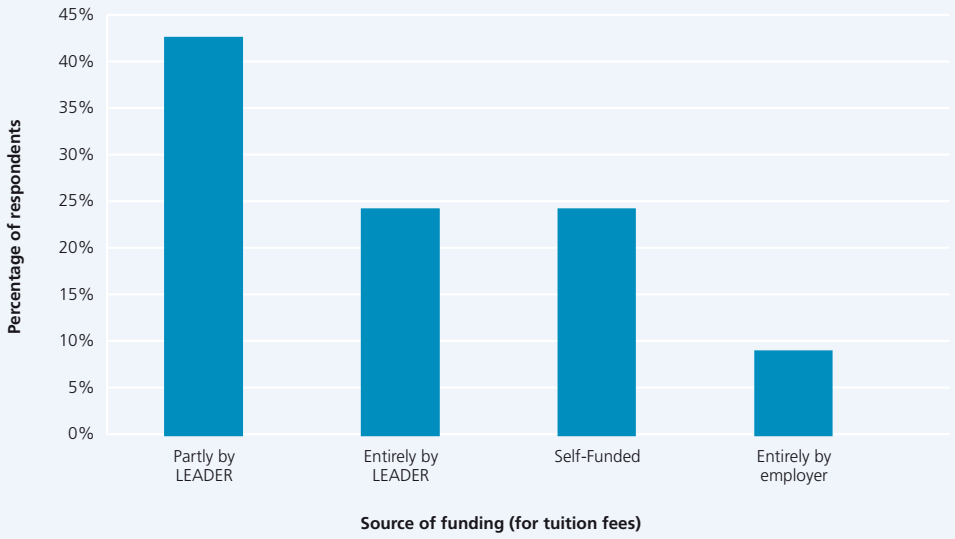
In 2012, the NUI instigated an award for the top student. This was presented every two years, and there were three winners in 2012, 2014 and 2016 respectively. This award raised the profile of the programme at a time when student numbers were falling.

2.4 The funding model

Student access to the Diploma/BSc. in Rural Development was by means of direct application to one of the participating NUI colleges, rather than through the Central Application Office (CAO) system. Consequently, and as these were part-time courses, students were not eligible to apply for local authority (now SUSI) grants in the same way that CAO entrants and full-time students could.[6] Therefore, they were obliged to fund their own studies. In practice, LEADER emerged as the most significant source of funding for students.[7] Under the second LEADER Programme (1995-2000) and under LEADER+ (2000-2006) the managing authority (Department of Agriculture) permitted LEADER Local Action Groups (now known as local development companies (LDCs)) to set aside part of their 'training' budgets to fund student bursaries'. Thus, for about ten years, students were able to access dedicated funding from their local LEADER group to cover at least some of their course tuition fees. The obligation was on each individual student to apply to his/her local LEADER group. Although some LDCs organised information sessions (often attended by a co-ordinator from one of the universities) for individuals interested in applying for these student bursaries, not all were actively involved in student recruitment and/or participation. As each LDC had autonomy, subject to the programme operating rules, in respect of the funds they allocated, the sizes of bursaries awarded to students varied. Technically, the programme operating rules permitted full funding of student tuition fees, but due to other demands on their funds, few LEADER groups were able to afford to pay all applicants' full tuition fees. LEADER did not provide support for any other student outgoings (e.g. travel, fieldwork).

Survey findings support the view of university consultees that LEADER provided funding – either partly or entirely – for 'about two thirds of graduates'. Among the survey respondents whose tuition fees were paid by their employers (nine per cent of graduates), local development companies used a combination of LEADER funds and other smaller bursaries.

Figure 2.1: Ways graduates paid their university tuition fees (online survey)

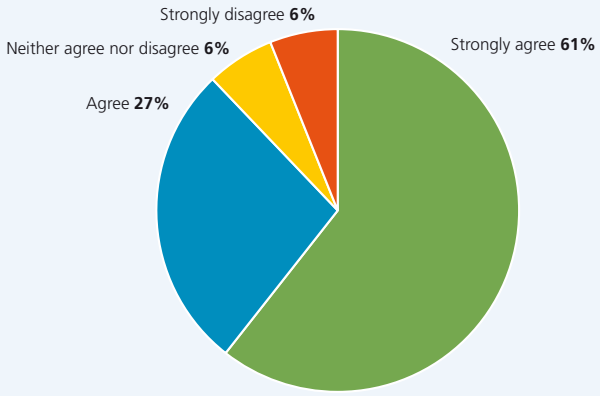


6 The inability of part-time students on both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes to benefit from free tuition fees continues to be an issue. This is however something the new Dept of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has said it will address as part of its support for Lifelong Learning.

7 In Ireland, and throughout the EU, LEADER operates on the basis of multi-annual programmes that generally span a five- or six-year period.

Both university consultees and graduates surveyed alike recognised the significance of LEADER funding. As one university staff member stated, 'There was always more demand for bursaries than there were bursaries available, without those bursaries many of our graduates would not have been able to participate.' See Figure 2.2 for details of survey respondents' views on the role of LEADER funding.

Figure 2.2: Levels of agreement/disagreement with the statement 'without funding from LEADER/ employers to cover the cost/some of the costs of attending the programme, I would not have been able to attend'



Analysis of Figure 2.2 reveals a positive association between LEADER funding and graduate participation in the programme. However, the student focus groups suggested that in the final few years of the programme, LEADER funds became increasingly difficult to access. These difficulties appear to have affected students from the west of Ireland more than those in other parts of the country. Graduates reported that while LEADER contributions to students declined from 2010 onwards, those living in Leinster and Munster continued to receive some level of funding, while those in Connacht and the border counties had their applications for LEADER funding rejected. These were declined by the local development companies and by their then parent government department (Department of Environment, Community and Local Government). Graduates reported having made appeals to public representatives and to the then minister, but to no avail. They acknowledged the support they received from NUI Galway staff in their engagements with LEADER companies and with the Department, but stated that their experience of seeking to access bursaries under the LEADER Programme was a source of frustration for them.

Changes in LEADER[8] (post 2006) and its diminished status[9] in Ireland's rural development and funding landscape clearly impacted on students' abilities to secure funding to cover their tuition fees. These changes to LEADER and its lack of reliability, as a funding stream, posed challenges. These challenges were accentuated by the lack of a dedicated funding mechanism outside LEADER, from either the Department of Education or from the various iterations of the Department of Rural Affairs, since its establishment in 2002. University consultees were particularly critical of the latter's attitude to both LEADER and to the Diploma/ Degree in Rural Development. They noted that other professions benefit from direct government support for graduate/trainee formation, and they contended that given the importance of rural development – economically and socially – it ought to receive greater attention from the relevant ministries.

8 The ability of LEADER organisations to innovate or to exercise autonomy over budgetary decisions has been significantly curtailed over the past decade, and since the enactment of local government legislation, in 2014, all decisions in respect of funding allocations are subject to local government approval; with all individual LEADER projects subject to appraisal by Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs), which operate under the aegis of local authorities. Moreover, there have been funding discontinuities; the LEADER programme that had been due to start in 2007 did not fully commence until 2009 and there were further delays between 2013 and 2015. These interruptions were associated with central government efforts to align the geography and governance of LEADER with those of Ireland's local authorities.

9 LEADER has not been mainstreamed in Ireland it has rather remained a marginal element of rural development policy, with the bulk of Pillar II resources being dedicated to agri-environmental measures and other activities 'inside the farm gate'. Their consequences for endogenous development have been documented in rural development literature, and in the graduate focus groups, several participants lamented the evaporation of community development principles and the bottom-up approach.

In addition to supporting student participation in the programme, albeit over a curtailed timeframe, several local development companies provided work experience placements for students, while others hosted student fieldtrips and workshops. University consultees made particular mention of Ballyhoura Development, IRD Duhallow, South Kerry Development Partnership, Clare Local Development Company, FORUM Connemara, Wexford Local Development Company and Kilkenny LEADER Partnership among the local development companies that were most enabling of student learning and progression. They described these companies as providing 'living laboratories' and 'acting as spaces in which students could ask questions, test ideas and apply their knowledge'.

In Summary

It is clear that during the ascendant years of LEADER, in Ireland (c.1995-2005), the programme and its students benefited from access to a dedicated funding stream and a collaborative partner. Since the mid-2000s however, and the re-configuration of rural development governance and funding, the programme's ability to leverage finances from the local development sector declined. While the programme promoters anticipated the need for a more continuous and secure funding stream, and university representatives made efforts to engage government, these were largely unsuccessful, and undoubtedly, they contributed to the programme's demise.

The consultations undertaken as part of this research also indicate that the nature of the programme and its standing internally among the universities were factors in its inability to secure consistent funding. Unlike most undergraduate programmes, which are on the Central Applications Office (CAO) system, student tuition fees could not be subsidised by government through local authorities or Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI). The focus was on the recruitment of mature students. Thus, it was somewhat of an outlier among university offerings, and reflected the features of professional qualifications and programmes offered by organisations such as the Institute of Public Administration (IPA) and the Irish Auditing and Accounting Supervisory Authority (IAASA) among others. The programme's distinctiveness, while innovative and highly appropriate to the professional context, was a factor in its inability to secure mainstream funding. Moreover, while the programme had champions within each of the universities, these were almost entirely academic staff, rather than high-level administrators or decision-makers. As academics, their primary focus was on delivering for students, while also undertaking research in their subject fields. They had limited scope to take on responsibility for fundraising, although, in hindsight, there is a sense of regret among them that they did not arrange for a systemic and structural review of the programme's operation, which would have highlighted funding and administrative issues and potential solutions.

2.5 Student experiences and perspectives

2.5.1 Overview

This section presents student perspectives of the programme. It draws specifically on the student survey and the three focus group sessions convened with graduates. The findings show high levels of student satisfaction, particularly with programme content, the relationship with the academic staff and the modes of delivery. Graduates also reported that the programme enabled them to progress – professionally and as volunteers within their own communities.

A total of thirty-three (n=33) graduates responded to the survey questionnaire. As this sample of respondents is less than ten per cent of the graduate population, it is not advisable to extrapolate from it in respect of the entire graduate cohort. That said, however, the survey findings represent a valuable set of insights, and they provided useful prompts for the focus group discussions. In turn, the focus groups provided an opportunity to triangulate the survey findings.

Of those who responded to the survey questionnaire, the breakdown, by university, is as follows:

- University College Cork 14
- University College Dublin 11
- Maynooth University 5
- NUI Galway 3

Among the respondents, almost half (45%) had done both the diploma and degree courses. Almost four in ten (39%) completed the diploma only, while fifteen per cent (n=5) had done the degree only.

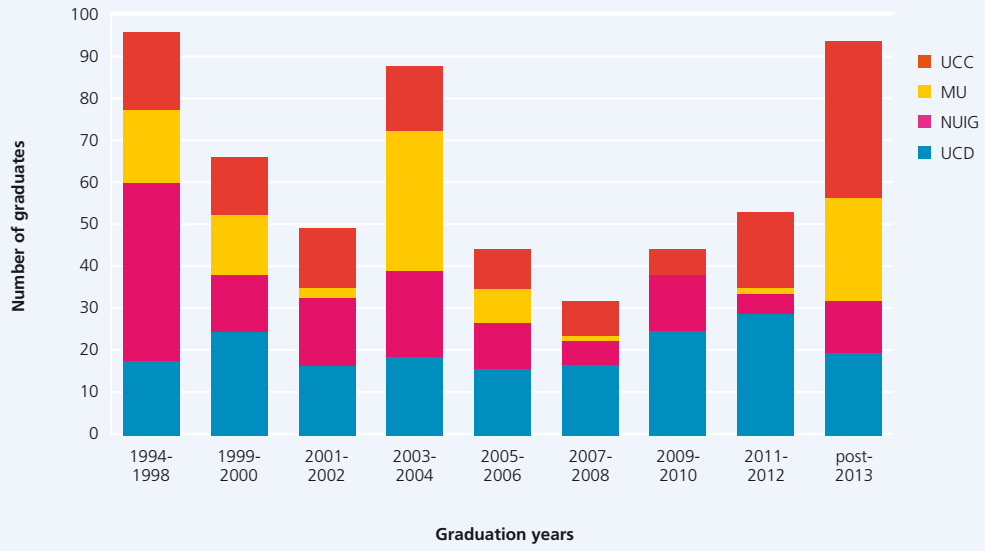
2.5.2 Academic completions and progression

Over the course of the programme, 563 students successfully completed the diploma. Of these, over half (55%) were female, and 45% were male. See Figure 2.3 and Figure 2.4 for a breakdown of these numbers across the various institutions.

Figure 2.3: A breakdown of students who completed the Diploma

Time-frames	UCD	NUIG	MU	UCC	Total
1994-1998	18	42	17	18	95
1999-2000	25	13	14	14	66
2001-2002	17	16	2	14	49
2003-2004	19	20	33	15	87
2005-2006	16	11	8	9	44
2007-2008	17	6	1	8	32
2009-2010	25	13		6	44
2011-2012	29	5	1	18	53
post 2013	20	12	24	37	93
					563

Figure 2.4: A breakdown of students who completed the Diploma by institution and year



It was not possible given the passage of time to get an accurate assessment of the exact number of students who completed the Degree in each institution.

Progression

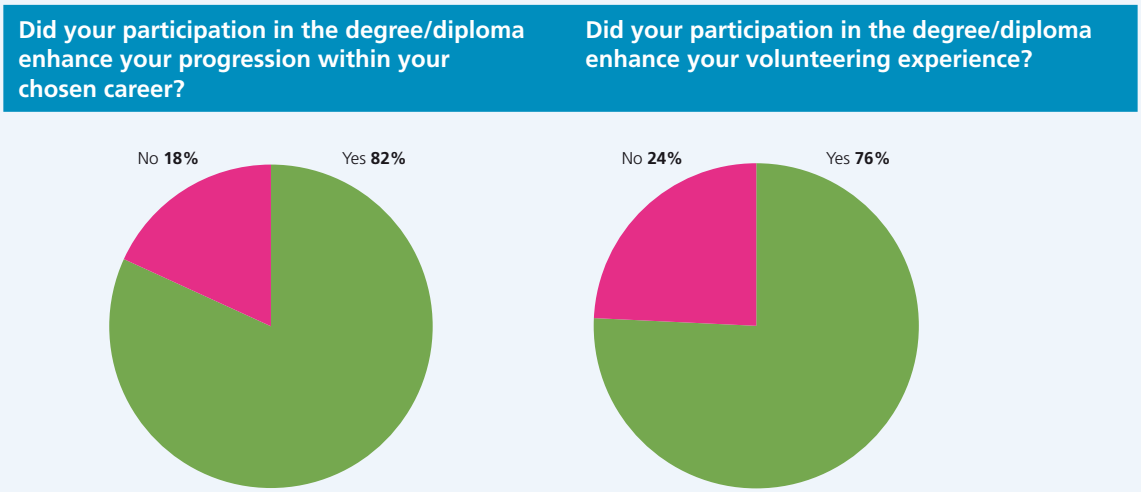
Databases provided by the universities provide some metrics in respect of student progression from the diploma to the degree. Given the time lag, these databases are not universal, and they relate to the largest possible sample at the time of writing (Q4 2020). Analysis of what data was available suggested that the vast majority of those who completed the degree programme had progressed from the diploma.

2.5.3 Career/Volunteer Progression

Career Progression

The majority of survey respondents (see Figure 2.3) indicated that the NUI programme had enhanced their experiences as professionals and as volunteers.

Figure 2.5: Graduates' perceptions of the NUI programme's contributions to their professional and civic lives (online survey)

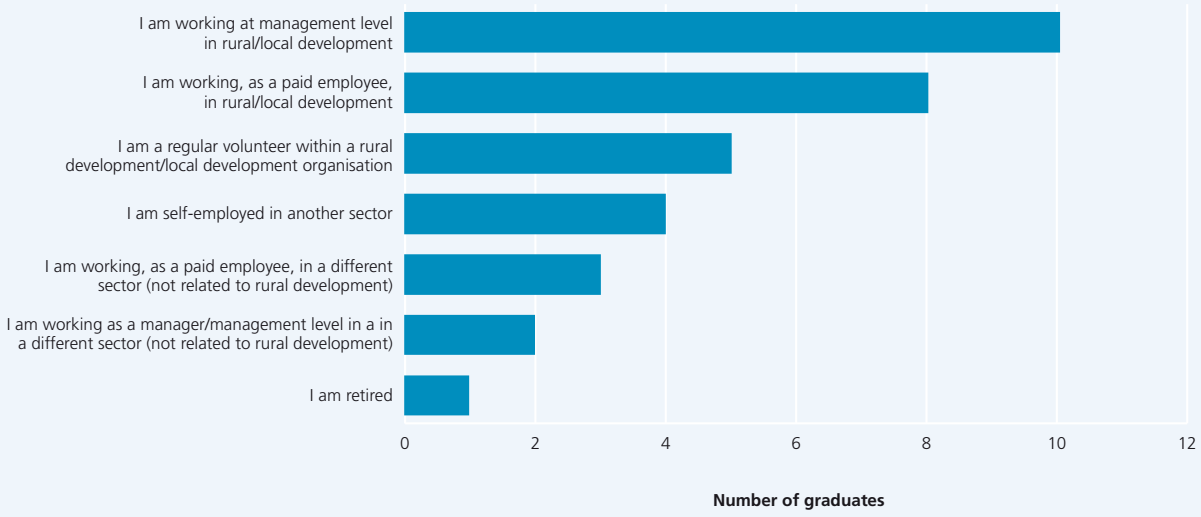


Specific examples provided by survey participants, on the impact of the programme, include the following statements:

> I now work in a community family support role that would not have been possible without the degree.
>
> I remain a farmer, but have taken on a director role in a credit union and a community council. It wouldn't have happened without the skills gained from the course.
>
> I went from being a volunteer to being Regional Manager of a Rural Development Company, and acting CEO for six months. The course gave me a grounding in Rural Development [and] Leadership Skills that I still use today as a Project Manager.
>
> It provided me with the theoretical background I needed in order to support the hands-on work that I was doing in the community sector. It also gave me the additional language and skills I needed to support my work in the sector.
>
> I am now a community lead in my employment. I was promoted three times while
>
> I was studying the course alone. I have produced a national programme that is now recognised as a success based on the learning I received on community-led development… I am fully confident I would not be as successful as I am without this course.

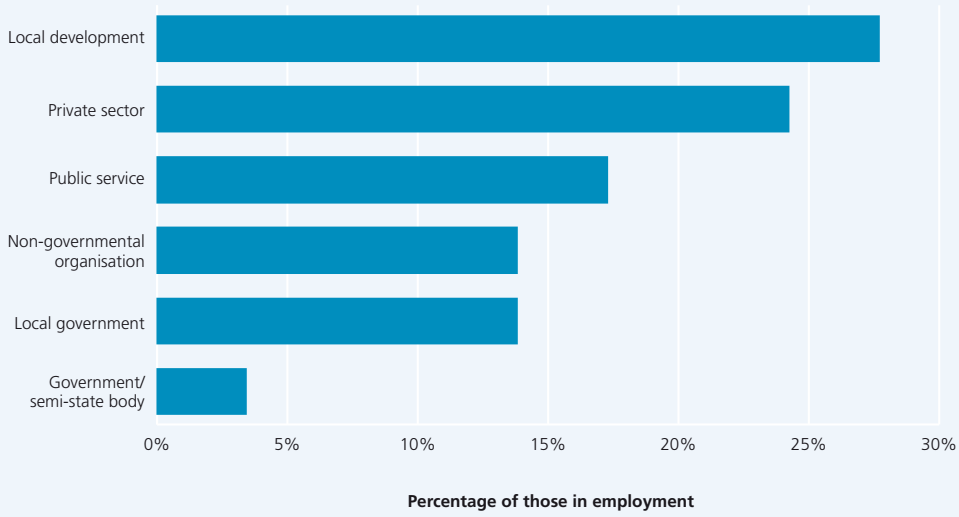
The survey among graduates also provided some insights in relation to their career progression. When asked to describe their involvement in rural development prior to undertaking their studies, one third described themselves as having been unpaid volunteers with a rural development organisation. A further thirty per cent stated that they were in paid employment in a sector other than rural development. A similar proportion were already employed in rural development – mainly with local development companies. The remainder were either self-employed or on an employment activation programme (e.g. community employment (CE)). At the time of the survey, seventy per cent (23 of the 33 respondents) were employed in the rural/local development sector; with a quarter (27%) being employed in other sectors, and one person now retired. Of those who are employed in rural development, over four-in-ten (43%) are now in senior/ management positions. See Figure 2.6 for details.

Figure 2.6: How graduates describe their current (2020) professional status (online survey)



Local development organisations (mainly local development companies (LDC)) were the single most significant place of employment among the graduates surveyed, as Figure 2.7 illustrates.

Figure 2.7: Employment types/sectors among programme graduates (online survey)



Volunteer progression

Focus group participants specifically remarked on how the programme had 'encouraged them to think differently', and 'to listen to the news/current affairs programmes with a sharper focus and greater interest than they did previously'. They stated that the programme 'encouraged them to think critically and to be more self-reflective'. Graduates noted that the programme had 'equipped them with the language of rural development' – with the 'lingo'/'vocabulary to enable them to engage in conversations and discussions about rural issues'. They reported that 'this knowledge of the relevant vocabulary stood them in good stead as volunteers, as it gave them an increased ability to complete application forms, submit funding applications and prepare documentation on behalf of local community and voluntary organisations'. Focus group participants also recounted that they had 'become more active citizens', and they cited, by way of example, 'increased participation in community groups' and 'making submissions to local authorities e.g. in relation to county development plans'.

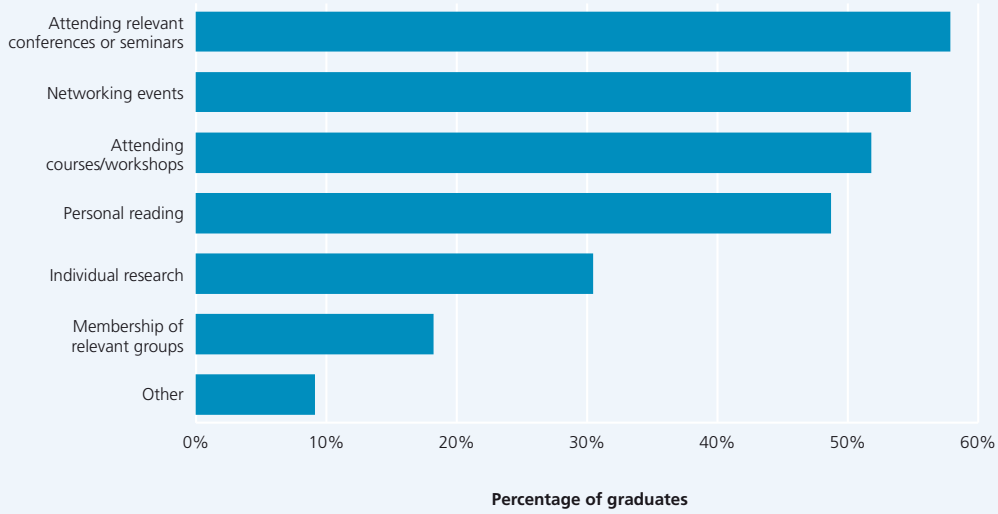
Challenges to progression

Graduates highlighted some challenges in relation to progression. The following quotes are indicative of their expressions:

> I gained employment based on my participation in this degree, but this was contract based only. Many rural development organisations seem to want business/secretarial workers rather than rural development practitioners. The ability to complete paperwork is now seen as more valuable than the knowledge of rural development. The existence and profile of the degree needs to be championed with rural development organisations.
>
> It became clear to me that a change of career to rural development matters would have been too risky, and not adequately paid.
>
> There were no opportunities within the sector at the time of graduation… There was no opportunity to gain paid experience on my graduation.

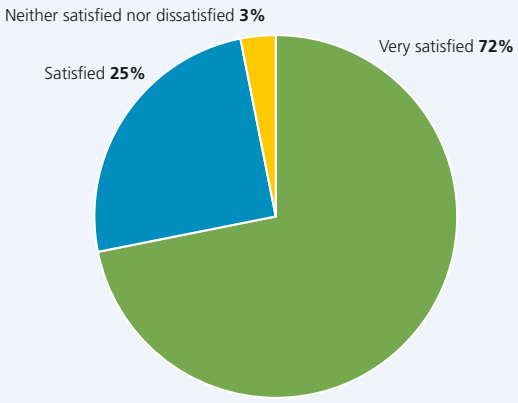
Despite these challenges the overwhelming view, among graduates consulted, was that the programme provided them with the skills and capacity to be effective rural development practitioners. They referred specifically to the programme's emphasis on community-led local development (CLLD), area-based approaches (to development) and empowering communities. They reported that these principles, practices and the associated skills are very much required in rural development. Notwithstanding the widespread applicability and universal importance of CLLD, the dominant perception among the graduates consulted was that there has been a diminution, in the sector – particularly among local development companies – in the standing of CLLD and the bottom-up approach. Consequently, graduates who wanted to progress their careers in local development reported either having to acquire new skills or to set aside some of their learning and principles in favour of more functional approaches to rural development. Their observations also point to the challenges associated with the stop-start nature of rural development programmes (including LEADER) and of the precarious nature of employment in the sector. Despite this, over three quarters (76%) of survey respondents indicated that they have continued to develop their knowledge and skills in relation to rural development. Figure 2.8 illustrates the ways in which they do so.

Figure 2.8: Ways in which graduates have continued to develop their knowledge and skills in relation to rural development



Feedback from graduates indicates an association between this high level of satisfaction and the various ways in which graduates were enabled to progress. As already noted, graduates have progressed as active citizens, educationally and professionally. While progression has been affected by shifting values[10] in the rural development landscape, discontinuities in the administration of rural development and a reconfiguration of rural development governance and approaches, in Ireland, the predominant sense among graduates is that the programme content has a perpetuity on which they can call in a wide range of personal and professional contexts.

Figure 2.9: Graduates' overall levels of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the Diploma/Degree in Rural Development (online survey)



10 Graduates reported a move away from community development principles to a practice environment which emphasises compliance with national systems more than reference to local communities.

2.5.4 Other impacts of course participation

Focus group participants reported that the NUI programme had given them 'increased self-confidence'. The following remarks, in the survey questionnaire and focus groups, are indicative of the programme's transformative impacts:

> [I have a] greater understanding of how RD works, how to research, what supports are available as a result of this course. I was able to provide much material for supporting grant applications locally. I am able to understand the local development planning process as well as the LEADER process, and can advocate on behalf of my community in the correct language and with confidence.
>
> The module we did on group behaviour and formation in UCD, really helped with my work as a volunteer chairperson.
>
> I undertook the degree to be able to work more effectively in my community both from and employment perspective and as a volunteer. I needed a greater understanding of the structures, systems, opportunities and constraints to do this more effectively. It gave me confidence, as I had the knowledge to back up my thinking.
>
> I understood the theory behind the work I was doing.
>
> [I have a] better understanding of dynamics which make things work, group dynamics, bottom-up development.
>
> It gave me greater skills in a number of areas that improved my volunteering – including people, facilitating, putting programmes together, funding applications, governance etc.

The impacts on graduates' lives are associated with the way in which the programme was delivered, and in particular with the blended-learning and inter-university approaches. Focus group participants spoke highly of the following aspects:

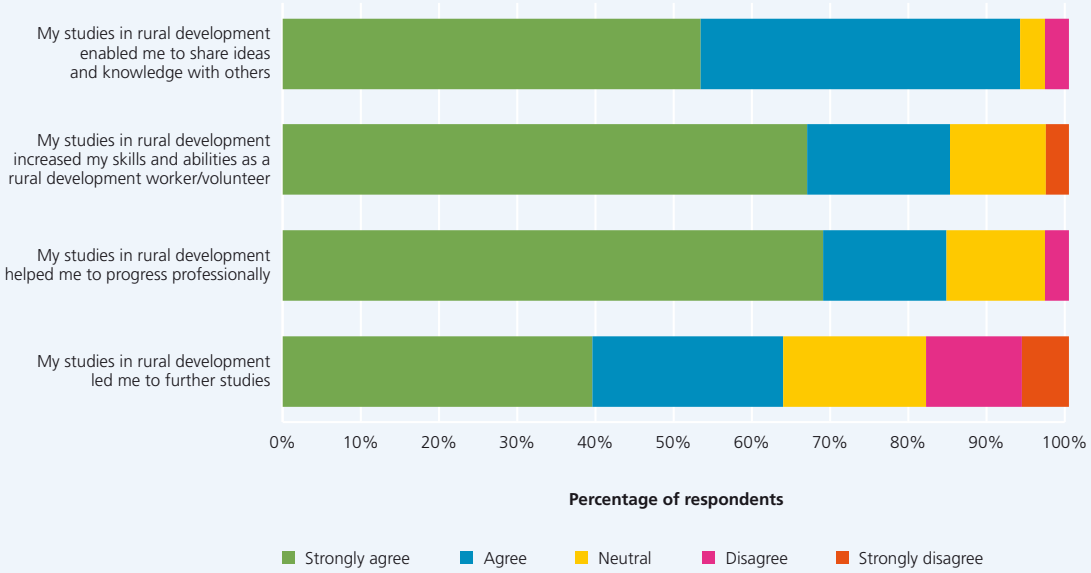
- Lecturers' knowledge and their ability to communicate and interact with students;
- Having access to expertise from across the four universities;
- Meeting and networking with other people who were engaged (professionally and/or in a voluntary capacity) in rural development; and
- The support and mentoring provided by peers and by university staff.

Some of the graduates, particularly those who completed the programme since the mid-2000s, remained in periodic contact with one another, although the level and frequency of contacts have waned over time. They use social media and WhatsApp to communicate with one another as groups, and they arrange to meet at events such as the National Ploughing Championships. The Rural Science Association was set up by graduates of the programme. Graduates report that they would like to have devoted time to establishing more defined networking structures.[11] They also suggest that the universities could have organised annual gatherings in the form of seminars/workshops to which graduates would have been invited to contribute. They also suggested bringing graduates in to classes to talk to students.

As the following graph shows, the vast majority of survey respondents attest to the programme's positive impacts on their progression. These sentiments were also reflected in the focus group deliberations.

11 Find the organisation at: https://www.facebook.com/RuralScienceAssociation

Figure 2.10: Levels of agreement/disagreement with given statements about graduate progression and programme impacts



2.5.5 Adequacy of the programme content

Almost half (45%) of survey respondents reported they had gaps in their training needs upon completion of their course. Some referred to perceived deficits in programme content, including a lack of emphasis on environmental issues or inadequate citing of case studies from other EU member states. Interestingly the 2013 Review of the diploma programme content included two recommendations that related to 'providing a systematic introduction to ecology and environmental science at the diploma level' (Rennie, 2013: 7).'

There were divergent views among graduates regarding the extent to which agricultural/farming issues were covered; some suggested that there should have been more farming-related content, and that on-farm visits ought to have been included in the fieldtrips. Others contended that there was too much emphasis on agricultural issues.

The following statements, by graduates, effectively capture the challenges associated with ensuring content's temporal relevance:

> It is easy enough to find courses in particular subjects, and I have done so. What has been more difficult is keeping up with the changing context within which rural development takes place – e.g. rise in neoliberalism – has it led to a decline in collective activism; why has development become increasingly bureaucratised; what in the wider contexts is guiding rural development now – what should we be focusing on?
>
> Some of the content of the modules was outdated, however, with the skills that I learned while studying, but I was able to upskill.
>
> There was a lot I still had to learn. The ideal and the reality were not really compatible when dealing with humans and their interpretation of development.
>
> I believe what is possibly missing is a piece that I would describe as more left field, maybe a text or book, either Irish or European, that delves into different aspects of rural culture.
>
> There will always be gaps so tricky to say. More learning and experience needed in project management. Deeper knowledge required in business and accounting.
>
> I would have liked to know more about rural housing and planning, employment and governance for those of us on Boards of Management of social enterprises.

2.5.6 Student engagement

The programme was characterised by a very high level of student engagement and by collaborative relationships between students and university staff. Indeed, these were among the programme's strongest and most enduring features. Within each participating university, particularly in the first decade of the programme, there were strong bonds between the programme staff and between staff (academic and administrative) and students. Graduates identified the following as the factors that were conducive to their engagement:

- Wide access routes;
- Distance learning;
- Staff approach;
- Peer support;
- Access to expertise; and
- Sense of purpose.

Wide access routes

The programme recruited students from all over Ireland, who had diverse academic and professional backgrounds. Some had prior third-level qualifications (in fields other than rural development), while others had not progressed beyond Junior/Intermediate Certificate. Some were working in local development companies, while others were engaged in rural/community development in an entirely voluntary capacity. In selecting students, the programme used a wide range of criteria that placed a value on life experience. In promoting the programme, university staff engaged in outreach work – visiting communities, holding public meetings and engaging with LEADER groups and other organisations to disseminate information. This outreach approach afforded would-be students the opportunity to talk to university staff – thereby enhancing their ability to make an informed decision about applying for a place on the programme. This engagement, along with the programme selection criteria, which were largely non-academic, resulted in the recruitment of graduates from diverse professional backgrounds and with a wide variety of life experiences. Their diversity, coupled with students' strong personal motivations, engendered high levels of student engagement that manifested itself, *inter alia*, in lively in-class discussions, requests (to staff) for supplementary reading and the completion of student projects that were marked by an application of course material to practitioner contexts.

Distance learning

Distance learning proved to be integral to the recruitment of students from all parts of Ireland and from diverse socio-economic and age profiles. Unlike most full-time undergraduate and post-graduate students, programme participants had a wide range of family and work commitments. It was important for them to be able to attend lectures at weekends. They appreciated the programme timetables and the way in which lecturers staggered submission deadlines.

Over the lifetime of the two courses, the distance-learning element became more refined. Its progress was aided by technological advances, including the development of on-line teaching platforms (Moodle and Blackboard) and e-mail. During the initial five years of the programme, staff had to photocopy material for students. Thus, in addition to working on Saturdays, university staff gave of their own personal time to preparing material for hard-copy circulation to students. The advent of CDs reduced the need for large volumes of paper, but not all students had the requisite technological capacity. Several students got support from their local LEADER groups, who provided them with study spaces and enabled them to print assignments. While students, university personnel and external stakeholders were all committed to taking extensive actions to support the programme, they recognised, at least in hindsight, that such inordinate personal inputs could not be sustained.

The advent of the internet, and the universities' development of on-line learning platforms, such as Moodle and Blackboard, had a transformative effect on the learning environment. These brought about greater efficiencies and provided for more inter-student interaction, in addition to enhanced student-lecturer communications. It is evident that the Diploma/Degree in Rural Development was a pioneer programme in respect of the application and mainstreaming of distance learning in the third-level sector. While distance learning has proven to be conducive to student engagement, at least for mature learners and part-time students, it was not until the Corona Virus Pandemic (2020) that universities applied distance learning on a widespread scale. While it would be previous to assess the successes or otherwise of the current experience, the fact that distance learning has become the mainstream approach suggests that its use is more feasible than may have been the case heretofore. This would be significant for any future programmes in rural and community development and for the engagement of mature learners in general.

Staff approach

Primary data collection among programme graduates reveals tremendous enthusiasm for the work done by university staff – academic and administrative. Graduates used words like 'inspiring', 'linchpin', 'expert', 'mentor', 'support' and 'outstanding' to describe the ways in which staff had engaged with them. They spoke at length about their collegiate approach, their openness to student inputs and their commitment. They recounted going for coffee or to have lunch with their lecturers and how in-class discussions continued and were amplified in these social settings. They acknowledged the detailed feedback on their assignments, and they reported that their phone calls were always returned. Graduates felt that, as students, they benefited from staff members' subject knowledge, commitment to rural development and personal interest in each student's progression. They also noted the importance of the work done by non-teaching staff in the universities and they recounted ways in which the Programme Co-ordinators had consistently supported them.

University consultees in turn spoke fluently about students' responsiveness to the mentoring, support and feedback they provided. Among the innovations promoted by staff was the requirement, on students, to host fieldtrips. These often-propelled students into leadership and coordination roles and caused them to engage in some reflective praxis. Graduates spoke glowingly about the fieldtrips, and they recounted how much they had learned from them.

Peer support

As mature learners and as practitioners – in either/both voluntary and professional capacities – students took it upon themselves to organise study groups. These proved to be an important source of peer support. The relationships between students complemented those between students and staff. Being mature learners, with many not having done state examinations, either at all or in recent years, they had to acquire the know-how and capacity to complete assessments and sit examinations in a third-level context. Therefore, students formed study groups, and they worked collaboratively on assignments/projects. Indeed, some assignments had been specifically designed on the basis of groupwork. These mutual support groups not only became vehicles through which students supported one another to complete tasks, they became enablers of peer support, and helped to give students the confidence and self-belief required to ensure they successfully completed the programme. Thus, the groups were both task oriented and process oriented, and they provided a space in which students could talk about their learning experience and the ways in which they were striving to combine their studies with their family, community and professional lives.

As with distance learning, the progressive evolution of information and communications technology (ICT) assisted inter-student communication and consolidated support groups. Thus, among more recent graduates, Facebook and WhatsApp are the preferred tools of inter-graduate communication. While some graduates are in contact with one another and with some staff members, there is no evidence of any widespread or systemic networking. As professional networking would stand graduates in good stead, this finding suggests that any future programme would incorporate a greater commitment to networking.

Access to expertise

Graduates, university and external stakeholder consultees universally concurred on the merits of an inter-university approach in enabling students to benefit from a wide range of subject expertise and professional experience. Each university brought strengths to the programme, such that the whole was greater than the sum of the parts. Consultees identified the following as being among the particular sets of expertise associated with each university:

- UCC: Food, business and social economy;
- UCD: Agriculture, environment, landscape;
- NUIG: Economics/econometrics; and
- MU: Community development, social policy.

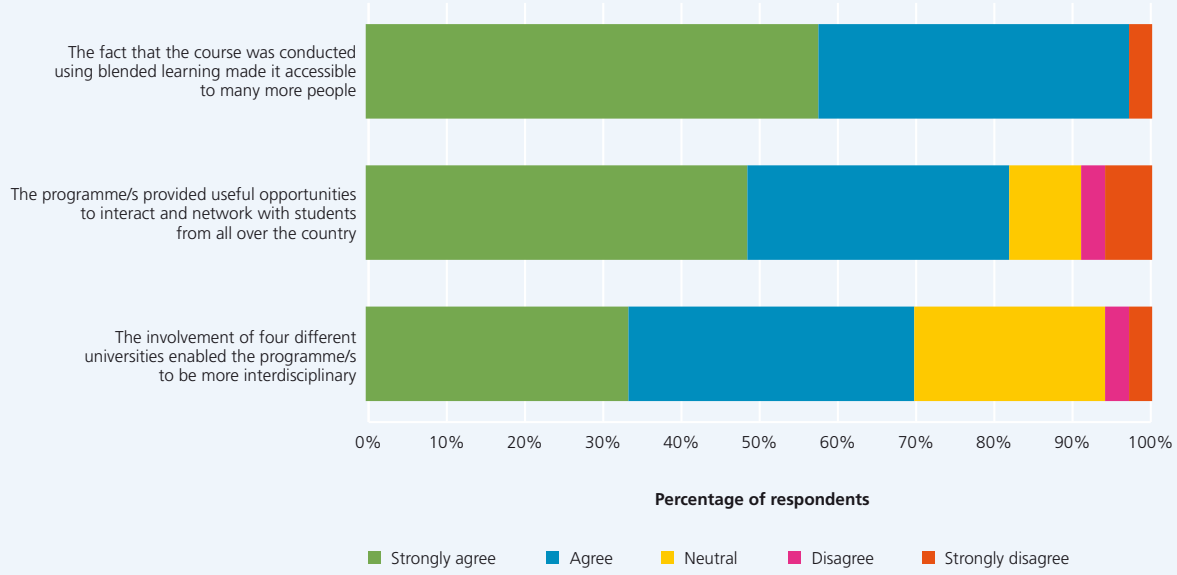
The programme represented a fusion of these respective strengths, and students reported that they benefitted from, and enjoyed, interacting with the academics from the universities other than the one at which they were ordinarily based. This core feature of the programme built on previous collaborations between NUIG, UCC and QUB, whereby lecturers visited the other universities to give guest lectures and to run workshops in the field of rural development. It is universally deemed to have been one of the most successful aspects of the programme, and given the aforementioned progress in respect of digital technologies and distance learning, the findings suggest that such collaborative approaches and pooling of expertise can be further promoted among universities.

An initial sense of clear purpose

The programme was instigated and propelled by a need, among students and in rural communities, for professionals with refined skills in rural development and by a simultaneous mushrooming of academic interest in community-led local development and collaborative governance. The timing of this shared focus among academics and communities is associated with the 1987 publication of the EU White Paper on Rural Development (*The Future of Rural Society*) and by the subsequent reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). These EU-level events created favourable conditions that enabled the putting-into-practice of visions and ideas that had been coming to light in rural communities and among researchers. Thus, from the late 1980s to the early 2000s, there was a notable upsurge in rural development activity and the emergence of the LEADER approach necessitated the recruitment of a professional staff to support voluntary organisations in the delivery of rural development objectives. As the EU insisted on a bottom-up approach to rural development, it was evident to communities and to universities that pre-existing statutory bodies were not suitable vehicles of the delivery of endogenous rural development, and that concerted and organised citizen-led structures were required to harness and channel local knowledge, expertise and insights. While many civil society organisations had the ability to mobilise local citizens, they lacked expertise in strategic planning, needs analysis, project management, research, evaluation and reporting – among the suite of skills and competencies now considered integral to successful rural development. Thus, the coming on stream of the Diploma/Degree in Rural Development contributed to the filling of a professional gap, and it proved to be a factor in enabling civil society organisations to grow and to acquire the capacity to engage in partnership governance and to be the main protagonists in rural development in Ireland. Furthermore, the ascendance of the LEADER approach and the parallel roll out of local social partnership structures added to the momentum around rural development, such that the programme was part of a growing vibrancy in rural Ireland. Thus, the favourable policy, resource and practice contexts that pertained, up to about the early 2000s, were contributors to encouraging and enabling student recruitment and graduate employment. Furthermore, the innovations that took place in rural Ireland over this period provided case study material and fieldtrip sites that enhanced course content.

The following graph, which is based on responses to the survey questionnaire, quantifies graduates' favourable perceptions of blended learning and student networking, although, as noted earlier, the latter has not been universally sustained. The survey findings also show that graduates have a positive perception of the inter-university model, and specifically of the inter-disciplinary experiences it engendered.

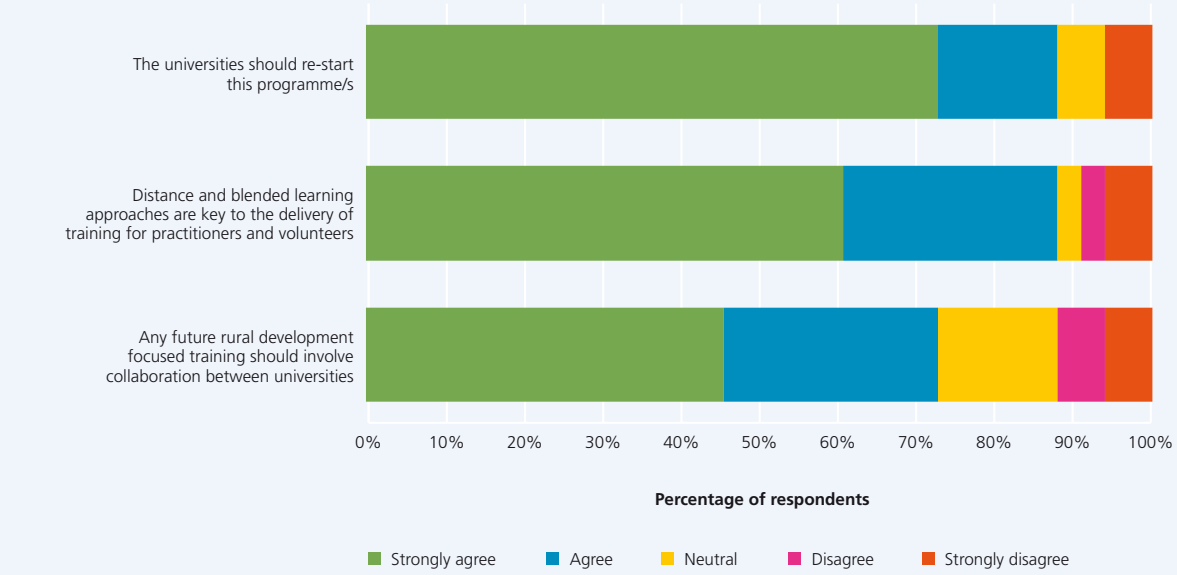
Figure 2.11: Levels of agreement/disagreement with given statements about student engagement and the programme's mode of delivery (online survey)



2.5.7 Filling the Gap

There was general support for the development of a new renewed programme among graduates. Figure 2.12 quantifies the extent of this support among survey respondents.

Figure 2.12: Graduates' levels of agreement/disagreement with given statements about a possible future diploma/degree in rural development



These sentiments among graduates were shared among a number of the rural development practitioners consulted. Recommendations in respect of any future rollout are presented in Chapter 3.

2.6 Impact in terms of contributions to rural development policy

The majority of the programme's graduates consulted as part of this review continued to be active in rural development – either as volunteers and/or as professionals. Given that the bottom-up approach is among the ongoing, features of rural development in Ireland, the organisations with which graduates are involved reported having had various opportunities to contribute to rural development policy formulation. As expected, the importance of the 'bottom-up' approach to rural enterprise growth and job creation has been highlighted in the government's new Rural Development Policy 2021-2025, launched in March 2021.[12] Interestingly in this context the majority of graduates consulted reported believing that the bottom-up approach had been somewhat diminished by the increasing administrative burdens being placed on groups and organisations working in the area.

Through their ongoing professional engagements, it was clear that the graduates consulted has also contributed to and been involved in advocacy work in relation to rural development policy initially via various initiatives organised by Area Development Management's (ADM's) Rural Development Sub-Committee (1995-2007), as well as more recently the new 2021 Rural Policy.[13] Graduates consulted specifically reported undertaking advocacy work in relation to the development of the Low-Income Smallholder Initiative and approaches to rural repopulation. Some also reported contributing to ADM's Social Economy Working Group, and their work in this regard, among other efforts led to the formulation of Ireland's current policy (2019) on the social economy. Some graduates are also to be found among the contemporary leaders of organisations that have a rural development brief, and their professional and voluntary engagements bring them into both national and local policy domains. Locally, graduates are involved in making submissions to local authorities (usually in relation to planning). Regionally and nationally, some are active in lobbying – through structures such as Irish Rural Link (IRL) and the National Rural Network (NRN). The Irish Local Development Network (ILDN) also offers a vehicle through which lessons from rural development practice can be brought to bear on national and EU policy, and graduates are involved in this forum.

University staff who worked on the diploma/degree and their colleagues have contributed to rural development policy through the aforementioned channels and in several other ways. Some were actively involved between 2012 and 2014 (between the 2012 publication of *Putting People First – Action Programme for Effective Local Government* and the 2014 Local Government Reform Act) in working to ensure that community development principles and approaches would not be lost in the reconfiguration of local government and its relationship with local development. These academics also contributed to several think tanks – nationally and internationally, and have published extensively in relation to rural development. However, the consultations with them suggest that their contributions to policy stem from their individual expertise and fields of research rather than from their involvement with the NUI programme.

Students' assignments/projects were informed by a research base that was appropriate at undergraduate level, but which unlike MA or PhD research was not of sufficient depth of scale to act as the base for a policy paper or submission. Instead, the programme focused on giving students some of the skills and competencies to enable them to undertake research that could subsequently feed into policy formulation. These were put into practice, in a very clear way, with the aforementioned 2006 publication of the survey of living conditions in rural Ireland.

12 'Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025', available for download at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/4c236-our-rural-future-vision-and-policy-context/

13 Area Development Management (ADM) was established by the European Commission and Irish Government, in 1992, as an intermediary through which European funds to support rural and local development could be disbursed in Ireland. ADM operated as a national-level partnership and its board of directors included representatives from the community sector and partnership companies. It was abolished in 2005, with the establishment of Pobal, all of whose board members were ministerial appointees. Pobal assumed ADM's functions.

Undoubtedly the past 10 years have seen significant change in rural Ireland and this report has referenced some of these changes, as they have affected the governance of rural development at the local level – most notably the shift from diverse community development approaches to more coordinated delivery structures and mechanisms. These shifts have brought about changes in the skillsets required in rural development; there is now an increased emphasis on project management and development, report-writing and financial accounting and less emphasis on group development and animation skills. In contrast, the NUI programme with its consistent stress on community development approaches, (while in line with independent research and the OECD *New Rural Paradigm* (2006)) became increasingly out of step with the predominant policy trajectory in Ireland, particularly since 2000, which may in turn have contributed to the programme's demise.

By the same token, the absence of a concerted research agenda or agreed research strategy – to feed, from the programme, into national policy – on the part of the universities – is, in part, a factor in the paucity of the evidence available to policy-makers. This deficit was accentuated by the lack of academic involvement in the evaluation of LEADER II and subsequent iterations of LEADER in Ireland.[14] Thus, the programme's shortcomings, in terms of having a significant shaping effect on rural development policy in Ireland, can be associated with both internal and external factors.

14 The evaluation of LEADER I had been undertaken by a research team that included university-based academics. Subsequent LEADER evaluations were programmatic, rather than scoping – as the LEADER I evaluation had been.

3 Lessons

This chapter draws on the findings presented in Chapter 2. It synthesises the learning in respect of collaboration in higher education, in rural development policy and in rural development education.

3.1 Lessons for the Irish higher education sector

In December 2020, funding of €254,000 was made available by the Department of Rural and Community Development to support the work of the All-Ireland Endorsement Body for Community Work Education and Training (AIEB). The funding provided will support a review and mapping of community development programmes and their qualifications. It will also support a needs assessment of practicing community workers and others working with marginalised groups. While this investment relates to community development, rather than rural development per se, there are, as noted throughout this report, significant commonalities between these areas and the associated professional formation of those who work in them. Thus, HEIs involved in the education and training of those working in rural development can expect to participate in and/or experience some of the processes associated with the recently announced investment in community work education and training.

It is also the case that if this recent government announcement is indicative of a renewed interest in supporting capacity-building in communities – including rural communities, it may be timely in the context of this review report, particularly given the dominant view among stakeholders (internal and external) to consider the feasibility of revisiting and reactivating some form of qualification in Rural Development as an inter-university programme, using blended-learning modes.

In this context, it should be noted that over the past decade, there have been considerable advances in inter-university collaboration and networking, particularly across the EU. The Bologna System, in which all Irish universities participate, provides for mutual recognition of qualifications and the transfer of modular credits. This increases opportunities for student mobility and for broadening the menu of modules on offer to students who are attending any Irish HEI. Furthermore, access to ERASMUS+ is enabling universities in the European Economic Area (EEA) to engage in collaborative research and teaching. This and other EU programmes, including some of the streams under Horizon 2020, provide potential financial and technical supports for any future rural development programmes. Moreover, they offer prospects for the inclusion, in any consortium, of one or more HEIs from other member states.

The pursuit of an inter-disciplinary, inter-university and all-island (and possibly beyond) approach to the delivery of any future rural development higher education programme needs to be amplified and extended into ensuring that participants engage in a collaborative research programme linked to both academic publication and policy the outputs of which are likely to stimulate and motivate external interest in supporting, and investing in, the programme. As the next section (3.2) notes, this advances practitioner and academic contributions to policy making. Indeed, the embedding of a research agenda and brief within a reconfigured programme is essential in terms of its ability to raise finance. As noted throughout this report, the previous programme's lack of a core funding stream and the absence of a finance strategy proved to be detrimental. The current financial pressures and obligations on Irish universities further underscore the imperative of ensuring that any future programme be self-financing.

Experiences during the previous programme emphasise the importance of key personnel, offices and structures in enabling, supporting and sustaining student recruitment and progression and in underpinning inter-university collaboration. At university level, the programme co-ordinators were essential, and such posts will need to be provided for in any new configuration. At the inter-university level, the offices of the NUI were an important factor in the programme's successes. The NUI's role is universally acknowledged among stakeholders, and there is an openness to an enhanced NUI role in any future programme and in furthering inter-university collaborations more generally. At the same time, stakeholders are cognisant of 'bottom-lines', metrics and possible territorialism within individual universities, and they acknowledge the need for careful and respectful negotiations and full stakeholder consultations in the development

of the appropriate collaborative governance model. While the recent amalgamations of institutes of technology (IoTs) represent one way of promoting greater inter-discipline and inter-university collaboration, the model and structure of the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) represents a more obvious and tried-and-tested way of attaining and cementing the best practices that pertained to the Diploma/ Degree in Rural Development. Indeed, the UHI model offers transferable features that can give effect to the recommendations arising from this review.

The programme experience points to the merits of having strong drivers within the higher education sector, but cautions against an over-reliance on personalities and their goodwill. At a minimum, there is a need to have a memorandum of understanding (MoU) in place, so that collaboration is institutionally embedded. This MoU needs to be supported and actioned at all levels among the participating universities, so that academic staff know that they have the full support of management in promoting the programme and in rolling it out. There is also a need for a sufficient level of dedicated admin support to be provided.

3.2 Lessons for rural development public policy

The promotion of best practice in rural development requires on-going investment in professional formation, training and capacity building. As the OECD policy note *Rural 3.0* (OCED, 2018: 23) states, 'building capacity underpins the implementation of rural policy. Long-term capacity building makes rural communities more engaged in processes of development and more resilient to shocks.' This policy statement, which draws on extensive international research and the 2018 Edinburgh Conference on Rural Development, argues that rural development processes and structures require effective participation by bottom-up and top-down actors and collective decision-making based on participative governance.

The Diploma/Degree in Rural Development covered material that was in concert with several current OECD policy recommendations, as well as previous OECD recommendations, including the 2006 *New Rural Paradigm* (OCED, 2006). Consultations with graduates revealed that they have a strong awareness of the linkages between rural development policy and practice and of the importance of practitioners engaging with, and contributing to, policy development and reviews/evaluations. The university stakeholders shared these perspectives, and they noted the need to embed clear policy dimensions and agendas within any future rural development course/programme, so that there is a stronger direct feed from academic research into policy formulation at EU and member state levels. Indeed, even if the NUI or the universities do not embark on a programme/course in rural development, there is a need to increase and systematise the universities' contributions to policy formulation.

Policy makers have noted the merits of having a research feed from the third-level sector, so that decision-making is evidence-based. This implies supporting data collection in respect of rural development processes and governance, in general, as well as in relation to specific sectors. The *Cork Declaration* affirms the centrality of capacity building to the development of rural regions. It states that 'investment in rural areas should focus on generating added value for society. Investments in business development, public and private services, essential infrastructure and capacity building should deliver towards the common EU objectives notably in relation to jobs and green and inclusive growth' (European Commission, 2016:3).

Similarly, Ireland's *Action Plan for Rural Development 2017-2019* referred to the importance of capacity building and of strengthening knowledge capital in rural areas. (Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht, 2017). It notes that the innate knowledge and social capital of rural communities are among rural Ireland's most important strategic assets, and it contends that these strengths merit investment and consolidation. Strategic Action 37 (of the Action Plan) commits, in the context of supporting PPNs and participative democracy, to 'rolling out local training and capacity building'. This commitment is in addition to specific sectoral investments in capacity building (e.g. tourism, enterprise). Since the publication of the Action Plan for Rural Development, the Irish government has introduced policies in related areas, all of which refer to the need for investment in human capital. Among the examples are national policies on the social economy and the capacity of the community and voluntary sector. These publications, among others, provide evidence of a policy environment that is supportive of training, capacity-building and professional formation along the lines envisaged by those who pioneered the Diploma/Degree in Rural Development.

The current challenge is to turn this alignment into action through ensuring on-going government funding for dedicated rural development education in Irish universities. Thus, there is an immediate onus on education and policy stakeholders to progress this agenda collaboratively.

Systemic government investment in rural development education would enhance the delivery of stated EU and Irish government policies. In addition, and in order to maximise the return on investment, it would be reasonable and appropriate for government to expect, engender and facilitate a structured university input – from academics (lecturers/professors and researchers) and students – into the development, review and evaluation of policy. University staff have already given, and are giving, of their time to the formulation of public policy and to the reviews/evaluations of policy initiatives. In doing so, they draw on their individual and faculty expertise in rural development – among other fields. If a structured input into rural development policy were to be arranged, via the NUI and/or a collaborative inter-university rural development programme, there would arguably be stronger synergies than currently pertain. The aforementioned RUTAC represents an example of a collaborative (policy – academic – practitioner) structure that could be activated to support policy-making. Over recent years, platforms such as the National Rural Network (based in NUI Galway) have demonstrated the merits of collaborations between policymakers, practitioners and academics. At the same time, collaborative networks such as the Irish Local Development Network (ILDN) have strengthened their policy focus, thus broadening and enhancing the prospects for collaborative and evidence-informed policymaking.

3.3 Lessons for future rural development education

Rural development is, by its nature, interdisciplinary, and students and researchers will clearly benefit from access to inputs from geography, sociology, political science, economics and agriculture, among other fields of study. The evidence from international literature and the pointers provided by stakeholders, who participated in this review, noted that while agriculture is an important element of rural society and the rural economy, the 'rural' is an increasingly complex and heterogeneous place, the understanding, appreciation and development which transcends any one sector or discipline.

There is a gap in rural development education, and a new focus on 'the rural/the local' is required in the context of COVID-19

The cessation of the Diploma and Degree in Rural Development, in 2015, has left a gap in rural development education that has not been filled to date. With a new focus on 'the local', which has been accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic, now could be an ideal time to revisit rural development education, professional formation and equipping rural communities with enhanced contemporary skills and expertise. The international literature recommends focusing on bringing people/communities together and further promoting the integration of economic and ecological objectives. There is currently an absence of clear career pathways and training for individuals, who want to engage in this work, including those working in local development companies, local authorities and other similar organisations. Consideration should also be given to changing/broadening the nomenclature used to describe any new programme to include 'local' and/or 'economic' and/or 'community' (with a significant emphasis on environmental issues and sustainability) in order to enhance the appeal of any future programme. At the same time, retaining the word 'rural' in the title demonstrates the programme's distinctiveness, and relates it to an established corpus of study.

New course content and methods of delivery

Any future rural development education and training programmes need to move beyond an exclusive focus on rural areas; rural development should focus on the sustainable use and management of resources (human and physical) and on the relationships between rural areas, villages, towns, regions and cities. Course material and research agendas must also include a focus on societal, cultural and behavioural change. This mix of subjects will require the involvement of a range of different disciplines and an increased degree of inter-disciplinarity.

Assuming the focus remains on mature students, any new courses need to be developed in such a way that students should be able to tailor the training/formation to meet their specific needs. This will require modularisation – enabling students to select the modules that meet their needs and build up credits over time. Such an approach will also provide students with the opportunities to explore particular topics in depth. Courses and modules need to be kept under constant review, and it would be important for course organisers to keep in touch with graduates in order to keep abreast of current education and training needs. As recommended by graduates, there is scope to consider convening research and policy seminars/ webinars – involving graduates.

Distance learning/blended learning

Blended learning, which includes a combination of distance learning, peer learning and face-to-face meetings, is the best way to deliver rural development education and training. The development of distance learning materials is resource intensive, while online learning needs to be accompanied by both pastoral and technical support.

The role of research/linking research to policy

Any rural development education/training and education needs to maximise the associated research opportunities and to ensure that the learning arising from any research undertaken as part of the training is shared with local, national and EU policy makers as relevant. Academics should be encouraged to prepare inter-disciplinary papers for publication in peer-reviewed academic journals. Outlets should also include publications that target practitioners (professional and voluntary), thereby ensuring involvement in the programme is an attractive proposition for academics' keen to develop a strong publication record as well as those who engage in action research and further the development of the civic university.

Funding

The funding model for the diploma and degree was ad hoc. Any future rural development programme needs to put in place a clear sustainable funding model that supports practitioners to engage in the programme.

Engagement with policy makers and rural development practitioners

A programme of ongoing engagement with policy makers (including representatives from the Department of Rural and Community Development, as well as key stakeholders in the local authority and local development sectors) will be required for any future rural development education initiative.

The model of engagement with employers, particularly with LEADER companies, while it was often based on personal relationships and contacts, was useful for both academics and students alike. As such, it is suggested, that any future programme incorporate these principles and practices into their governance, planning and operation.

Appendix 1 List of Acronyms

ADM	Area Development Management
AIEB	All Ireland Endorsement Body for Community Work Education and Training
BoM	Board of Management
CAO	Central Application Office
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CD	Compact Disc
CE	Community Employment
CLLD	Community-Led Local Development
DAB	Designated Awarding Body
DAFM	Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine
EEA	European Economic Area
EU	European Union
FTE	Full-Time Equivalent
GDPR	General Data Protection Guidelines
HEI	Higher-Education Institute
IAASA	Irish Auditing and Accounting Supervisory Authority
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
ILDN	Irish Local Development Network
IoT	Institutes of Technology
IPA	Institute of Public Administration
IRL	Irish Rural Link
LCDC	Local Community Development Committee
LDC	Local Development Company
LEADER	Liaison entre actions de développement de l'économie rurale
MA	Master of Arts
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MU	Maynooth University
MP3	This is the abbreviated form of MPEG: Moving Picture Experts Group. The digit 3 indicates that it is an audio file.
NESC	National Economic and Social Council
NRN	National Rural Network
NUI	National University of Ireland
NUI Galway	National University of Ireland, Galway
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PPN	Public Participation Network
QUB	Queen's University Belfast
RD	Rural Development
RUTAC	Rural Training Advisory Committee
SUSI	Student Universal Support Ireland
TD	Teachta Dála (Member of Parliament)
UCC	University College Cork
UCD	University College Dublin
UCG	University College Galway
UHI	University of the Highlands and Islands
UK	United Kingdom

Appendix 2 Academic related partner consultations completed

Institution	Individual
National University of Ireland	Attracta Halpin NUI Registrar
Maynooth University	Michael Kenny, Course Organiser Aidan Mulkeen, Professor of Education at that time Jim Walsh, Occasional Lecturer on the programme and former University Vice President Josephine Finn, Head of Department (retired)
NUI Galway	Maureen Mescall (programme administrator) Brian Barrett (occasional lecturer) Michael Cuddy (retired)
UCC	Mary O'Shaughnessy, Co-ordinator Michael Ward (emeritus)
UCD	Jim Kinsella, Programme Lecturer/Module Writer Anne Markey, Programme Lecturer/Module Writer Pádraig Wims, Programme Academic Director Lily Mulhall, Programme Co-ordinator (retired)

Appendix 3 External stakeholders consulted

External Examiners	Frank Rennie – external examiner – Professor of Sustainable Rural Development, Assistant Principal (Research, Enterprise, and Development).
	Sally Shorthall – Duke of Northumberland Chair of Rural Economy, Newcastle University.
Local Development Companies	Maria Moynihan-Lee former Manager of Blackwater Resource Development (LEADER) and former CEO of Macra na Feirme. She was also a member of the executive of Comhar LEADER na hÉireann.
	Brian Carty, CEO of Wicklow LEADER Partnership and Co-ordinator of the Irish Local Development Network (ILDN).
	Niamh Kenny, Former Secretary of Comhar LEADER na hÉireann.
	Mary Walsh, CEO of County Carlow Development Partnership.
Government Departments	Gerry Kearney, former Secretary General, Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.
	Aisling Penrose, Assistant Principal, Rural Strategy and Social Enterprise Unit, Dept of Rural and Community Development.

Appendix 4 Membership of the Steering Group

Attracta Halpin	NUI
Patricia Maguire	
Michael Kenny	Maynooth University
Mary O'Shaughnessy	UCC
Pádraig Wims	UCD
Karen Keaveney	
Marie Mahon	NUI Galway

Appendix 5 Diploma and Degree Modules

Level	Modules
Diploma	1. Introduction to Rural Development 2. Socio-Economic aspects of Rural Development 3. Socio-Economic Community/Area Resource Audits 4. Community and Rural Development though Groups 5. Choosing and setting up a Rural Development Related Organisation/Structure 6. Marketing for Rural Enterprise 7. Business Planning and Stimulating rural Enterprise 8. Interpersonal Communications, Leadership and Group Work Skills 9. Designing and Managing an Area Development Plan 10. Inter-Organisational Partnership and the Role of Support Agencies 11. Social Exclusion and Gender Equality Issues in Rural Development Project: Integrated Fieldwork Project and a Report
B.Sc Modules	1. Information and Communications Technology 2. Organisational Communications in Rural Dev. 3. SME Development 4. Co-operative Theory and Practice 5. Project Planning and Development 6. Public and Social Policy Processes 7. Community Education and Development 8. Rural Labour Markets 9. Rural Development: Social and Economic Aspects of Policy and Planning 10. Socio-Economic Research/Level Two 11. Financial Analysis and Planning 12. Socio-Economic Research/Level Three 13. Food Business 14. Co-Operative and Rural Social Enterprise 15. Health & Social Service Policy 16. Rural Tourism 17. Research Project/Thesis

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Biographies

Dr Breandán Ó Caoimh is a human geographer and social scientist with a practitioner background in rural development. He is an independent consultant working in the fields of social research, local development, community planning, evaluation, project management and organisational change. As an academic, he was a senior lecturer in geography and director of quality in Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick. Breandán's current work mainly involves the use of action-research methodologies, and he is working with a number of local development companies, local authorities and civil society organisations. He has compiled research reports on several issues including youth needs, spatial planning, homelessness, community planning, cross-border collaboration, good governance and rural development.

Breandán holds a BA in European Studies from the University of Limerick, an MA in Community Development from NUI Galway and a PhD in Geography from Maynooth University.

Dr Kathy Walsh is an experienced independent social researcher with significant knowledge of rural issues. Key pieces of work she has been involved in have includes evaluations of various rural development programmes, development of various funding applications for rural initiatives, preparation of a study of employment and inclusion in rural areas, a study of the role of social enterprise in rural areas, studies on the measurement of rural disadvantage, as well as various analysis of rural policies. Kathy works with a wide variety of organisations at European level and nationally, including government departments and agencies, local authorities and community groups, Kathy previously worked as the Research Co-ordinator for the Programme for Peace & Reconciliation and as a Development Officer with Highland Regional Council in Scotland.

Kathy holds a BAgSci from University College Dublin an MSc in Rural Planning from the University of Aberdeen and a PhD on the role of evaluation in Rural Community Development from the University of Bristol.

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