

EFRA Committee: Inquiry Education and Careers in Land-based Sectors

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This submission draws on recent research into training in horticultural farming, including evaluation of a pilot in Wales 2021-23, the [Future Farmer Training Programme](#). This research provides insight to experiences of new entrants seeking to access training and of farmers who provide on-farm learning opportunities, with a focus on agro-ecological farming and horticulture.

Key findings relevant to this inquiry are:

- There is no **clear pathway** for a new entrant seeking to learn how to become an agro-ecological farmer, and then to develop into an expert. There is a need for more coordinated information about opportunities available, and for further training to take growers beyond an entry-level placement.
- Access to educational opportunities in agro-ecological farming is limited by **financial constraints** with many being un- or low-paid, or at a cost to the learner. This has resulted in a lack of diversity amongst trainees, and creates financial difficulties for those who pursue traineeships. **Paid traineeships** offering learners a living wage as they work are required to make education in food growing accessible and resilient.
- Trainees have a strong preference for **hands-on learning** and educational opportunities centred on practical on-farm work experience. The Future Farmer Training programme was valued for combining this with more theoretical sessions and opportunities to learn from a range of experienced growers to ensure a rounded education.
- Agro-ecological farming currently relies on a significant number of **informal learning** opportunities such as internships and volunteering. The quality and conditions of these vary, with no way for trainees to guarantee the learning and experience they will receive. Trainees need better information about their rights, and mechanisms to **control the quality** of placements, including remuneration and living conditions.
- Farmers and growers who host trainees have a wealth of expertise they share largely on a voluntary, **goodwill** basis. They would benefit from support to deliver quality training, and remuneration for their work as educators. The curriculum developed by Future Farmer Training and other support provided by Land Workers Alliance offer positive examples.
- There is a strong community of agro-ecological growers and networks of organisations working to support trainees and trainers. This provides a valuable **peer-support system** and routes for exchanging good practice. But this support system is informal, relying on the time of people who are frequently overworked and financially precarious. **Investing**

in organisations and experts who hold vital expertise will help ensure they can train future generations of food producers.

Participants suggested that the ideal training opportunity for a new entrant to agro-ecological food growing would comprise:

- At least 1 year of learning.
- Predominantly applied learning through hands-on experience working as a grower.
- An element of theoretical / class-based learning in general principles of growing and business operation.
- Visits to a range of growers / farms to gain insight into varying production systems and business models.
- A range of teaching modes to suit varied learning needs.
- A community of learners who can become a network of peers for career-long support.
- Fair pay for work delivered on-farm.
- Options to graduate onto further learning and development opportunities.

The full report of evaluation of the pilot training is available on request. The remainder of the submission addresses the inquiry questions for which the research has relevant findings.

2. How effective is the education system at supporting young people seeking careers in land-based sectors? For example, are routes such as T levels and apprenticeships fit for purpose?

There is a lack of formal educational programmes focused on edible horticulture, particularly agro-ecological growing including organic. Informal training opportunities in this sector are disconnected from routes such as apprenticeships, being more often provided by small farms or enterprises, including community run growing. Those who host on-farm trainees have accessed programmes like Kick Start, but understanding of how to connect to other educational routes such as apprenticeships is limited.

Trainees and trainers recognise the value that can come through partnering with educational institutions such as FE colleges to deliver accredited learning via on-farm placements, suggesting it enhances consistency and quality control across work-based learning placements. However, many prioritise hands-on experience over a qualification, and class-based learning is a deterrent to some. The location of farms where trainees can learn agro-ecological growing can make it difficult to organise day-release to a college. The curriculum offered by vocational institutions needs to be tailored to agro-ecological food growing, including learning how to run a business or enterprise.

An example of a programme seeking to address some of these issues is the [Black Mountains College NVQ in Regenerative Horticulture](#).

3. What more can be done to facilitate new entrants, including those from non-rural backgrounds, into land-based sectors, including those considering a career change?

There are a significant number of adults interested in entering land-based careers following a period in work or higher education in unrelated fields, including the new entrants involved in the Future Farmer Training. They reported that it is difficult to identify opportunities to access education in agro-ecological horticulture as there are multiple, often informal, pathways in. There is no single portal to discover these opportunities.

Programmes that suit the needs of career changers are less supported by established educational routes. For example, new entrants reported that they could not take up an apprenticeship as the income is insufficient to meet their costs of living or there are prohibitive age limits. Academic programmes eligible for student finance (e.g. MSc) were not found to equip people to become food growers due to the lack of applied learning.

The location of traineeships is also a limitation as they often require trainees to move to remote rural settings where affordable housing is highly limited. Plus the trainee is relocating for the duration of a traineeship – usually less than 1 year – which is disruptive and incurs expenses. Opportunities in rural areas also present barriers to people of colour or minoritised genders who do not always feel welcomed there.

To address these issues there is a need for a mosaic of flexible training provision in land-based careers. This should include traineeships in varied locations, including cities and the urban fringe, of varying durations and delivery modes, including online and part-time options. Accessibility also depends on trainees receiving financial support to cover their costs of living – which might include caring responsibilities - for the duration of the programme.

4. Are colleges offering land-based education accessible and available to those seeking to enroll in courses? Are there gaps in coverage and if so, how can these be addressed?

AND

5. Do colleges offering land-based education have the appropriate facilities and funding to enable effective teaching (e.g. access to farmland)? What more can be done to make this teaching more effective?

At present it is difficult to establish the level of provision in land-based courses, or student numbers as insufficient data is available ([Miller Research 2022](#)). There is a need for a coordinated approach to monitoring this and evaluating whether provision is able to meet current and projected demand. For horticulture, this could have been usefully facilitated by a strategy for the industry so it is disappointing that UK Government will not proceed with this.

College courses offer better coverage for conventional land-based industries than for agro-ecological farming, with provision focused on edible horticulture having suffered particular decline and being under-resourced ([Pitt 2019](#)). These courses are relatively costly to operate meaning institutions are reluctant to offer them, particularly for small cohorts.

A challenge facing educational provision is that the academic calendar does not match the seasonal cycle of horticulture. Ideally, training would commence by March, run through the growing season and cover all parts, including winter. Many horticultural enterprises target their

recruitment for early spring, so ideally trainees want to exit their programmes in time to apply for these jobs. A September-June academic course offers limited opportunity for hands-on experience of crop growing.

6. What role should schools, colleges, universities, and local and central government play in promoting and supporting careers in land-based sectors?

Being able to grow food in a sustainable way is a core feature of a resilient society; enabling learning in food growing is therefore an essential public good (Pitt 2021). At present it is difficult to make a viable income as a food grower, particularly when producing to agro-ecological principles (Pitt 2022). Yet those working in the sector are currently providing essential education to new recruits. Government can support the sector and ensure thriving knowledge exchange by recognising the value of this learning. Farmers and growers could be paid for the time they give to train others moving into land-based careers, and offered support to develop their skills as educators, for example through train-the-trainer initiatives. This will help underpin the viability of their farm business and enhance the sector's capacity to provide educational opportunities.

7. How can more children, young people and adults be provided with opportunities to see the career opportunities in land-based sectors first-hand? Are there examples of initiatives doing this successfully (for example, through initiatives such as Open Farm Sunday)?

In association with the Future Farmer Training Programme, researchers organised visits for groups of young people (aged 11-16) to growers in South Wales. Groups saw food growing firsthand, and heard about trainees' experiences of entering careers in the sector. This research suggested that visits are effective in educating young people about work in land-based sectors, but this is insufficient to encourage them to move into associated careers. We found that young people's aspirations for their future are not well aligned with the jobs available, plus as they learn more about growers' pay, conditions, volume of work and pressures they can find the opportunities even less appealing.

8. Are there domestic or international examples of best practice in successfully promoting educational opportunities and careers in land-based sectors?

Trainees involved in the Future Farmer Training Programme feature in a [film](#) created by the same project to help young people understand careers in food growing. It is freely available for careers advisors and others.

References

Miller Research 2022 Mapping of existing horticulture training provision (and current sector requirements)

https://www.farmgarden.org.uk/sites/farmgarden.org.uk/files/mapping_of_existing_horticulture_training_provision.pdf

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