

# An investigation into farmers' perceptions and experiences of engaging with continued professional development

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In 2022, I completed my BSc. Education Studies from Marino Institute of Education and currently am in my final year studying my Professional Masters in Education (primary) in Maynooth University [or PME primary] to become a primary school teacher. I completed this research as part of my BSc and wanted to focus on a demographic of people who I am familiar with, but I did not see represented in mainstream education research. This research examines the levels of awareness and access farmers in Ireland have to continued professional development (CPD) and was chosen based on my own experience of growing up on a sheep farm in rural Ireland.

**KEYWORDS:** CPD, Farming, CPD for Farmers, Lifelong learning, Upskilling

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this research was to investigate the perceptions and experiences of farmers when engaging with continued professional development (CPD) in Ireland. The data was collected through a combination of online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The main questions seeking to be answered were ‘how farmers interact with CPD’, ‘where farmers access information relating to CPD’ and ‘are the courses currently being run through organisations relevant to the needs of farmers? The purpose was to understand, from the perspective of farmers, the levels of awareness there is relating to CPD, while also investigating how this may impact on levels of interest.

The objectives of this research were:

1. To explore the experiences of farmers in relation to accessing professional development and new information relating to farming techniques and equipment.
2. To identify the types of resources used by farmers when accessing training and continued education.
3. To gather the views and opinions of farmers relating to awareness and interest in upskilling and CPD.

The importance of continued professional training and development, within the agricultural sector, is recognised and emphasised by the National Skills Strategy 2025 (Teagasc, 2018). It is vital to ensure economic competitiveness and, in terms of agriculture, is essential to help the wider farming population cope with constant and fast paced changes (LIT & BRC, 2019). It is important to note that, a ‘farmer’ in this research refers to any individual who is involved in the operations of a farm on either a frequent basis or in a casual capacity, this can include family members and those managing accounts or otherwise.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Irish farmers and the levels of educational attainment among the community was explored in this research, and the qualifications necessary to become a ‘trained farmer’ in Ireland were examined. Following on from this, it highlights the value and importance of CPD in agriculture justifying the involvement of the farmer’s voice and opinion in the design and development of CPD to ensure relevance and accessibility of the topics covered.

### *Irish farmers and educational achievement*

The education level of individuals, particularly those aged 65 and older in Ireland, is an important factor to be considered impacting on an individual’s ability to engage and participate in CPD. According to the 2016 Census, 30% of farm holders in Ireland were aged 65 and older. It is important to note that in the same year 39.7% of this general population had only received the equivalent of primary level education (CSO, 2016(a)). To elaborate, it is critical to consider the disadvantage at which some individuals who have minimally accessed education may be at while accessing CPD. The National Adult Literacy Agency states that from the OECD Adult Skills Survey in 2012 it was found that 1 in 6 Irish adults, 17.9%, have a literacy level of 1 or below, meaning they may be unable to comprehend basic written information (n.d.). While this data is nine years old it is still relevant and a possible serious barrier facing the older population of Agri-sector workers in Ireland, based off the findings of the 2016 Census.

### *Farming and importance of upskilling*

To ensure economic competitiveness and help cope with fast paced changes, CPD in agriculture is essential, this is emphasised by the National Skills Strategy 2025, who highlighted the importance of CPD (Limerick Institute of Technology & Broadmore Research and Consulting, 2019; Teagasc, 2018).

The Teagasc Education Vision report (2018) stated that the “provision of lifelong learning opportunities and a continuous professional development programme for active farmers will be a key element of Teagasc’s future knowledge exchange activities” (p.49). The key benefits of CPD courses for members of the agricultural community in Ireland have been presented in research completed by Limerick Institute of Technology and Broadmore Research and Consulting (LIT & BRC, 2019). This research suggested that the introduction of a wide range of accredited CPD courses would help farmers to improve their skills and make more informed decision-making in relation to farm economics (LIT & BRC, 2019). It was also proposed that specifically focused CPD courses would lead to an increased awareness among agricultural workers about the details relating to policies, regulations, and scheme requirements necessary for farming success (LIT & BRC, 2019).

Ultimately this research identified that there are numerous benefits to developing accredited CPD course in agriculture, promoting innovation and ensuring that this industry continues to become more knowledgeable as well as have “access to up-to-date advice and information which can be applied to farming activities” (LIT & BRC, 2019, p.18).

The Education Vision report highlighted the role of digital technologies in lifelong learning allowing for more interactive and personalised learning resources to be created (Teagasc, 2018). One of the main goals of this report is to “establish professional development routes for farmers and the wider land sector including an alumni support programme for Teagasc graduates who are taking up farming” (2018, p.63), this shows that as an organisation Teagasc are committed to engaging all members of the agricultural community in CPD and working towards better education and training prospects. They aim to make these opportunities readily available to all members of the community and specifically focus also on new farmers, to support in the development of development of their farms.

#### *Farmer involvement in research*

A common theme which is emphasised throughout research is the exclusion of farmers opinion and inputs in agricultural research. The gap which is then created as a result of a lack of farmer involvement in formal research unintentionally creates mismatched expectations between researchers and farmers, especially in the development of smart technology (Rose et al., 2018). This gap may have a negative impact on the provision of CPD as a result of a lack of student voice in CPD development.

In terms of lifelong learning, Fleming (2013) identifies the student voice as integral to learning and pedagogy. Through the recognition and acknowledgement of student input educators become better equipped to tailor the contents of learning to the needs of the class. Student input can be accommodated through formal and informal methods, including an evaluation and the provision of feedback on educational programmes (Teagasc, 2018). The development of any CPD must be supported by industry and when being designed should include consultation with key stakeholders in order to ensure that the courses are of a benefit to the entire sector not solely focused on individual aims (LIT & BRC, 2019).

#### *Accessibility to CPD, training and upskilling*

An essential infrastructural issue in farmer education is accessibility. The Merriam-Webster dictionary (n.d.) defines accessible as “being within reach” and “easily used or accessed by people with disabilities” (n.p.). When CPD courses are being designed they must also be assessed to ensure equal access is being made for all. Accessibility issues can relate to levels of literacy, lack of time in schedules, low levels of student engagement or poor access to broadband and internet connections. Farmer involvement throughout the design process of CPD, may be a solution to ensuring that opportunities are accessible to all (Teagasc, 2018). Accessible CPD also means that courses are being run at a times which are suitable to farmers in their schedule. There are multiple approaches to engagement which can be used to ensure accessibility for all when availing CPD, consultation with key stakeholders can have a major positive impact (LIT & BRC, 2019). Examples of creating an accessible environment would include adaptable and flexible working hours, multiple means of engagement, and clear, concise correspondence between the educators and students (LIT & BRC, 2019).

### **METHODOLOGY**

This research followed a mixed methods approach which involved a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies and using both these approaches to analyse data (Creswell, 2017). In this research project, quantitative questionnaires (n=70) and qualitative semi structured interviews (n=2) were introduced at the data collection stage. Data was analysed using thematic analysis, which involved grouping the findings into the major themes of the research.

This project was situated in the pragmatic paradigm meaning the researcher examined data through a practical lens and chooses the methods which were best suited to the research topic and aims (Creswell, 2017). As this was a social research project it was important that participants were able to express opinions as was ensured in both questionnaires and interviews.

A major benefit of using a questionnaire in this research is that it was accessible while also quick and easy to complete, making it convenient for farmers in their stressful climate (Queirós, 2017). Additionally, the number of respondents that can be reached through using a questionnaire can be much greater than with interviews, as was portrayed in this research (Cohen et al., 2007; Queirós, 2017).

The interview questions and questionnaires were designed in parallel with each other, following a concurrent design, with neither influencing the data being collected. This method of data collection and casual conversational flow is constructive as it allows for discussions to form and can often highlight other topic areas which may have been neglected previously (Longhurst, 2003). As this was a social research project and there is such a wide range of variables impacting uptake, availability, and accessibility to courses, semi-structured interviews can have a significant positive influence on the direction of the research.

## **ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

This section examines the key findings which emerged from questionnaire data and provides a discussion and analysis of these findings in relation to literature. As this research was mainly based on the findings of the questionnaires, data gathered from the interviews was used to support and illuminate the quantitative data.

### *Sources of News and Up to Date Farming Information*

Question 10 of the online questionnaire, asked respondents to choose where they would receive most of their farming news and up to date information, allowing for the selection of multiple sources. With 56 respondents choosing newspapers such as the Irish Farmer's Journal and the Irish Farming Independent it appears that written media is the most popular and convenient source, being a favourite among this questionnaire's participants. The second most popular options chosen was word of mouth, with 42 respondents also relying on other farmers to inform them of up-to-date farming information alongside other sources. Interestingly, an outlier in the sourcing of information found from the questionnaire results was Macra na Feirme. This was surprising considering that this is an organisation which supports young farmers aged 17-35 whom represented over 50% of the respondents in this research.

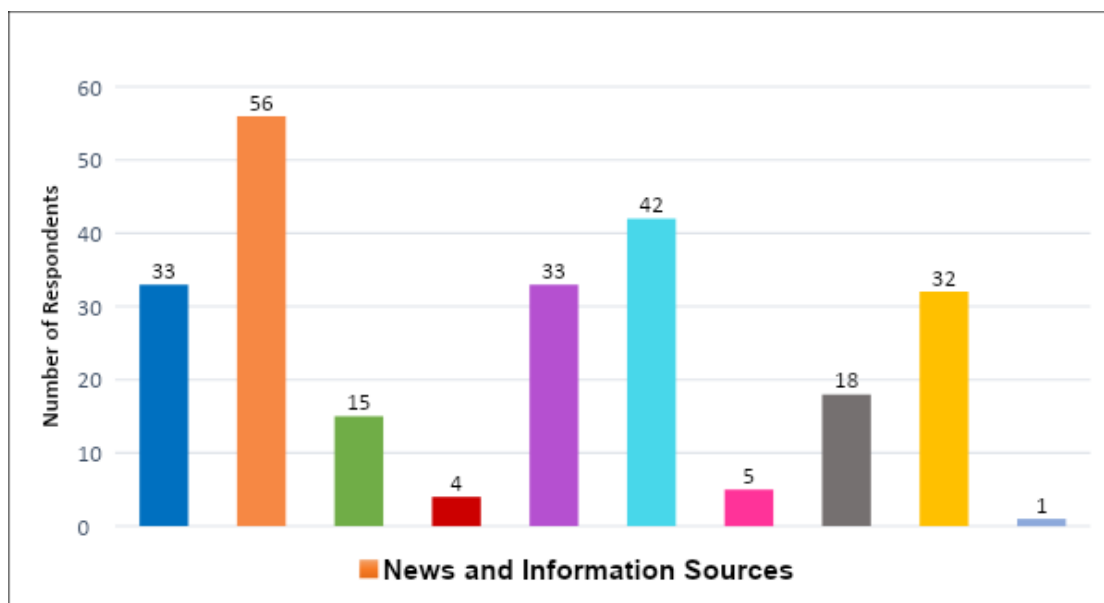


Chart 1: Most commonly used news and information sources

### *Participation in CPD*

Seventy-nine percent of participants (n=55) stated that they do not participate in upskilling and training courses. This leaves 20% (n=14) partaking between 1 to 3 times a year and just 1 respondent stating that they regularly participate in CPD between 4 to 6 times a year. If individuals are not aware of CPD happening due to insufficient advertising, as referenced by James in his interview, or otherwise, this could lead to lower levels of frequent participation. Participation rates may also be negatively impacted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In his interview, John discussed how often farmers from an older generation may feel intimidated in a classroom environment and this was also mentioned by a questionnaire respondent in relation to factors hindering participation in CPD. John mentioned how “they [the course providers] are coming from a textbook end of it and if they were farming themselves, they’d have a far more practical thing”. The opinion of John was quite clear as he stated that “they [the course providers] haven’t a clue themselves how to do it, they are just reading out of a book”. This was similar to the opinions of James who said that in his view the factors influencing farmers participation was dependent on several elements including, “how topical a course is [and] who will be giving the course.” James continued by describing that if an individual teaching on a course is not someone who they find amiable then they are more likely not to attend.

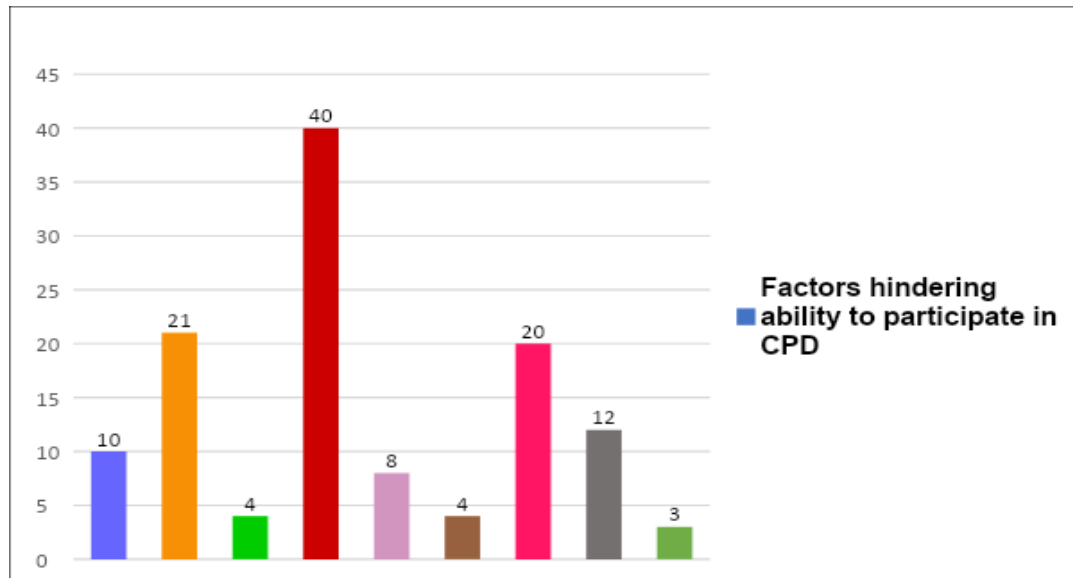


Chart 2: Factors hindering farmer's ability to participate in CPD

### *Lack of awareness*

The issue surrounding a lack of awareness about the provision of CPD courses was linked to advertising in an interview with James, who stated that “if advertising was improved and targeted properly for example by including information about future courses being run when advertising a dance in the local pub, it would improve levels of participation.” By just limiting the advertisement of CPD courses to the internet and websites such as Facebook, James said that this is having a knock-on effect and therefore limiting participation unintentionally. An example of this could be the advertisement of a farm succession information session alongside the advertisement of a local dance as this may be a better way to reach the target demographic. This lack of awareness may also arise from the main sources being used by participants in relation to the latest news and agricultural updates, which have been found to be newspapers and word of mouth from other farmers. It is likely to also be a contributing factor to the low levels of engagement with CPD by participants.

### *Lack of interest*

Findings highlighted a lack of interest among farmers as a major factor hindering participation. This may be a significant concern, considering the importance of CPD which is continuously highlighted in published literature (Teagasc, 2018; LIT & BRC, 2019). It is essential to ensuring farmers are equipped to cope with the fast-paced changes in agriculture and that they are able to continue to be economically viable and competitive repeatedly (LIT & BRC, 2019). Additionally, the significance of CPD was also highlighted by respondents in this research. Many stated that they believe there is a need for CPD in agriculture, finding it to be “important to keep skills up and develop the farm” as well as “being aware of change”. Perhaps, it is more a perceived lack to interest among farmers in CPD as it has been indicated the topic areas which they would preference are in line with that offered by organisations. To elaborate, misdirected advertising has been linked as a possible reason for the high ‘lack of awareness’ in this research, therefore if farmers are not aware of CPD opportunities, then how can they be interested? Currently, CPD courses which are available to farmers place a heavy emphasis on farm safety, spraying and in more recent times farm management (Teagasc, 2018). From the data collected in this research, these topics are relevant to the wants and needs of the farming community, with 84% of participants either ‘interested’ or ‘very interested’ in farm management and business as the topic of a

CPD course. Other areas, such as technology, the environment and sustainable farming and farm safety all had over 55% or more respondents ‘interested’ or ‘very interested’ in the topic.

An outlier topic identified as a possible topic in CPD brought forward by a participant in the ‘other’ section was work-life balance coaching. This is interesting as the practice and inclusion of mindfulness is often standard in the training of other professions, and yet according to participants appears to be overlooked in agriculture. A profession such as farming has been identified by Mental Health Ireland as one which requires strong resilience, with high levels of stress and anxiety common among farmers (Mental Health Ireland, 2020). In 2020, in partnership with Teagasc and the IFA, Mental Health Ireland launched the ‘Farming Resilience’ page, aiming to provide supports to farmers throughout COVID-19 and beyond (Mental Health Ireland, 2020).

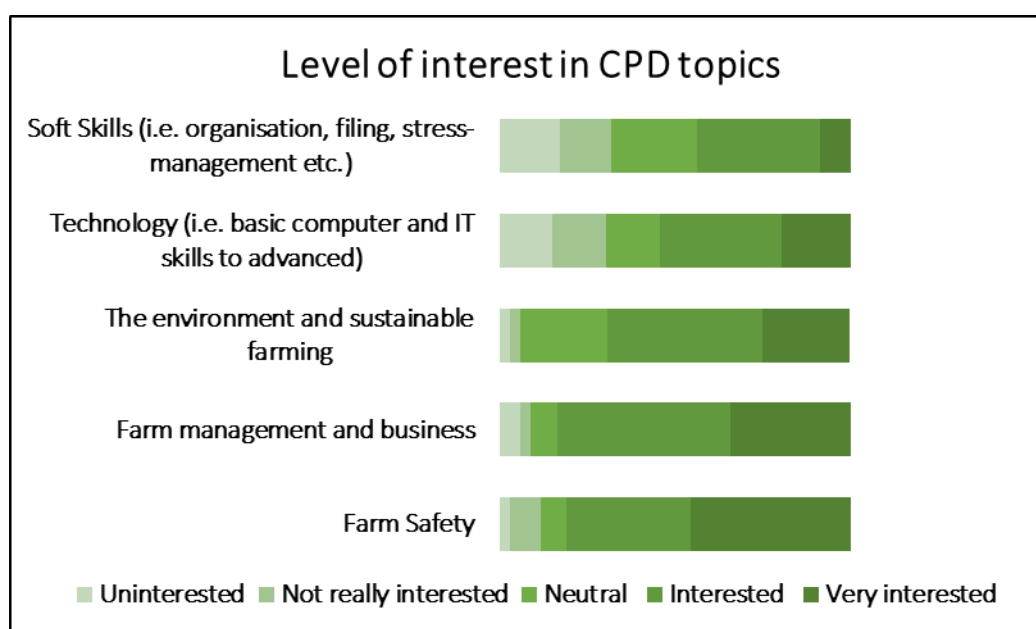


Chart 3: Levels of interest in CPD topics

### *Other barriers to participation*

An interesting finding was that one respondent highlighted that a classroom scenario was too intimidating and therefore impacted on their ability to participate in CPD. This highlights the importance of farmer inclusion when developing CPD programmes to ensure that it is offered through a variety of access routes in order to appeal to all farmers, and to meet their needs. As stated in the literature review, 30% of Ireland's farm holders are aged 65 or older according to the 2016 Census and from this in the general public, of this 39.7% had only received the equivalent of a primary education (CSO, 2016(a)). If an individual falls into this category it is possible that they have not returned to a classroom scenario since, and therefore as was brought forward in this data, it can be ‘too intimidating’ a situation. In order to prevent this from occurring, organisations such as Teagasc and FRS offer courses delivered through a variety of means such as online and a blended approach to learning. This also highlights that, providers of CPD for farmers should work to ensure that farmers have opportunities to develop the skills required for learning, including self-confidence and learner self-efficacy, to ensure that psychological elements of learning are not barriers for farmers, and to help some overcome difficult educational histories.



### *Factors facilitating the provision of CPD*

Participants also highlighted the factors they believe facilitate or encourage their participation in CPD and continued learning. A total of 44 respondents chose financial incentives, such as an increase in grant money or a reduced cost of CPD as a possible facilitating factor to encourage their participation. The second most chosen answer was weekend provision, followed by the accreditation of training courses.

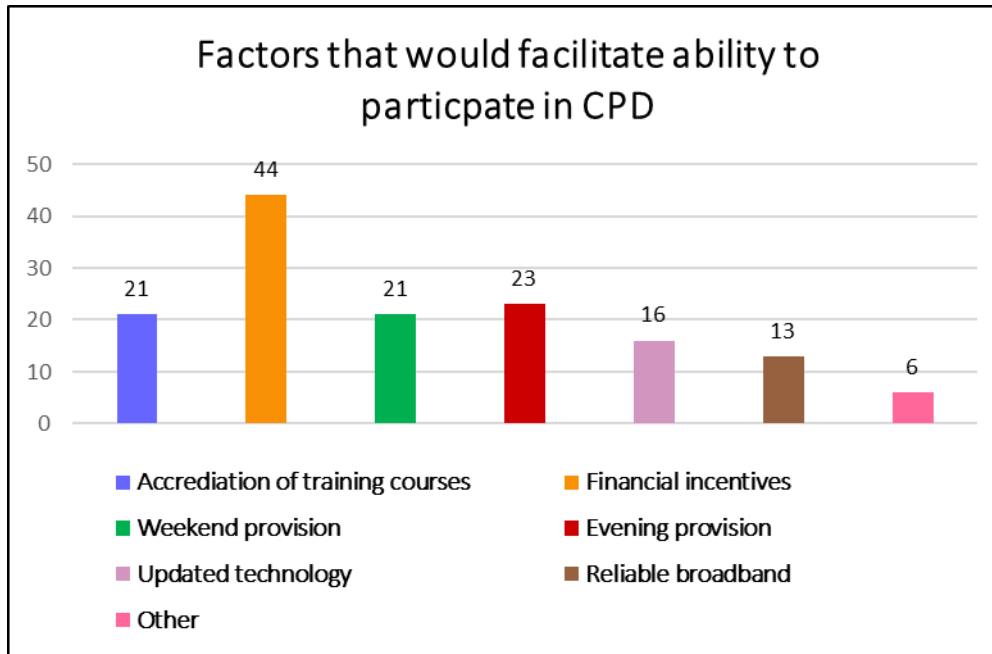


Chart 4: Factors facilitating farmer's ability to participate in CPD

### *Linking learning to financial incentives*

The linking of financial incentives to CPD was the most common factor chosen by respondents as a facilitator in their participation. GLAS (Green, low-carbon, Agri-environment scheme) is an agri-environmental scheme, overseen by Teagasc, under the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 (Teagasc, 2017 (a)), which links financial incentives and training with sustainable farming.

While the GLAS scheme is more complex than just paying farmers to complete CPD, there is a financial incentive aspect to draw farmers into participating in this environmental work. During their interview, James stated that he "[didn't] think you should be paid to do this" based on past experiences. He described that he had found if people were attending CPD to receive an end goal of grant money or otherwise that often "they had no interest, and they'd want to hold all the course down" by asking irrelevant questions. He went on to say that he did not think it was fair on others who spent money to attend and progress further. He did however express that if partially subsidising CPD may be a solution to this as it would mean that individuals "are still investing" but also it is not as expensive to complete. One respondent of the questionnaire said that "if it was stated that it was necessary to receive financial interest, I would take part. In other words, if I had to, do CPD I would do it". This reinforces the point made by James that providing financial incentives to farmers just to complete CPD without personal investment may negatively impact on others registered in a course.

It could be argued that rather than acting as a facilitator to engage farmers in CPD, financial incentives are possibly a motivation. The subsidising of grants means that while farmers are not paying full price to complete CPD, they are still personally investing and therefore it is likely they are really interested in being there.



### *Preferred methods of delivery*

Weekend and evening provision were also common ‘facilitators’ chosen by respondents and these both relate to the methods used to deliver CPD. The methods used to deliver the content of CPD courses is important in ensuring that the programmes created are productive and meaningful, not seen as a box-ticking activity. Day and Sachs (2005) noted that matching the topic of CPD programmes with the professional needs of the participants is an essential element in ensuring the effectiveness of CPD.

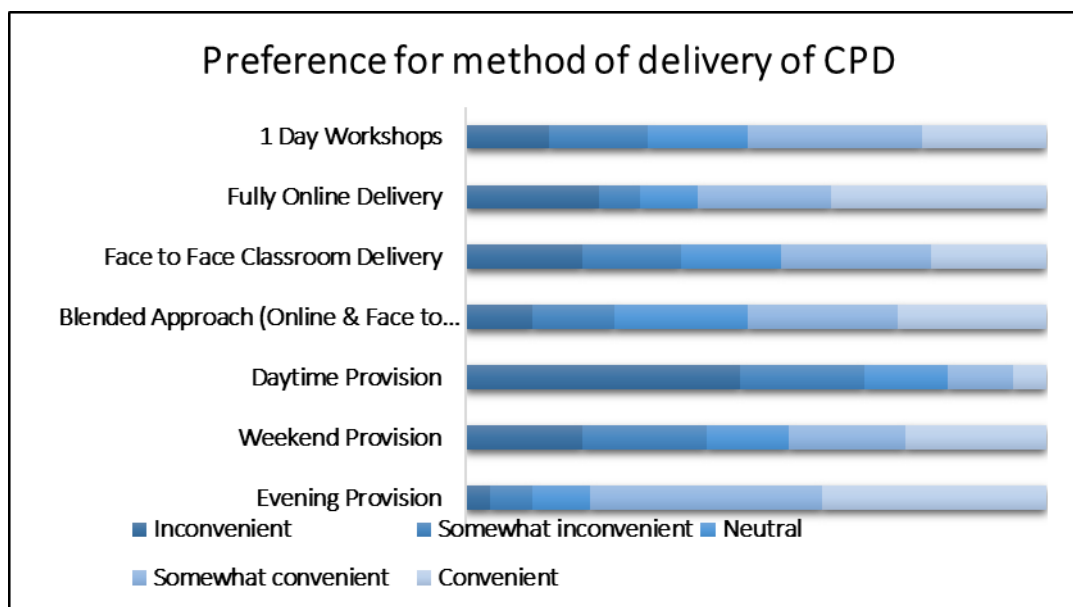


Chart 5: Preference of delivery methods for CPD

### *Opinions on the need for CPD in agriculture*

Seventy-six percent (n=53) of all respondents agreed that there is a need for CPD in agriculture, with most citing the importance of remaining up to date with advancements and creating a sustainable business model as a reason. This was supported with some anonymous participants stating, “the sector is evolving; farmers need to refine their farms to remain profitable” and that CPD is necessary “to keep up to date with new research and skills”.

This is a large contrast to a previous finding of this data where a ‘lack of interest’ was stated a factor hindering participation in CPD by 20 respondents. Although, it has been suggested this ‘lack of interest’ stem from the high lack of awareness there is surrounding the provision of CPD. Similarly, other participants agreed that CPD is important in agriculture as it increases the chance of ‘off-farm’ employment and provides farmers with good practices relating to farm safety, particularly highlighting the use of machinery.

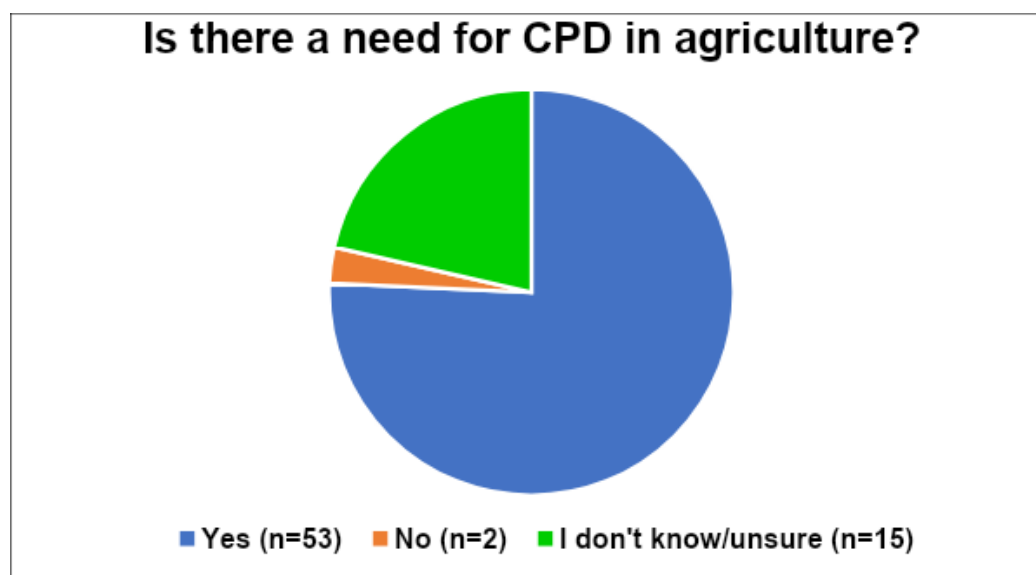


Chart 6: Is there a need for CPD in agriculture?

In conclusion, it was found that the lack of interest and awareness relating to agricultural CPD brought forward in this research may be linked to insufficient targeted advertising by organisations. In addition, while financial incentives appear to be the most popular factor highlighted that would facilitate or motivate an individual's participation in CPD, the negative side of this was also emphasised and opinions about the impact that could be had on other farmers as a result were explained. Also, from responses gathered there was a keen enthusiasm for the availability of alternative agriculture courses and training to help farmers ensure that their farms remain sustainable and able to generate profit. Participants in this research do believe that there is a need for CPD in agriculture particularly, placing a focus on how to create a sustainable business model and ensure a farm remains profitable in the future.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The rationale of this project was to produce research that incorporated the opinions and views of farmers relating to CPD in agriculture. The lack of published research in this area meant that organisations which were advertising CPD courses and information sessions were lacking awareness about the best methods which could be used to reach the intended target audience. This project added to current research by examining the perspectives of farmers from a small sample size.

### *Key findings*

1. Lack of awareness is a barrier to participation—Farmers feel that there is a significant lack of awareness relating to CPD, about where and when it happens but also about what is involved in the process. This lack of awareness makes it difficult to source CPD, therefore hindering participation and creating a barrier to access. This lack of awareness may be linked to the advertising methods being used by organisations when promoting CPD courses
2. Misaligned advertising is creating a perceived lack of interest in CPD —This data suggested that the lack of interest in participating in CPD stems from a lack of awareness. If farmers are not targeted correctly when CPD is being advertised, they will lack the knowledge surrounding what is involved and the opportunities available to complete CPD.

2. Financial incentives act as a motivator to encourage participation—This research suggested that a large proportion of farmers would be more willing to participate in CPD if it was linked to financial incentives such as grant increases or CPD being subsidised. Therefore, it was established that the provision of financial incentives acts more as motivation to participate rather than facilitation.

### *Recommendations of research*

These recommendations are supported by the key findings of this research, aiming to inform the future development of CPD in agriculture.

1. Increase targeted advertising of CPD for farmers—This study recommends that providers of CPD for farmers increase the use of targeted advertising campaigns to increase awareness offerings, and that these are advertised in the places where most farmers readily obtain their news and information. This recommendation is based on that data collected in this research suggesting that newspapers such as the Irish Farming Independent and the Irish Farmer's Journal are the main sources used by participants to access news and up to date farming information.
2. Increase advertising at times concurrent to agriculture—Research suggested that TV programmes are a strong information source for farmers. Following this pattern, organisations should aim to publicise CPD events during advertisement breaks of agriculture shows such as Ear to the Ground or otherwise, thus increasing passive engagement with adverts.
3. Increase the partial subsidisation of CPD - This research suggests that financial incentives motivate farmers to participate in CPD and thus through providing partially subsidising CPD courses, there should be an increased engagement. This ensures that there would still be a personal investment in this training as farmers are not just participating to earn money but rather from genuine interest.

### *Outcomes*

This research was conducted through consultation with farmers, exploring their personal experiences and perceptions of engaging with CPD. There is a want for CPD among farmers. However, improving the scope of advertising and working in co-operation with farmers to ensure the relevance and wide availability of courses would be necessary in the future. The recommendations formed based on the data collected are aimed at informing and improving practice in relation to agricultural CPD.

To summarise, in this research participants raised concerns about barriers to accessing CPD being the lack of awareness, interest and intimidation of classroom settings. To improve these, increased targeted advertising and working in co-operation with farmers to design and develop CPD is recommended. Financial incentives were noted as a major pull to increase participation in CPD but with this it was recognised that to prevent these being exploited, subsidising CPD may be an alternative.

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