



# The Rural College Experience

**The Role and Importance Of Education In  
Sustaining Rural Communities**

# Community development is...

*‘The long term process whereby people who are marginalised or living in poverty, work together to identify their needs, create change, exert more influence in the decisions which affect their lives and work to improve the quality of their lives, the communities in which they live, and the societies of which they are a part’*

*Combat Poverty Agency*

# Our History

Rural College was established in 1994 to be a centre of learning for Rural Communities throughout NI

We offered part time courses in:

- Masters/Post Graduate Diploma and Post Grad Certificate in [Rural Sustainable Development](#), Queen's University Belfast
- Pre graduate [Diploma in Community Development Practice](#), NUI Galway
- Certificate [Rural Local Tourism](#), NUI Maynooth
- Certificate in [Local History and Heritage](#), NUI Maynooth

## **Improve the quality of life for those living and working in rural areas thorough education**

- Establishing accessible, affordable and accredited learning courses.
- Enabling individuals and local community groups to develop and progress.
- To encourage prosperity and development in rural communities throughout Northern Ireland

# Principles and Values

Community development practices and principles underpin our work:

Equality

Social Justice

Vision

Participation

Collective action

Empowerment

# Ambition

- 1. Develop the potential of the individual**
- 2. Support learners in life long learning**
- 3. Recognise the challenges of adult learning**
- 4. Support learners to bring their learning back to their communities**
- 5. Learning must have a practical application**
- 6. Grass roots activists targeted initially**
- 7. Build on local knowledge and skills**
- 8. Recognise the skills of those taking part**

# Demand and Delivery

**Courses delivered to 500 graduates:**

**Courses delivered in the following areas:**

Armagh, Antrim, Ballymena, Ballymoney,  
Cavan, Donegal, Derry, Draperstown,  
Dungannon, Enniskillen, Jonesborough,  
Newry, Omagh, Strabane, Monaghan,

# Tourism courses

Tourism courses aimed to:

- Value local assets – exploit natural assets
- Recognise the potential of local areas
- Uncover the culture and diversity of the region
- Develop new markets and new businesses
- Avail of funding opportunities
- Improve customer services
- Linkages with other areas/regions
- Kick start new tourism business ventures
- Capitalise on ongoing projects being developed locally

# Outcomes

- Welcome Host training for local businesses
- B&Bs established a marketing consortia
- Sperrin Hillwalking Festival and other local festivals/events established
- Linkages with other areas/regions/projects
- Recording of walks, routes, scenic drives, heritage and history sites
- Contribution to the regional tourism organisation
- Understanding seasonality – extending seasons
- Creative breaks /short breaks market
- New tourism projects and products developed

# History and heritage courses

- Local historical societies established & strengthened
- Local history recorded and made more accessible to local communities and tourists
- Physical history projects established –even revival of old housing patterns in new developments - Clachans
- Exhibitions, displays and publications
- Renewed interest in community/parish/townland boundaries
- Revival of cultural traditions and local expression
- Revival of interest in historical sites and flora and fauna

# Diploma in Community Development Practice

- Outreach education & life long learning
- Practical skills in community development
- Understanding of local context
- Understanding peace and reconciliation
- Understanding rural and urban development
- Project management
- Partnership development
- How groups work/don't work
- Site visits and field trips – best practice explored
- Learners networked – peer learning
- Governance principles and values

# Outcomes

- Course relevant to all sectors
- Deeper and wider understanding of CD processes
- Confidence in their own practice - reflection on practice
- Confidence in their existing skills and knowledge
- Confidence in taking part in policy responses/ development
- Understanding funding, collaboration, representation and participation
- More effective community groups – learning is shared
- Reflection on why and how things are being done – critical appraisal
- Best practice examples explored and learning shared
- Professionalized sector with common standards
- Local projects/research undertaken
- Networking participants – lasting networks

# MSc/Graduate Diploma in Sustainable Rural Development

- Defining rural in EU and local contexts
- Understanding sustainability and rurality
- Managing local development
- Communication
- Policy and practice
- Research, research methods

# Outcomes of our training courses

- Understanding of rural Northern Ireland and borders
- Understanding the pros and cons of Rural
- Knowledge & understanding of current policy contexts locally, nationally and internationally
- Awareness of the journey of RD throughout the various programmes and initiatives
- Confidence in themselves and their knowledge and skills
- Understanding of the importance of community, sense of place and the principles of local action and CD
- Understanding that they control the development of rural areas – it can't happen without them – seizing that power
- Independent research
- Competent, knowledgeable activists – good connections

# Outcomes cont.....

- Course appeals to people from all walks of life and all age groups from Ireland North and south
- Students hail from farm families, CD workers, DARD employees, funding agents for EU funds, local Govt staff, volunteers, health workers etc.
- Peer support and learning
- Created a greater awareness and understanding of RD in NI
- Rural Proofing taking place with past students
- Rural is on the agenda of new areas/agencies.
- Students already aware of the implications of RPA on the rural agenda – more peripheral areas created

# Our Learning

- People who come on the courses already have a passion for what they do – Rural is ‘in your bones’
- Courses give students a focus and background knowledge to focus their efforts to achieve more sustainably
- Courses enable students to recognise the limitations of their influence and power
- Courses have to be dynamic – changing environment, changing policy, changing demands from students
- Groups are cyclical in nature, therefore a constant investment has to be made in educating people/communities
- Networking happens naturally between volunteers/ workers and policy makers
- Commitment of everyone from tutors to students to guest speakers – long term relationships brokered

# Our Learning

- Individuals learn to understand community and the different communities which exist in those communities.
- Life long learning is essential to rural development as it gives a second chance to local people – empowers people
- Courses have to be accessible – times, venues, duration etc...
- Students have existing knowledge and skills – open the learning environment to them to enable them share
- Progression routes – enabling progression and development. Students often want to progress once they complete a course

# Impact of education on rural development

- Broader understanding of systems and policy
- No longer passive recipients of policy but activists
- Pro-active communities
- Confident, competent individuals – passes into communities
- Increased ability to access funding and investment
- Preventing disinvestment
- Tackling social deprivation, isolation and highlighting hidden problems in communities
- Education is a way out of passive acceptance
- More critical appraisal of propositions from policy makers

# Final Thought....

Peace in our communities will depend on confident, **educated**, informed individuals who, in coming together, will create a better reality for the future .....I believe our education programmes are the starting point of this journey.