

Dairy farmers' opinions of lifelong learning

VETNET LLN NE & Yorkshire and North West regions are funding 2 studies investigating existing skills and qualifications in the dairy sector and the future requirements for continuing professional development (CPD) / training.



Our timing coincides with the emergence of the industry's own professional body "Stockmen UK" who are in discussions with VETNET LLN looking to promote the professionalism of the industry and exploring how accreditation of training, or more formal training and a professional register may assist with this. The findings from these surveys will serve to inform development of appropriate courses for the industry. The initial results will also be fed back to the NFU, to inform follow-up discussions with the environment secretary, Hilary Benn, after the Agri-Skills group meeting in April 2009, which was held with the minister to discuss skills training and how to improve access to training for 21st-century farming. Mr Benn commented that "Farming is by its very nature a skilled profession, but more should be done to improve access to training for existing farmers". The purpose of the Agri-skills discussions was to develop a clear and simple system so that farmers know where to go for advice on assessing their skills needs and on the most appropriate form of training.

The NFU president Peter Kendall also supports the up-skilling agenda and is quoted on the DEFRA website saying "It is important that training and skills development are a top priority when considering the future of the industry". Another representative at the Agri-skills meeting highlights the role of the emerging professional registers "we do at times struggle to demonstrate our skills base through qualifications but this is changing — several CPD schemes such as the Pig Industry Professional Register shows the industry is already in a position to start demonstrating the professionalism that exists within the industry".

So this is what Government and those representing the profession have to say, what about those at "grass roots" level?

The first survey was conducted at a CPD meeting updating on Blue Tongue. It is the responses of 30 predominantly dairy farmers in Lancashire.

The respondents' ages are shown in figure 1. The existing level of qualifications held is shown in figure 2.

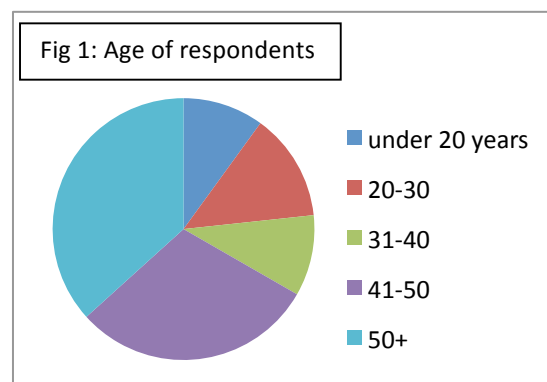
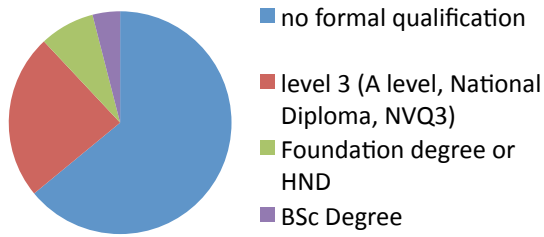


Figure 2: Level of qualification held by the respondents



Farmers were asked what CPD they had done over the past year and to indicate how much time they had spent in each category of activity. Figure 3 shows the breakdown:

Figure 3: Breakdown of time spent on CPD activities in the last year

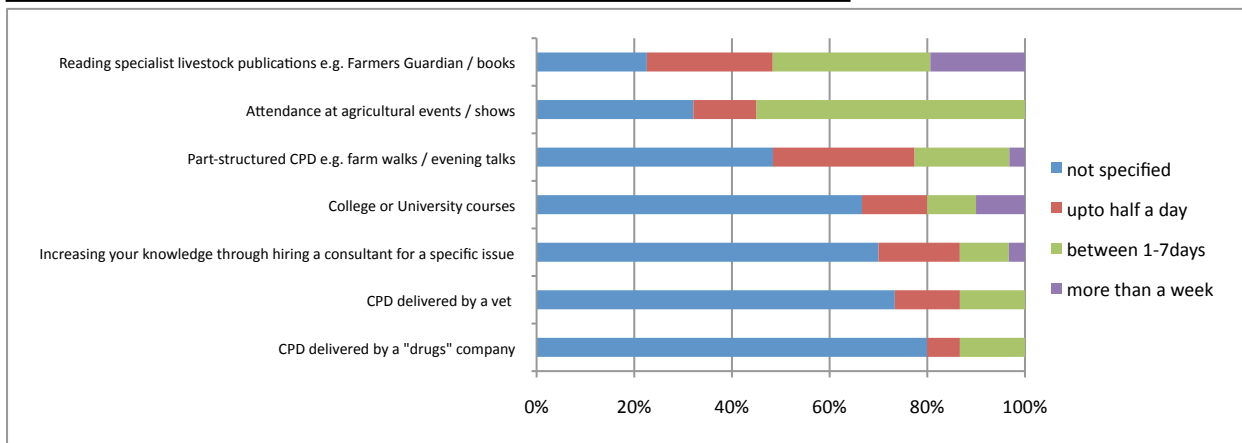
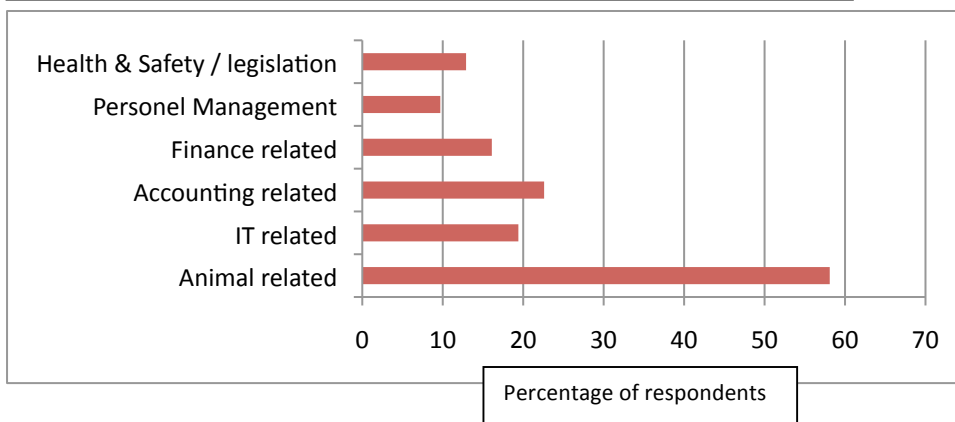
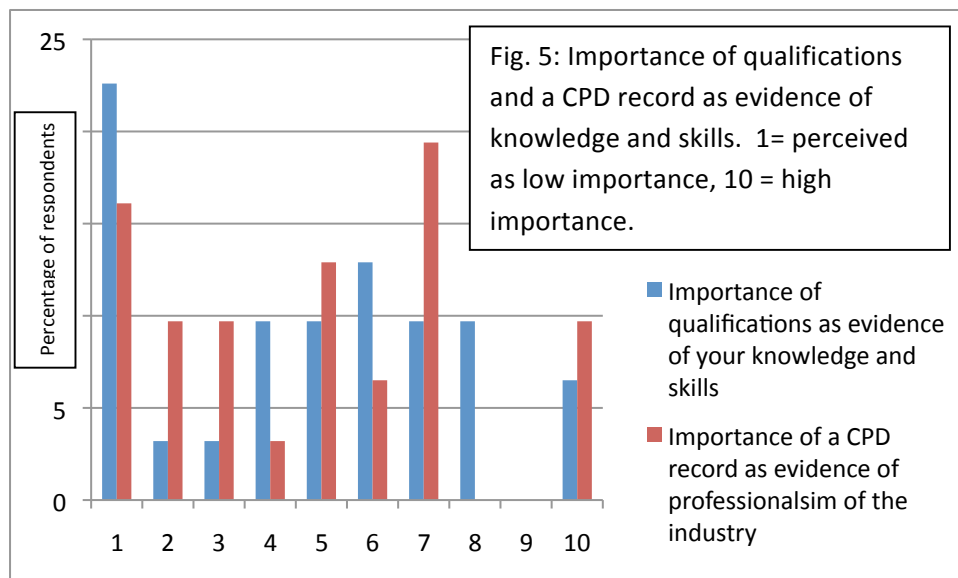


Figure 4 shows areas where farmers would like more training

Figure 4 The areas farmers identified as wanted further training



Respondents were asked “how important do you feel it is to hold a qualification as evidence of your knowledge and skills?”, they were also asked “How important do you feel it is to have a Professional Development Record (as some other professions do) as evidence of your knowledge and skills to either show future employers or to reassure the consumer of the professionalism of the industry?” Figure 5 shows their responses to both of these which were on a scale of 1-10.



When asked to identify the best route into a career in the agricultural industry for new entrants the majority identified get a work placement (55%), do a qualification on the job (26%), study at a land-based college (32%) or go to university for a degree or foundation degree (10%). This suggests that respondents recognized the value of qualifications.

Farmers were asked whether they would like short courses to be able to count towards a larger qualification, 19% said “yes”, 19% said “no”, with 52% stating they had “no preference”.

Farmers were asked “Would you prefer training that was endorsed by a professional body (e.g. NFU / Stockman UK) and Universities / Colleges” 29% responded “yes” and 48% had no preference (23% did not respond to that question).

Askham Bryan College had previously mooted the idea of attaching learning outcomes to consultancy sessions as this represents a form of knowledge transfer / “training” not captured by other forms of qualifications or courses, but widely accessed by farming professionals. We solicited opinion on this by asking farmers “if you use a consultant for a specific farm issue – would you like the opportunity to gain credit for this specific type of learning?” 26% responded “yes”, 13% “no” and 48% having “no preference”.

In some EU countries there is a requirement for at least one member of an animal unit to hold a recognised qualification for the premises to be licensed to have animals. Respondents opinion was divided on whether this would be a good move and help promote consumer confidence in UK livestock farming: 32% responded “yes it was a good idea”, 45% “no” and 19% having “no opinion”?

We asked farmers about the type of course delivery they would consider and the amount they would be prepared to pay for that CPD. 23% expressed a preference for weekdays, 36% preferred weekday evenings, 10% the weekend and 32% did not respond. The response to the types of delivery is shown in Figure 6 and 7.

Figure 6: The types of course respondents would consider

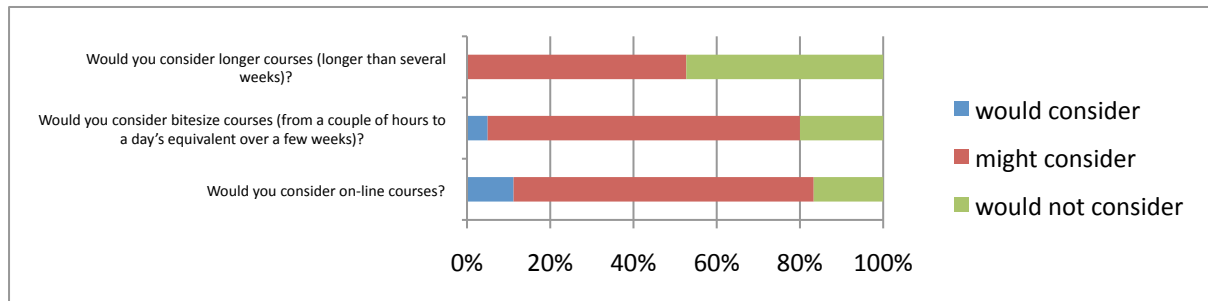
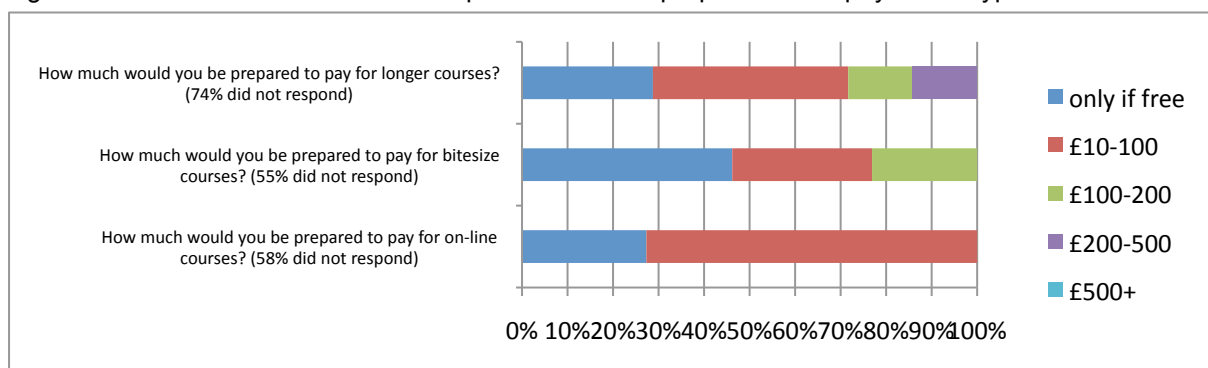


Figure 7: How much would respondents be prepared to pay for types of courses



Most farmers pay for their own CPD (62%), 17% the employee pays, 10% share the cost between employer and employee, and 10% only go to free CPD.

The respondents found out about training opportunities from a variety of sources: farming press (61%), at the land-based colleges (26%), Stockmen UK (10%), uses their bosses recommendation (3%), DEFRA (29%), NFU (45%), VETNET LLN (10%), other farmers (32%), Lantra (10%), vet (3%).

26% of respondents came from agricultural units of 1 employee, 48% from units employing 2-5 people and 10% from those reporting to employ more than 5 staff. 26% of respondents were general workers on their farms, 13% the managers, and 42% the owner.

As can be seen there is varying opinion of the value of qualifications in the industry, but it is an industry who are constantly expanding their skills and knowledge (the survey was conducted at a CPD event). There is also vast investment in their time in reading the farming journals and attending agricultural events. The sample is currently too small to analyse across categories e.g. age, but this may be possible when we have gathered more responses.

Thanks to Beacon Farm Vets (Lancashire) and Kingshay Farming Trust (Yorkshire) for distributing the surveys.