



Higher student intakes and innovative training are filling dairy vacancies

The 'generation' gap

Skilled dairy staff – be they relief milkers or herd managers – are the lynch pin of any successful dairy business. But they can be tricky to find. But, according to two UK leading lights on education and dairy training, things are improving

text **Rachael Porter**

Sourcing skilled employees has been a sore point for the past decade on many dairy units but, with agricultural student applications and admission well up on figures from 10 years ago and continuing to rise, as well as a wealth of dairy training initiatives, including apprenticeships and academies, that's all set to change.

"We've definitely seen an increase in student numbers during the past few years," says Askham Bryan's principal Liz Philip, adding that the North Yorkshire-based college has also seen an increase in female students and those from non-farming backgrounds applying for courses.

"About 65% of our students have an agricultural background and about 35% are new to the industry. In 2006, that figure was around 8%, so agriculture is attracting new blood. That's great news for the industry."

Labour 'gap'

The skilled labour gap that dairy – and indeed the other agricultural sectors – struggled with during the past decade can be traced back to the foot-and-mouth

disease crisis in 2001 and possibly even further back with BSE. "It was a really tough time for the industry. Prices were low and there was a lot of uncertainty. Farming families were in a bad place and urged their children not to follow in their footsteps. Many went off and pursued training and careers away from the farm," says Mrs Philip.

"We lost a generation, in effect. Between 2000 and 2010, we saw a lot of 18 year olds turn their back on farming. And we're really feeling that pinch now. These people would now be in their late 20s or early 30s and it's these people, as level four technical managers, that the industry is really missing at the moment." Back in 2006, Askham Bryan's student numbers stood at around 1,000. Today there are 3,800 and there are no signs that a plateau has been reached, according to Mrs Philip.

Shropshire-based Harper Adams University has also seen an increase in agricultural student numbers – they're up 25% compared to four years ago and continuing to grow. And it is also offering several postgraduate dairy courses,

including dairy business management, as well as forming partnerships with processors and other sectors of the dairy industry.

Renewed interest

"There's definitely been a resurgence of interest in the industry," says Mrs Philip. "And we're also able to offer more courses – on an increasing number of levels and across more subjects. This allows students to specialise and take a path that interests them. They can also ensure that they acquire the skills that prospective employees are looking for."

The jobs are certainly out there. "At the end of academic year, there are typically two jobs for every student. We can't fill them all. Prospective employees looking for staff really need to start advertising and canvassing students in February – if they wait until June or July they're usually disappointed."

LKL Services' director George Gordon agrees that there's still a significant shortage of skilled staff. "It's difficult to find people – particularly skilled herd managers in their 30s or 40s – to fill more senior roles. The past six months have been particularly difficult. There's a perception that the milk price collapse may have eased the problem slightly, as some units sell up and 'release' staff.

"But it doesn't always work that way. If a unit closes in Somerset, is the herd manager going to uproot a young family to take a job in Yorkshire? Probably not. People are more cautious during a recession and when milk price is low."



George Gordon: "It's vital to recognise staff potential early on"

Mr Gordon's clients are certainly feeling the loss of a generation of skilled dairy staff and managers and that was one of the key drivers behind the formation of the Dairy Management Academy in 2009. "We formed a partnership with Promar and Genus to launch the academy, which was borne out of clients' concerns about where the next generation of herd managers was going to come from," he explains.

The remit was to take bright, young British people, who were already working on dairy units, and to turn them into the managers of the future. "And it's been such a success that we now have two intakes a year. Student numbers are now four times what they were in 2009. Back then we put 12 students through the two-year course. This year we've 30 students due to start this spring and there will be another 30 this autumn. It took a while to gather momentum, but now it's really taken off."

Career ladder

One of the key problems the course addresses is 'the brain drain' – the loss of young people working in the dairy industry who can see no way of climbing the career ladder and gaining more responsibility as well as professional and financial reward. "We saw a lot of young people getting bored and frustrated and then leaving the industry, after being told that they may be able to take a more senior position once 'so and so' retired or when they were a few years older and more experienced. Some were looking at a 10-year wait.

"No other industry promotes its staff like that or uses that a career ladder model. Dairying was well behind the times. We now have graduates from the academy who leave and take jobs managing large herds in their 20s.

"It's about recognising staff potential early on and then nurturing and harnessing it. Our more progressive clients are doing this and they're not only retaining and motivating staff, they're

also solving their own problem when it comes to finding people to fill senior roles," adds Mr Gordon.

He says that the academy will go from strength to strength as industry attitudes toward staff training, development and promotion change.

"The academy is not a silver bullet – but it's a start. And it is making a real difference to the businesses – and individuals – involved."

Mrs Philip agrees that the number of

young people training and entering the industry will continue to grow. "Askham Bryan has already seen demand for its higher education courses – including HNDs and degrees – grow by 37% for the next academic year.

"We've seen 23% growth per year for the past seven years, so this is a significant jump and demonstrates that we've not peaked yet.

"That's great news for educators and for the industry." |

Skilled staff: young people are accessing dairy training and filling more senior roles

