

STUDY ORGANIC FARMING AT SRUC

SRUC Aberdeen has almost three decades of experience of postgraduate teaching in Sustainable Agriculture and Organic Farming. The Organic Farming programme was established in 2000 and converted to its current online distance learning format in 2002. Since then we have had well over one hundred MSc Organic Farming graduates, and many more students completing the Postgraduate Diploma.

SRUC delivers sector-leading research, education and consultancy and students on the Organic Farming programme have the benefit of teaching input from all three of these complementary strands, alongside input from other sector experts. Since 2015 this has included a formal teaching partnership with the Organic Research Centre, which further widens the base of expertise feeding into the programme. In addition, we are proud to have a longstanding recruitment link with the National Organic Training Skillnet in Ireland.

The Organic Farming programme uses part time online distance learning which (in non-Covid times) is blended with residential study weekends and study tours and allows students to gain a PGDip qualification in 2 years or an MSc in 3 years, as well as the option to study single modules as CPD. We have had many students from Ireland as well as other countries in Europe and around the world studying Organic Farming with us, and we've caught up with just a few of them to find out why they embarked on the programme and what it's meant to them.

If you are interested in studying Organic Farming with us, please contact Programme Leader Dr Lou Ralph on lou.ralph@sruc.ac.uk or visit our website at: <http://www.sruc.ac.uk/pgorganicfarming> for more information.

DEREK KELLY



Growing up on an organic farm certified with IOA for over 20 years has given me a wealth of experience in organic farming, however I could not have anticipated how much the MSc in Organic Farming would improve and expand my knowledge on all aspects of organic farming.

I gained a mass of in-depth knowledge on soil health, nutrient cycling, crop rotations, and building a more sustainable and robust farming system for me generally as well as giving me the chance to meet some really great people. In the past we ran an organic dairy system on my farm. I now run a thriving tillage and suckler to beef farming enterprises in Mullingar Co. Westmeath alongside my father.

We sell the grain directly to organic farmers as well as supplying Flahavans with oats and Slaney with the beef. In the coming years I intend to expand the diversity of crops grown on the farm. I would also like to venture into an organic farm advisory service part-time in the future.

LOUISE DOCHERTY

I am interested in local and sustainable farming systems and decided to pursue a career in organic farming. I began with a practical education then applied to the organic farming course with SRUC to gain a more formal education.



The flexibility of the distance learning course allowed me to continue my practical education and gain experience of working on farms. I have learned so much from the course and met many inspiring people from the farming community.

As I am not from a farming background, I found moving into this sector a little intimidating, however the staff and classmates have been greatly supportive. The education has given me much confidence in entering the organic sector and I have now gained employment with a social enterprise that supports local and sustainable farming.

SUE PHELAN

I completed the PgDip in 2019 and am currently completing my MSc researching Grass Fed organic dairy systems this summer. I was looking for an opportunity to expand my knowledge of organic production systems and the distance education course structure appealed to me as I was also able to continue working.



I consider that the course has a comprehensive structure to it, covering all aspects of organic farming. I looked forward to my visits over to the Craibstone campus for the study weekends, where I was fortunate to have encountered a diverse group of international classmates, that had a range of talents and experiences to share. We continually raised the bar for each other, ensuring a high standard of thinking and good engagement throughout the modules. The lecturers, all authorities in the organic industry, were always keen to share their extensive knowledge and although we could not travel this year due to Covid travel restrictions, Dr. Lou Ralph and the SRUC team have done a great job organising online social get-togethers and networking events, which have provided us with study support and encouragement in the 'virtual' world.

The PgDip and MSc are well recognised, credible qualifications which have strengthened my CV. Since completing the PgDip I was able to put my new qualification to good effect as I now work with the Irish Organic Association as a part-time inspector. With the launch of the organic farming scheme in March there has been a lot of interest from Irish farmers looking to convert to organic production methods and I also work in agricultural education and advisory roles, where I get an opportunity to share the knowledge that I have gained to date. I would highly recommend the course to anyone wishing to educate themselves with current thinking and modern practices in organic farming.

PHILIP DAY



I started the MSc in 2018, aged 55 and with many years of organic farm management, with a desire to understand more about organic farming and with the intention of consolidating my knowledge and experience into a recognisable qualification which may then provide new opportunities for me.

I am now in my third year and doing my dissertation on 'significant factors in effective weed control strategies for organic arable crops in the UK'. The course has been stimulating in terms of content and has given the opportunity to share views and experiences with fellow participants from various backgrounds. Already I have a better understanding of organics but there's always more to learn.

JANE SHACKLETON

Our family farm in County Cavan has been certified organic for nearly 30 years. Despite this my knowledge of organic farming was minimal when I returned to work on the farm 5 years ago. I soon realised that I needed to further my knowledge and get an understanding of organic farming. There was no other option at the time in Ireland so I was lucky to be able to take the MSc in Organic Farming with SRUC. It was a brilliant experience, sometimes challenging but definitely worthwhile.



Aside from the knowledge I gained, I also made many good friends who are also involved in the organic sector and who I have learned a lot from. We still have an active Whatsapp group which now is a sort of knowledge transfer system! The weekend study trips were something that I really looked forward to, especially the farm visits.

Completing the MSc encouraged and gave me confidence to continue my studies and I am now one year into a PhD programme focusing on multispecies grasslands.



MARK GILLANDERS



I got interested in the course because I was at a stage where the benefits of organic farming were becoming more apparent.

Even though I converted to organic farming in 2009 I was only really beginning to grasp how the whole organic farm system worked and I found that the more I understood the more there was to understand.

Due to the excellent support and tutorials of our programme leader Dr. Lou Ralph and her tutors, I found the depth of knowledge out there is vast and all one has to do is find it.

The most pleasant surprise was the camaraderie of the classmates of my year, who through all the midnight deadlines on the course, and to this day remain a great source of collective knowledge and support.

The knowledge that I gained through undertaking the MSc really intensified my understanding of organic farming and also has given me to confidence to experiment more on my farm in terms of adopting different enterprises.

I have integrated more tillage on the farm and this year established the Irish Organic Mill with another organic farmer processing wheat, oats, and rye to begin with, and we are now selling the flour to Irish customers.



SRUC
ORGANIC
FARMING MSc
21 YEARS / 2000-2021

THOMAS FOUHY

I started the 3 year MSc in SRUC in the Academic year 2016/17 under the incredible guidance and encouragement of Dr. Lou Ralph with a great bunch of people who remain friends today. Where the hard slog involving many long hours was done at home drawing on everyone around me and my new classmates, Aberdeen was never far away for support.

The couple of visits a year over to SRUC were hectic in the best possible way, always great to catch up and the couple of days set out for us were intense. Each lecturer delivering their own expertise with overwhelming amounts of knowledge and information and the corresponding amount of work and research to be done on our return home. It's still great to touch base with some of these people now as new opportunities begin to evolve for me.

One memory that stands out, was when we combined our exams at the ORC with visits to Helen Brownings, Sheepdrove, Iain Tolhurst and the cereal trials at Dove Farms – all outstanding. Many of our lively debates still continue through WhatsApp and the overall confidence and knowledge gained has and will hopefully allow me further opportunity to contribute in some small way to developing and promoting Organic Farming and Production in today's world.

