

ACCESS AGREEMENT ROYAL AGRICULTURAL COLLEGE 2008

ACCESS AGREEMENT: THE ROYAL AGRICULTURAL COLLEGE 2008

Tuition Fees

The College will continue to charge the full variable tuition fee of £3145 for all undergraduate courses apart from the Foundation Degree in Business (which will be charged at £1255) in order to provide the necessary resourcing for teaching and learning and for widening access (as detailed in Annex 1).

Background

As a small (800 students) rural, specialist institution, Widening Participation has been an area of challenge since joining the Publicly Funded Sector in 2001. The College has moved from being a privately funded institution with a need to charge full tuition fees, to a publicly funded institution with a more diverse student body.

The College has been successful since that time in increasing student numbers at a time when the number of students on land-based Courses across the sector has been falling. The diversity of the student body has also changed dramatically. The College now has 30% of its students receiving support for tuition fees and 21% on full support, an increase of 5% since 2001. 60% of undergraduates are from state schools. The original widening participation activities (Annex 2) were aimed at rural disadvantaged areas, mature students and part time study. There has been some success, but this has been constrained by the small target market, and our rural location has made part time study difficult to promote successfully. These existing widening participation activities are continuing alongside the new target activities.

Widening Access

At present local recruitment is limited despite our participation in Aim Higher and collaboration with Cirencester College, the Regional Foundation Degree Consortium and schools and FE Colleges within the Cirencester area. We are intending to continue directing more resources into raising our profile locally. The additional income generated by variable fees has enabled the College to employ an Access Officer with experience necessary to assist the College in attracting and retaining students from more disadvantaged backgrounds. This additional resource has also enabled us to offer incentive payments to staff involved in out-reach work.

Our identified, most under-represented groups remain as local, young, urban, low-income, and ethnic minority. We are aware that "Applicants from places with little or no tradition of HE attendance are 25% more likely to study at a local University within 30 minutes travel of home". [Higher Education Funding Council (2005). *Young participation in higher education*. (03)]

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Swindon is only 15 miles away, has less than 26% HE attendance and is a primary target. Our increased engagement over the last two years has shown that students in the local area have little or no awareness of the opportunities available to them at the College. We have confirmed that we have a great deal more work ahead of us to raise both aspirations towards, and awareness of, the very different learning opportunities that the College has to offer. We also intend to continue concentrating our efforts on South Bristol and Gloucester, which also have a high proportion of low-income young students. Another engagement area, although not in the lowest HE attendance bracket, is the Forest of Dean, which is a disadvantaged rural area. We will build on our successes and continue to expand our engagement with all these target zones. All of these areas have a large population, who come from disadvantaged backgrounds where studying at HE level would not be a high priority. The College will also continue to promote the opportunity to follow non-rural pathways leading to a wider range of careers in the rural economy, the food chain and the property sector.

The College will continue to concentrate on promoting and developing programmes with more appeal to our most under-represented groups (young, urban, low income and ethnic minority) and has put additional resources into promoting the BSc Property Agency and Marketing and the Foundation Degree in Property Agency and Surveying, both programmes providing professional accreditation from the RICS. We have been successful with, and will continue to promote, our suite of Business Management programmes (at Foundation or BSc Honours level), which may also have wider appeal. We will also provide as much additional resource for new programme development as possible.

We are producing specialist promotional materials aimed at these groups and areas, The Access Officer is responsible for assisting our existing Admissions Team in recruiting students from these areas. We have increased, and will continue to increase, our local school visits and we are running additional recruitment events at College to bring them to our campus.

The College is resourcing, where necessary, additional support mechanisms for those students who may require a different approach to learning and more assistance in embedding themselves into higher education and the rural campus environment.

We are still working to the original five-year plan in which we set realistic but challenging targets and will be working to continue and expand the activities into a further five year period.

We are utilising Aim Higher and Outreach contacts, and a contextual statement for Aim Higher is attached. (Annex 3) To date this has resulted in the training and appointment of Student Ambassadors, and an Aim Higher event run at the College which provided an introduction to opportunities of Higher Education, the land based sector and rural pathways to Year 9 students from schools within our target areas.

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The College continues to run our very successful 'Land Based Careers', a two day taster course in the Easter Vacation but is intending to expand this and run summer schools relating to the target subject areas of Business and Property. We are offering more support for students attending from disadvantaged areas in the form of travel expenses, scholarships and opportunities for more short term visits to the College.

Working with Wilfred Emmanuel Jones (The Black Farmer), and with sponsorship from the Country Land-Owners Association, the College provided a very successful two week residential opportunity for 12 disadvantaged urban students in Summer 2007. The successful applicants were selected from over 60 applications to discover and enjoy the experiences and career opportunities that a rural environment has to offer. This was so successful that it was very over subscribed and will be offered again in 2008.

We are also actively addressing on-campus cultural issues arising from Widening Access. Utilising our Diversity and Equalities Committee, Student Liaison and Access Officer, Disability and Learning Support team, in addition to a project team (CATalyst), we are working towards a holistic welfare and support system across the College.

Main Activities

The five areas that we are concentrating on are:

1. Raising aspirations

Working with teenagers, teachers and parents to give them the opportunity to understand how a degree can enhance their life, and that careers in the land based sector are not just about farming.

Expanding the 'Land Based Careers' taster courses by providing financial support for attendees, and running additional one day courses for specific schools and colleges to promote opportunities available including specific programmes in Business and Property which may appeal to our non-traditional student.

2. Ensuring support during study

Whilst it is important that all students are supported through their studies it will be particularly important to provide additional support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, where their schools may not have provided all of the necessary skills to make the appropriate transition from school to HE. We are providing study skills support and remedial teaching where necessary. This has required an expansion of the existing provision which is already used for many first year students to improve retention and completion rates in year one.

We offer pre-sessional programmes for students in need of development in areas such as IT, writing, grammar, mathematics, and

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science and will continue to increase welfare support to back up the academic support mechanism and hope to further develop student mentoring. We are continuing to develop the student support and welfare network and this, together with benchmarks for recruitment and retention, will be monitored and adjusted as necessary throughout the duration of this plan.

Improving student retention will be targeted towards Year One as this is when the majority of withdrawals occur. Areas where efforts have been successfully directed are induction, academic support and welfare advice provision. At present we have a high retention rate and are working very hard to maintain this.

3. Increasing collaboration with FE and schools in target areas

We have strong links with local schools and colleges and are expanding and developing our network by offering targeted activities on campus to help them become familiar with the College and realise what HE, and the RAC in particular, can offer for the improvement of future potential and career development.

We also intend to continue to expand our range of programmes for such students to enhance their confidence and self-esteem.

We shall aim to encourage students from these areas to regard the College as a possible next step following their school career through identifying subjects and careers paths that are exciting and new.

This is being supported by more Staff and Students from the RAC visiting an increased number of schools and colleges to give advice on HE, and inviting these institutions to specifically targeted events at the RAC i.e. one day or half-day conferences for pupils which will develop links between the RAC and FE Colleges, pupils and schools, maintaining contact via specific promotional material and maintenance of email links with heads of careers and subject specialists.

4. Providing targeted promotional materials

We have increased our range of promotional materials to allow us to better approach and appeal to prospective students in areas of social deprivation and we will continue to work to ensure that our promotional material is appropriate. We have not so far attracted many BME applicants and we have not, until recently, had the resources available to employ additional staff experienced in these areas of recruitment. We shall continue to enhance our range of information services, both paper and web based, to ensure that they demonstrate that we welcome non-standard entrants. We will provide and publicise bursaries for these students to encourage them to feel that the College is affordable for them.

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5. Outreach activities

The Access Officer will continue to undertake and co-ordinate outreach activities in addition to integrating with the activities of the Centre for Rural Skills. We have utilised £50,000 in 2007 to offer the opportunity for skill based training courses available to all students to enhance their employability upon completion of their studies.

Bursaries

The RAC is participating in the Higher Education Bursary Scheme and all variable fee bursaries are provided through this method.

The bursaries will continue to be carefully targeted and the RAC will be flexible during recruitment to ensure that monies available are assisting and encouraging as many students as possible to study with us. Once they have joined the RAC we shall ensure they are able to continue their studies with the necessary levels of support. This may be greater than that needed for current students, so a proportion of the increased tuition fees has been, and will continue to be, invested in student support and welfare to ensure high retention rates. This may include additional support for living expenses, which are comparatively high in rural areas such as Gloucestershire, as well as vouchers to assist students with their studies and travel. We are initially concentrating on local recruitment however, and a high proportion of these students are opting to live at home whilst studying and may need financial assistance for travel to the campus.

One of the key areas that has emerged since the introduction of variable fees is the importance of promotion and simplification of the Bursary support scheme. We are working to ensure that clear, accessible information is available to students, parents and schools, as many still seem unaware of the support and help that we can offer.

From 2008 the College will concentrate major awards on the lower income brackets to ensure that needy student receive the support they require. They will also allocate more variable fee income to provide assistance to all students regardless of income. This will be provided in the form of vouchers which can only be used to support their ability to study whilst at the RAC.

Bursary levels of up to £2,175 per student are available. All new entrants with an income level of £25,000 or less are entitled to a bursary of £1575, with an additional £500 available to students in receipt of full support who fulfil a minimum of three of the following criteria:

1. First generation Higher Education
2. Disadvantaged Postcode (Urban or Rural)
3. Specified School or College
4. Member of a Minority Ethnic Group

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All eligible students will be entitled to a voucher to the value of £100 to use against books and learning support materials, computer equipment/accessories or bicycle/accessories.

The College already allocates up to £125,000 in the form of scholarships and bursaries each year, and this will continue to be reviewed against the cost of living index.

We publish information on the full cost of total tuition fees for the courses and full support arrangements, in addition to all other charges, on our web site and in paper format. These charges will be enclosed with the prospectuses clearly stating whether they are provisional and may be subject to a cost of living increase. All College documentation is available in a variety of formats upon request from the Registry, i.e. large print, coloured background or Braille for those with special requirements. All applicants will be sent information on fees and charges with their offer letter. These will be sent out again for confirmation in March before the start of the academic year in October. This will detail how much they will be required to pay, when and where to apply for support and full details of our scholarships, bursaries and hardship support.

Milestones

We have set realistic, attainable but challenging targets and would be prepared to raise these if recruitment proves more successful than expected.

We are aiming to recruit an additional 45 students from the targeted groups (local, young, urban, low income, minority ethnic) by October 2010, with 10 additional students in 2008. At present we have 40% of students receiving some level of support and 25% of students on full support, but still with little representation from our target groups. Our strategic aim is to increase the number of students in receipt of full support to 30% of the undergraduate student body.

Monitoring

All applications and acceptances are closely monitored and statistics measured against targets annually. Feedback is requested from applicants who withdraw. This data already provides all the information required to monitor results and (if necessary) to revise our action plan. The Academic Quality and Standards Committee monitors student performance annually and further data will be kept to ensure that they are able to monitor and analyse success rates of the widening participation students. The Diversity and Equalities Committee, Diversity Officers and Registry already have an extensive monitoring system in place and this will be used to provide the necessary data for monitoring support against achievement and retention. The Access Officer will be a member of the Registry team reporting directly to the Registrar – Admissions and Records and will be responsible for collating and providing any additional statistics required. The Registrar – Admissions and Records will be responsible for identifying any trends, shortfalls or likely inability to meet targets which may require revision of the action plan. These

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recommendations will be included with the monthly statistical analysis of applications that is provided to the Senior Management Group, Academic Board and Strategic Planning Group.

Key risks and dependencies

Key Risks

As a specialist college we may find that there is limited interest in our Courses and be unable to hit targets.

We will need to continually reassess and possibly re-target throughout the five-year period.

Dependencies

Input from Academic Staff and Marketing Department will be key to success.

Targets

October 2008 10 additional students from low participation areas

October 2009 15 additional students from low participation areas

October 2010 15 additional students from low participation areas

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Annexes

Annex 1 - Bursaries for 2008

Annex 2 – Variable Fees Bursaries Projections