

Royal Agricultural University TEF Student Submission 2023

Despite being the oldest Agricultural College in the English-speaking world, the now called Royal Agricultural University (RAU) prides itself on ensuring their students are prepared to be leaders of change when they graduate. The rural sector is facing a massive shift due to Brexit and the climate crisis. Farmers, land managers and business experts are being relied upon more than ever to guide the sector into a new normal. The teaching at the University reflects the changes in the sector and encourages students to enter graduate schemes in which they will be expected to shape the future of farming. These changes highlight the importance of the RAU not only to future generations interested in a career in agriculture, but also to the rural sector.

To write this student submission, data was gathered from current students to assess their views on the direction in which the University is moving as well as to be compared against the NSS results from the previous four years. Student course representatives from first, second and third years also completed NSS survey questions to give a picture of the current student view at the University. They were also asked to attend a non-compulsory student voice meeting. This meeting was free format and was an opportunity for the course representatives to air any issues or comments they had regarding their course that may not have been touched on in the NSS survey. This feedback has been used to give an overall view of student experiences at the University.

Student Experience

Student experience at the RAU stretches well beyond the academic experiences that students receive. From the day that first years arrive they are part of a community. This community is not left once you graduate; you continue to be a part of this community throughout your career and even retirement. This is shown through our network of over 17,000 alumni that are members of our 'RAU Connect' system which is a space that links alumni. Students not only feel supported by academics, but by each other. The size of the University means that we don't feel like a number, which is reflected in the NSS results that state we are number 1 in the UK for learning community. The University has acknowledged the low results in student satisfaction for the years 2020 and 2021. However, students have commented that this was not as much a reflection on the University as it was on the Covid-19 pandemic and the rules that were implemented by the government through these periods which led to most students moving home and switching to online learning.

Due to having such a small campus and community here at the RAU, the student voice has always been prominent. This is reflected in the previous NSS results that show we are consistently on and above benchmark for student voice at the University. Students get involved and engage with the Students' Union because they trust that their voices will be heard, and that the University will quickly act upon any feedback that student representatives give them. Throughout 2018-2021 there were some challenges for the Students' Union. COVID-19 changed the way that the union officers could engage with students, each other, and the University. Despite this, the NSS results were still 12.2% above benchmark.

There is constant communication between key members of the University staff and the Students' Union staff. The President of the Students' Union has monthly catch-ups with the University's Vice-Chancellor, as well as a position as Student Governor on the University's governing council. This ensures that the staff are making informed decisions with the student experience at the forefront of their minds.

Every year the RAU Students' Union holds a raising and giving week (RAG). The students choose three charities which they would like to raise money for throughout the week. Activities such as a tractor pull, clay shoot and the infamous RAG rally all take place with the aim to raise as much money as possible. Each year the University show their support by donating money to RAG. This year, they are donating £5 for every NSS survey filled out, so the more students that fill out the survey the more money the University donate to charity. This is a great example of the support shown to the Students' Union by the University.

We note that the RAU is below the benchmark in learning resources. This may be due to the small size of our library but also two of the years the results cover were Covid-19 years, where most students were off campus, so they did not have direct access to the resources that the University has to offer, such as the science laboratories and the library. The library is generally well stocked with books, magazines, and other academic material and was rated highly by our focus group. The library has a quiet study zone but also space for group projects too which was also noted during our research.

The RAU Gateway is our online platform, which is considered user-friendly and there are often IT staff around to help you if you are having any technical difficulties. Within Gateway there is an online library in which you can access most books that are in the library. This was particularly useful for students during Covid-19, where it was not possible to go to the library on campus.

Teaching, Assessments and Feedback

The NSS results show that the University was rated below benchmark with regards to assessments and feedback. Some evidence this year also showed that students want more in-depth and more detailed feedback from their assessments. The University has taken this feedback onboard and is currently considering whether to extend the feedback window, enabling lecturers greater time to give more detailed and constructive feedback. The students have been consulted on this and are supportive of any potential changes.

Whilst the University no longer has its own farm, the University has a great relationship with the Bathurst Estate. This estate is made up of approximately 15,000 acres of parkland and farmland. This relationship is key to ensuring the students get off campus and see farming in real time. For example, Kemble Dairy and Coates Farm are both within 10 minutes of the University, and often allow farm visits so students can see farming in action. However, one thing that has been noted students are lacking is hands-on, practical experience. This has been discussed at the University's Governing Council and already there are plans to change the structure of teaching and introduce some modules which include students gaining

hands-on experience on these farms. Again, this shows evidence of the importance of the student voice at the University. Further to this, the University already offers the chance to gain hands-on experience outside of the usual teaching. The John Oldcare Rural Innovation centre offers courses for students and the public. These courses cover skills such as tractor driving. The University offers a grant for undergraduate students to undergo a course at the JORIC, which further adds to their education and personal development.

Continuation, Completion and Progression

Throughout their time at university, students have continuous support available. Whether that be emotional, financial, or academic support, the student services team are excellent at ensuring students have the support they need to complete their studies here. The careers team also ensure that students have the information, support, and skills they need for their future after University.

The University is dedicated to supporting students for their life after study. There are many options for graduates, and the RAU ensures that students are fully aware of all options available to them. Continuing onto a master's degree is easily accessible at the University, especially as the RAU offers a 20% discount to all alumni who choose a master's degree at the RAU. For students who are interested in graduate jobs, large career fairs are held every year prior to graduate scheme application deadlines, and they give students the chance to meet their future potential employers in person. Support is offered throughout the year from heads of schools about job applications. The opportunity to meet future employers is invaluable. This could explain why the University are above benchmark for progression.

The enterprise and entrepreneurship team on campus support students who wish to start their own businesses. The grand ideas competition is a dragon's den style competition which awards the winner £10,000 to put towards their business venture. The judging panel is made up of industry specialists including Levi Roots who is the creator of Reggae Reggae Sauce. There is also a first steps fund which provides £250 to enable the student to try out their business. This fund also includes a business mentor for up to 10 hours, who provides support and advice for any budding entrepreneurs.

Conclusion

In general, the Royal Agricultural University is a forward-thinking establishment that prides itself on ensuring its students are ready for life after University. The student voice is heard loud and clear, and they have shown their willingness to listen and change year upon year as the student body changes. This enhances the warm community feeling you get on your first day as a first year, and ensures that alumni still feel part of the community many years after leaving. There are areas the University has acknowledged need improving, for example, assessment feedback. However, the students know that their voices are heard and have no doubt that the correct changes will be made as and when they are required.