

## **No one wants to be a farmer any more**

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### **Agriculture students are few and far between after the crisis in the industry puts off many potential applicants, reports Robert Uhlig**

Alison Cardrey cuts a solitary figure in Britain's most prestigious agriculture department.

She is the only farming student in her year, with no colleagues in the year beneath her and only four students in the year above. Miss Cardrey, 20, is the public face of what has become a crisis in farming education.

Low incomes, [high tuition fees](#) and [farming's poor image](#) have led to a sharp fall in the number of students following purely agricultural courses.

"No one in my family has ever farmed but I just felt attracted to it from an early age through contact with people in the village," she said.

At Imperial College's rural campus at Wye in Kent, where she studies, admissions staff are restructuring courses to ensure overall student numbers do not decline, but the statistics across Britain tell a tale of an industry threatened by a shrinking skills base.

Many universities, including Oxford and Edinburgh, have long closed down their agriculture departments and more than a third of specialist agricultural colleges have merged with other institutions in the last 10 years. Now, the crisis is widespread among agriculture colleges.

The University of Aberdeen's undergraduate degree in organic farming, launched by the Prince of Wales, has only one first year student. Its BSc Agriculture course has attracted six students in a department of 23, which would have had 140 a decade ago.

Training in agriculture is under threat at Devon's two agriculture colleges.

The head of Seale-Hayne Agricultural College, which houses 1,050 students and staff near Newton Abbot, recently resigned in protest after Plymouth University decided to close the college.

Bicton College at Budleigh Salterton, Devon, has dropped the Agriculture from its title and now calls itself a "Countryside College". To overcome the slump in

agriculture, the college has launched new courses in environmental and wildlife studies, leisure, business and finance, and is building a reputation for sports studies.

It is a pattern that is repeated nationwide. Animal care students, inspired by television pet shows, now outnumber agriculture students by three to one. The most common ambition is to become an RSPCA inspector instead of a farmer.

Changes in attitude towards agri-business and studying science have tarnished pure agriculture qualifications, say the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service.

Between 1995 and 2001, applicants for agriculture degrees dropped from 14,741 to 10,037. In the same period, agricultural science applications dropped from 360 to 177 and forestry applicants fell from 851 to 379.

Agriculture degrees, diplomas and certificates used to attract three types of student. Of these, farmers' children have come to realise there is little future in farming. Those interested in the scientific aspects of agriculture are in decline.

That leaves only the third group largely unchanged: the small number from urban or non-farming backgrounds wanting to escape to a countryside career.

Miss Cardrey, the sole second year BSc Agricultural Sciences student at Imperial College, is one such escapee.

She worked on farms as a teenager and shares her lectures with students studying animal sciences, equine sciences and environmental science and management.

"I never feel alone. If anything, being the only student has been an advantage."

Nigel Williams, undergraduate admissions tutor at Imperial College's Wye campus, said employment prospects for Imperial College agriculture graduates were extremely good. Most went into research or into multi-nationals.