

Context

Ruskin is an adult residential college. It is one of ten 'specialist designated institutions' in the further education (FE) sector, which means that it is a niche provider, not a general FE college.

Our particular role lies in assisting people to learn in a small and supportive community of scholars. This makes us distinctive in both higher education (HE) and FE contexts. Seen in the light of higher education (HE), we are very small and we offer a particular model of support for students. In the FE sector, Ruskin continues to stand out because it offers courses right up to MA level, all its HE courses are of its own design, the ratio of HE:FE is unusually high and Ruskin staff are employed on HE terms and conditions, with a higher level of research and scholarship than in normal in FE and far superior library facilities. The reason for this is that Ruskin was created initially in the HE sector and has only diversified into FE since 1992, rather than the other way round, as would be true of general FE colleges.

The mission of the College is to provide educational opportunities to adults who are excluded and disadvantaged, and to transform the individuals concerned along with the communities, groups and societies from which they come.

The strategy will build on Ruskin's links with the Open University, Oxford Brookes University, the University of Oxford and Buckinghamshire New University by continuing to promote high academic standards and opportunities .

The most recent institutional review in May 2007 resulted in continuing accreditation for five years, the maximum period, with no conditions. Ruskin therefore, has OUVS institutional accreditation for the period covered by the College's strategic plan, 2007-12. It will continue to work with the OUVS on the re-validation of existing HE programmes and the new provision planned. The College has informed the OUVS that it wishes to work towards 'delegated authority' at the next institutional review in 2012.

Ruskin joined the Associate College Partnership of Oxford Brookes University in 2006. The partnership with Buckinghamshire New University is recent and arose from the College's links with AimHigher. Ruskin is validated as a site to offer two taught programmes validated by BNU, a franchised pair of modules (entitled 'Introduction to Enabling Learning and Mentoring' and 'Developing Enabling Learning and Mentoring') that form part of BNU's post-qualifying Social Work (PQSW) award and an FD in Care Management that has not run. In addition Ruskin's foundation degree in Writing for Performance leads to direct entry into the third year at BNU.

The move to new buildings at the Headington site, to be finalised in 2012, will help develop an appropriate learning environment for students. The co-

location of all teaching and support, and administrative and domestic staff will further facilitate the consolidation and development of the College's provision.

Process of creation

This Strategy develops from the HE in FE strategy previously approved by the Governing Executive and draws upon the feedback the College has received to date from the IQER developmental engagements in 2009 and 2010 within the QAA framework. It also takes further forward the action plans arising from the last OFSTED inspection. Aspects of the Strategy were discussed at all Programme Boards within the College during the Spring of 2010 and at various Management Team meetings. The College will work with the regional Lifelong Learning Network, Progress South Central, to respond to demand within sectors relevant to the College's niche provision, for example within the Social Care and the Creative and Cultural sectors. It will also engage actively with the IQER summative review in Summer 2011 and with the OUVS in relation to feedback from the annual monitoring exercise of programmes at Ruskin validated by the Open University.

Goals

The Strategy aims to consolidate and refresh best practice, based on putting student experience at the core of our work and of disseminating this outside the College. We will maintain our open admission policy while aiming to ensure that students receive from Ruskin an environment for successful learning that is collegial and mutually supporting. We will continue to recruit non-traditional, adult students and to use supportive pedagogic methods to teach a suite of courses that offer progression routes.

We will continue to develop various forms of engaged scholarship and will make this our framework for course development. We will emphasise a distinctive and socially aware curriculum content within the Humanities and Social Sciences as indicated by discrete MA courses in International Labour and Trade Union Studies, Women's Studies, and Public History and undergraduate modules, for example, in creative writing based on critical analysis; radical political economy; sex, gender and the law; welfare rights in social work, the nature of time, and animal-human history. We will develop further aspects of trans-disciplinarity through the sharing of content as well as pedagogies. As part of the re-validation of all the courses, we will actively explore the value – as well as the practicability – of integrating modules from discrete subject areas and also utilising this as a way of providing some choice for students within a clear and structured framework.

We will explore modes of delivery including distance and multi-method learning to ensure that courses are appropriate for adult students. This will include the flexible use of the residential learning environment and the development of the College's intranet and e-learning facilities. Flexible modes of delivery will be explored, using the experience gained in delivering the part-time modes of some programmes, e.g. BA ILTUS., through a series of weekend residentials, supported by learning materials on the intranet.

We will continue to contribute to the national priority to deliver Foundation Degrees, for example through the new Writing for Performance degree.

We seek to develop the College's achievements to date as measured by national bodies, such as OFSTED and QAA.

Culture and the learning environment

As OFSTED noted in its annual report for 2008-9, 'Creating a culture of high aspirations begins with an unwavering determination from leaders that all learners will succeed. In outstanding providers there is a strong focus on the needs, interests and concerns of each individual learner. Conversations about learning happen regularly, and mentoring plays an important part in engaging learners who are at risk of becoming disaffected'. We endorse these sentiments and will develop them in relation to the learning that takes place at Ruskin.

We will maintain and develop the distinctive nature of the College, that is rooted in the students themselves. We will garner the added value that students themselves can bring to their studies through their life experience as mature, personally and politically aware and reflective students. We will seek to ensure that this culture is embedded both in the curricula and forms of assessments but also in the extra-curricular work of Ruskin as a residential College.

Recognising that many of the students we teach are new to academic work and have little confidence in their own abilities we will continue to promote an environment in which students feel able to learn without fear of ridicule or embarrassment. We will seek to enhance their confidence through the careful joint setting of targets through individual learning plans. Within group teaching we will continue to ensure that the voices of all students are heard and that their own experiences are incorporated within the learning that takes place.

Groundrules for the learning environment will continue to be devised ensuring group ownership of the conduct of work within classes.

Progression

As the Ofsted report of 2007 and IQER engagement on support services and assessment noted, we have very effective strategies in place for engaging students with low aspirations and poor prior achievement. Our diagnosis of – and outstanding support and guidance for – students with particular learning needs such as dyslexia has ensured effective progression and completion of HE courses. The strong college support systems were also commended by the OUVS in its monitoring report of 2010. Having introduced explicit monitoring of achievement related to learning support for the academic year

2009 -10, we will develop targets to ensure that this support is monitored effectively.

Incremental learning will be more effectively monitored with the introduction of new software packages enabling students, with the assistance of tutors, to reflect on their level of achievement and set themselves challenging targets. Tutors frequently write extensive feedback. We will explore the development of processes for ensuring that students develop their own action plans for working on feedback.

We will assist students to progress into and through further and higher education, both internally and through progression accords with other institutions, such as currently exists with Oxford Brookes and Reading universities in respect of certain programmes. We will consolidate our practice of promoting HE courses to students who take our FE level courses. Tutors on short course provision will continue to provide adults with information about progression to HE courses run by Ruskin, and students will continue to be effectively encouraged to become independent lifelong learners. We will continue our existing work with AimHigher through, for example, the provision of Higher Education Access Days, Information, Advice and Guidance Days and the employment of Student Ambassadors. We will develop our links, and formal agreements, with other FE colleges in the Oxfordshire area. A progression accord is in place, for example, with Abingdon & Witney College.

Curriculum

Our link with the OUVS, which has approved most of our undergraduate and postgraduate courses since the early 1990s, will continue and will enable us to ensure the development and monitoring of the delivery of higher education skills. We will seek to continue our partnership agreements with the TUC and GFTU. Our short course provision will continue as permitted within the new QCF framework.

We will continue to use the academic infrastructure such as generic and benchmark subject skills, as promoted by the QAA and relevant professional bodies, and these are already integrated into all our higher education undergraduate and postgraduate courses.

We will ensure when proposing new FE and HE courses for accreditation or validation that critical analysis of the content of the curriculum as applied and useful knowledge is central. This will assist in progression to, and through, sustainable careers, as outlined in the College's forthcoming Employability statement prepared for HEFCE. We will explore and develop modes of delivery appropriate for mature students.

Our curriculum is located within the Humanities and Social Sciences. We will regard this limited offer as a strength because it opens up opportunities, many as yet untapped, to share modules between disciplines and to develop a transdisciplinary approach. A start has been made on this in the History with

Social Sciences degree through links with the BAs in Social Sciences: Sociology, Politics and Economics and International Labour and Trade Union Studies, but far more is possible and will be actively pursued.

Learning ,teaching and assessment practices

We will sustain and develop the learning support and community support offered by the College. At the heart of our strategy is the dual emphasis on progression alongside achievement of excellence in academic standards. This strength was acknowledged by an Ofsted report in late 2007 which recognised that our students make progress rapidly and successfully to higher education programmes.

We aim critically to revisit the level and standard of work required of students at the formative stage. No student should be accepted onto a long course who the tutors do not think they will be able to teach. A key contributor to this is the avoidance of any kind of deficit model in thinking about learners or a passive model in conceptualising teaching and learning.

Differentiation

Differentiation, or differentiated learning, is part of the contemporary drive towards individualising or personalising public sector services, in belated recognition that one size does not fit all. It is more commonly recognised in the school and FE sectors but is applicable, too, in higher education – particularly with mixed ability mature learners, as at Ruskin. It relates strongly to equality and diversity since an equal opportunity is not being offered if all members of a class sit and listen to the same lecture, because some will have learning difficulties or other disabilities that impede their ability to absorb the information, while all will have their own learning style and this may not favour absorbing information aurally. Only the tutor who varies his or her teaching methods, involving the students each at their own pace in as many different ways as possible, will maximise the chances of all members of the class learning effectively. A further contemporary trend to which differentiation can be linked is that of the switch from ‘teaching’ alone to ‘teaching and learning’. We increasingly recognise that the student is at the centre of the learning process and that students come from different personal, educational, familial and social backgrounds, arriving on a course for a variety of reasons and with a range of motivational , as well as ability, levels and hence requiring differentiated instruction when they get there. Differentiation is the classroom equivalent of employing a range of tools in assessment: it seeks to ensure that the best is brought out of students with varying interests, abilities, skills and levels of readiness to learn. It requires the tutor to conduct constant learning checks, so as to ensure that everyone in class is keeping up, and depends on the employment of a wide repertoire of teaching approaches within a two-way, not a top-down, process that involves constant adaptation to learners’ needs.

Differentiation is embedded within the programmes of study at Ruskin across all subjects and levels. The emphasis on independent learning that underpins the pedagogical strategy of the College is an enormous help, since students are free to pursue their own interests in their own ways. But, even in more formal classroom sessions, differentiation holds sway. One recent example, from the BA Youth and Community Work, involved the tutor teaching bibliographic referencing, slowly but surely, across the entire length of a third year module. She started the process by cutting up a reference and having the students arrange it in the right order. This was fun to do but was also a highly effective way of engaging those who learn more visually or kinetically, including those with severe dyslexia (two of whom are heading for First Class Honours). This kind of approach is vastly assisted by Ruskin's small class sizes and by the Ruskin tutorial system which follows classroom learning through into small group discussion (typically with only three or four students) and formative assessment tasks, both of which clearly reveal the degree to which each student has comprehended or surpassed what has been presented in class.

Differentiation can happen: by task (setting different tasks for students of different types of ability), by outcome (setting tasks that allow students to meet their own needs and/or find their own level), and by support (giving some students more help, typically following a learning needs assessment). All three are practised at Ruskin.

In all programmes students are taught tutorially, enabling them to negotiate with their tutor the best approaches to their formative work. Thus one student within a tutorial group may be directed to emphasise note-taking for their weekly assignment, while another, who has studied the same content, may be requested to emphasise the structure of an essay. In some programmes, students are given options of forms of assessment. Thus, in History, students may opt for different lengths of project assessment or, in English Studies, the form of independent study: a creative writing portfolio or literary studies. Students also frequently draft their own essay titles and, on all courses, choose their own topics for projects and dissertations, thereby allowing the opportunity to work where applicable at levels above those determined as the minima by the QAA discourse.

Since students can come to Ruskin with few or no qualifications, teaching draws explicitly upon their life experiences as well as any earlier exposure to formal study. This inter-active learning may be harnessed in particular ways, for example in the professional courses to develop empathy with service users, on the MAs to promote reflexivity in research, and in International Labour and Trade Union Studies to demonstrate praxis whereby practical activism feeds off, and into, more theoretical concepts in industrial relations. Clearly, the life experiences of students will differ but can be of use empirically or conceptually in developing subject-based knowledge. Thus, a student within Social Sciences may bring to the group their experience of engaging in political campaigning while a youth worker may draw on theories of groups as covered in their reading to make sense of voluntary work that preceded the course.

The Ruskin tutorial model plays a vital role in breaking down formative tasks so that all students cover the stated learning outcomes, from a direction that suits them, while those who are able to can go further. Case studies are a good example of this since they offer almost limitless possibilities of drawing out additional issues, with tutorial discussion bringing everything back together and ensuring that the basics have been covered. Tutors typically use the Kolb cycle in tutorials to identify students' learning styles and are then able to harness these in the classroom where a role play, for example, can facilitate shared learning, from the kinetic – as people move around the room – to the more traditional learning, as reading is applied to a specific scenario. Alternative forms of learning, such as presenting work to peers, were commended by the OUVS in its report of 2010.

Recruitment and Retention

If we accept students, we have a responsibility to ensure that they succeed but we need to recognise that not everyone is ready to learn at any particular time in terms of motivation, mental health and so on.

Recent changes have helped strengthen our responsiveness and ability to assess readiness to learn. Literacy tests will be undertaken at interview stage for long courses and those who do not yet reach an appropriate standard will not be selected for courses that they cannot realistically – at this stage – complete. Rather, they will be actively recruited onto short courses. The new introduction of a probationary term for all students will also help to ensure that conscientious students are not demoralised by the continuing presence on their courses of students who do not work and who detract from group learning. We will also ensure that there is a rigorous interview procedure at the end of CertHE courses to enable progression. Tighter procedures for extensions for essays introduced two years ago are steps in the right direction for ensuring that clear parameters are maintained. Such procedures should help improve the retention and success rate. Tighter interviewing and Individual Learning Plan and PDP procedures will also help.

Equality and Diversity

We will maintain our policy on open entry to programmes of study, as an important way of seeking to engage non-traditional learners from all social backgrounds and all under-represented groups. We will not require formal qualifications from Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE) or Foundation Degree applicants, or from BA applicants where the year of registration for the BA is the first (i.e. for Social Work and for Youth and Community Work). We will also admit MA applicants without a degree where they can provide evidence of ability to study at this level. The CertHE in Combined Studies will draw learners into the College through undertaking a project of the learner's own choice and gaining confidence before joining formal modules in the second term of study.

Once a diverse body of learners has reached us each year, we will use differentiation in the classroom and in tutorial provision to ensure that their individual needs are understood and met. Although this has always been our unwritten practice, it has only begun to be formally recognised in this iteration of our Teaching and Learning Strategy. We put it forward now as a critical strand of equality since it recognises diversity in the heart of teaching and learning and works to give an equal chance to all learners to achieve their potential and succeed on their courses. Formally stating this as our aim also brings differentiation to the fore as a focus in the observation of teaching and learning and in the continuing professional development of staff.

We will use our internal progression routes to enable non-traditional learners and those from under-represented groups to move through to our HE provision via FE-level courses. A new level 2 course is being designed with a wide range of learner ages and backgrounds in mind, including older learners and learners from local homelessness projects. We will also encourage CertHE students to progress towards a degree once they feel confident to do so and our graduates to consider taking an MA at Ruskin. Within our HE provision, we will continue to offer diverse routes that may better fit with individual circumstances, including degrees built around block residential weekends for those in full-time employment or with caring commitments that are easier to share at the weekend.

We will use the current capital project to redevelop the College with full accessibility for disabled learners and teachers in all newly built teaching accommodation. We will further use the design and decoration of the building to seek to engage and integrate learners from a range of backgrounds and communities, e.g. through the provision of a quiet room that can be used for prayer, through the display of posters celebrating diversity and inclusion, and through retaining some unisex toilets that can be used by people with gender dysphoria who are in transition.

Dissemination of good practice

We will emphasise tutors' dissemination and analysis of their own teaching practice as an important aspect of pedagogic scholarship. The recent instigation of termly sessions on sharing best practice across the College will continue and will include exploration of themes arising from the College's Observation of Teaching and Learning exercise. The peer-review scheme ensures that best practice is embedded throughout the College and that the observations and experiences of both observer and observee became part of the self-reflection of the College on the delivery of effective teaching.

External examiners routinely comment favourably upon content and forms of assessment e.g. the welfare rights exercise on the BA Social Work, the integration of critical analysis and creativity in English Studies; the innovative thought that is channelled in History with Social Sciences. Consequently, tutors have much to contribute to relevant publications such as *Studies in the*

Education of Adults or at Higher Education Authority subject conferences. Recent examples of outputs on pedagogical approaches adopted at the College have included a textbook on incremental learning on the degree on Social Work and an analysis of the MA in Public History programme and its antecedents. This practice helps internal reflection on best practice and needs to become more widespread. Community initiatives and development work as examples of engaged scholarship also need to become yet more embedded within staff's practice and then written up.

Quality assurance

As outlined in the College's strategic plan we will strive for excellence in academic standards, supported by robust processes of quality assurance and enhancement as outlined in the quality handbook. We will implement the recommendations of the two IQER developmental engagements on assessment and student support that took place in 2008 and 2010. Action plans arising from the developmental engagements are being implemented and will help the College prepare for the summative engagement in Spring 2011. The College's key committee concerned with quality matters, the Academic Quality and Standards Committee (AQSC), has oversight of compliance with the QAA academic infrastructure and will continue to do so. The College experienced a very positive IQER developmental engagement (DE) on assessment in February 2009 and on student support in January 2010. We aim to achieve a positive report by QAA from the summative review in 2011.

Staff development

Continuous professional development is already embedded across the College. Staff are employed on HE terms and conditions irrespective of whether primarily teaching FE or HE courses. Staff are seen to be appropriately qualified for the niche market we serve. Increasing numbers of staff have obtained qualifications for teaching at HE level, particularly through undertaking a postgraduate certificate in teaching in further or higher education at Oxford Brookes University. All staff employed within FE are required to obtain qualifications of CTLSS, PTLSS and DTLSS. This is already embedded within the College. Our provision has been recognised and commended within the 2007 OUVS institutional review; in particular, the extent and creativity of staff development approaches have been praised. The strategic aim to develop staff includes an objective to increase further the number of staff with teaching qualifications albeit within constrained financial resources.

Through peer appraisal, observation of teaching and learning and the running of a variety of in-service provision, the College will continue to promote curriculum development and pedagogical innovation by staff teaching at all levels of its provision.

Several staff, including those teaching on Social Work, Youth and Community Work and History programmes have experience as external examiners for BA

and MA programmes and have acted as external reviewers of HE programmes or as part of QAA panels. Such expertise is disseminated through good practice workshops or standing items on Programme Board agendas, as appropriate. Several of our part-time staff also teach concurrently in other HEIs and bring their expertise of such institutions into the College. Moreover, many of our staff currently teaching on undergraduate and postgraduate courses have previous experience of teaching elsewhere and the Principal is an Emeritus Professor of the University of Warwick.

Scholarly and research activity is an integral part of the contracts for the majority of full time/permanent staff currently teaching on HE programmes. As part of the recruitment process for new staff, attention is paid – and will continue to be paid – to their publications and academic work. All staff recruited to teach at a higher level are expected to have at least a Master's degree, and often now a PhD.

Staff are encouraged to prepare work for publication and are supported in applications for research funding. Recent successful bids have been to the Reinvention Centre at Warwick University, the Union Modernisation Fund and the British Academy. Work is fed back through regular research seminars to provide further encouragement to staff to make their own submissions.

Staff with clear proposals are able to apply for a term's sabbatical, normally every seven years, which will be considered by the Management Team. Application for external funding for sabbaticals or conference travel overseas is also encouraged. A series of research workshops is held each year alongside an exchange of best teaching practice across the College.

Monitoring

We will continue to strengthen the strategic oversight of quality and standards through the AQSC, the committee structure, the management structure and the work of the Quality Officer. The committee structure is already established and will continue to deal with FE and HE work as appropriate. Within this structure Programme Boards – covering: Law and International Labour and Trade Union Studies; Social, Youth and Community Work Studies and Humanities and Social Sciences - feed into the AQSC. AQSC is the College's senior academic committee. It is chaired by the Dean, has the Principal as a Governing Executive member in active membership and reports direct to the Governing Executive.

Evaluation

This strategy, like others adopted by the College, will be evaluated cyclically through the Governing Executive.

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