

Experiences With the Employment of Students From Other Countries

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INTRODUCTION: REQUIREMENTS FOR SEASONAL LABOUR

The business is based near Spalding in the Lincolnshire Fens. It has six departments, each with its own specific labour requirements.

The largest department is Soft Fruit Propagation. This covers traditional field production of strawberry plants, raspberry canes, and other fruit bushes such as gooseberries, currants, and blackberries. Many of these are Ministry Certified cultivars, aimed at fruit farmers, retailers, and other outlets. These are grown on more than 40 ha in South Lincolnshire and West Norfolk. The main labour requirements are for planting, weeding, de-blossoming (a requirement for Ministry Certified strawberry plants), runner training, lifting, grading, and packing for cold storage.

Cross Keys Nursery is a recently developed part of the business which has been set up to grow strawberry plants in modules from misted tips. Many members of I.P.P.S. GB&I Region will be familiar with the Nursery Stock Division which grows a diverse range of high quality container-grown shrubs and fruit plants for garden centres and other retailers. The demands for extra seasonal labour are from propagation, through potting, pinching, and spraying right through to despatch.

The Arable Department grows wheat, and some potatoes, as part of the rotation of land for high-health-status crops. There is no large labour requirement here, except during potato picking and grading in September and October. However a separate fruit farm was set up 6 years ago, to grow strawberries and blackberries for supermarkets. We now grow 40 acres of strawberries, on raised beds, through polythene with T-tape irrigation, as well as in grow bags in French and Spanish tunnels. These are picked from May until October and packed, quality controlled, bar coded, and labeled in our own packhouse. Over 100 extra pickers are needed during the peak fortnight in late June, with approximately 50 needed during the rest of the season. It is vitally important that labour is available at all times, 7 days a week.

SOURCES AND MANAGEMENT OF OVERSEAS STUDENTS

The business has a full-time work force of 35 people, and also advertises locally for extra seasonal help.

However, in recent years foreign students have become an essential part of the work force. The business employs at least 100 at peak times. A student camp has been established, consisting of 24 mobile homes, each holding four or five people. Full planning permission for the camp took more than 2 years to achieve, mainly because of opposition from one family in a cottage on a neighbouring farm, and one local councillor. The camp has shower rooms, recreational facilities, and is attractively landscaped with a bund to hide it from view.

Some 70 of the students are from Eastern Europe, the main countries being Bulgaria, Poland, Slovakia, Ukraine, Russia, Lithuania, Czech Republic, and Estonia. They are recruited through the Harvest Opportunity Permit Scheme (HOPS).

Harvest Opportunity Permit Scheme is one of seven operators under the UK Government-backed Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (SAWS) which was created in 1990. In 1990 5000 SAWS work permits were issued, and by 1997 this allocation had risen to 10,000 work cards. HOPS receives about 38%. CONCORDIA is another well known operator of the scheme. The scheme, administered by the Home Office, enables students from countries outside the European Union to take temporary employment on UK farms during the harvesting season (May to November).

The Home Office has several criteria within which the operators administer the scheme:

- Students should be from outside the Commonwealth or the European Union;
- They should be aged between 18 and 25 years;
- They must return to their University in the same year to continue the same educational course.

The HOPS objectives are to recruit students from Central and Eastern Europe to give them the opportunity to visit the UK, to improve their English language, to "create an understanding between youth of many countries", and to give them the chance to be involved in practical work and the responsibilities of employment and to earn some money.

Other foreign students are from South East Asia, although they are studying at British Universities. We advertise, help them to get work permits in the Job Centres, then provide accommodation for them. We make extra provision for their religious beliefs, for example sourcing meat which has been butchered in their way. We have to show that we are not offering work to people outside the European Community without first advertising in Europe and to British Commonwealth countries. Therefore we advertise in student magazines and, this year, we have employed people from Spain, France, South Africa, New Zealand, and Australia. We also have contact with universities in Europe.

All students are paid at least the national minimum wage. For much of the time they are on piece work rates, and the better workers can, and often do earn more than double their hourly rates. More than £100 per day has been achieved, and more than £450 in one week.

As well as providing good facilities for the students, facilities which are inspected and audited by HOPS to their own exacting standards, the company arranges barbeques, trips to such places as London, Cambridge, theme parks and the seaside, together with the annual company versus student football match.