

OATES
Organic Agriculture Training in East Sussex
15th December 1999 to 30th June 2000
Final Report

1. Summary

OATES was a partnership project by East Sussex County Council (ESCC), Common Cause Co-operative and Plumpton College. Its aim was to provide training in organic horticulture to unemployed people living in East Sussex and to promote sustainable rural development.

Other partners on the steering group included Sussex Rural Community Council (SRCC), and East Sussex Rural Development Area (RDA). The Project was funded by the European Social fund, South East England Development Agency (SEEDA), ESCC and Plumpton College. The pilot project ran for six months from December 1999 until June 2000. Ten beneficiaries were selected to attend a fifteen week course – one day a week at Plumton College and one day a week work experience on one of five organic enterprises involved in the project.

Key findings include:

- There was a large response to the course publicity, particularly from the Hastings Bexhill area, indicating a demand for this kind of training
- Eight of the beneficiaries completed the course and gained qualifications.
- When evaluating the course, beneficiaries said that they would like it to have been a year long course to follow the growing seasons and to have more practical skills training.
- Beneficiaries felt that they had increased their knowledge of growing organically and gained useful work experience. They expressed a range of employment objectives including growing organic vegetables on a professional level, growing on allotments and marketing food in the community, being a nurseryman, running a smallholding, and being involved in community horticulture projects.
- A survey of organic and small scale farms in East Sussex indicates that farmers diversifying to add value to their produce are looking for a wide range of skills in their employees.

Recommendations include:

- Running further, year long, courses in organic horticulture with an emphasis on teaching practical skills including training plots for students to cultivate their own crops and business planning and support

- The course should offer work experience on a commercial organic enterprise - working with just one or two farms to develop a training programme that best benefits the students and the farm
- Delivery of the course should be expanded to other locations and course deliverers to make training more accessible to people living in different parts of the county.
- The potential of a “Land Trust” to enable people to lease land to set up small scale commercial horticulture should be researched and developed.

2. Introduction

The OATES project was a partnership project lead by East Sussex County Council (ESCC), managed by Common Cause Co-operative and delivered with Plumpton College. The aims of OATES was to:

- provide horticulture training for unemployed people living in East Sussex.
- promote sustainable rural development.

OATES was co-funded by the European Social Fund (ESF), the South East England Development Agency (SEEDA), ESCC, Plumpton College, with support in kind donated by the Lewes District Council Agenda 21 Programme, Sussex Rural Community Council (SRCC), the East Sussex Rural Development Area (RDA) and local farmers.

Common Cause Co-operative is a not-for profit community enterprise organisation. One of its objectives is to promote sustainable food production and consumption. The OATES Project evolved out of a project run by Common Cause Co-operative between 1996 and 1999 called Sussex Organic Link (SOL), funded by CountryWork. SOL offered work experience on local organic farms to unemployed people. In return for fifteen days volunteer work on a farm beneficiaries received a bursary of £300 to spend on related training. One of the frustrations of the SOL project was the lack of local training courses in organic horticulture from which the volunteers could benefit. The main objective of OATES therefore was to offer training in organic horticulture with work experience on local organic enterprises to unemployed people living in East Sussex.

The original proposal for OATES was for a 18 month project. The ESF offered funding for a six month period only. The funding was offered in December 1999 as a result of an underspend and had to be spent by 30th June 2000. This meant that the project had less time for planning, preparing and publicising the training course and less time for follow up work. In spite of this, the relatively large number of people responding to the course publicity, the overall positive assessment given by the beneficiaries, and the experience and knowledge gained by the project managers are indicators of the success of the project and the demand for this kind of training by unemployed people in East Sussex.

3. Project Monitoring

The OATES Steering Group was made up of representatives of ESCC, Plumpton College, SRCC, RDA, Common Cause Co-operative, two beneficiaries and a farmer (see Appendix I). The group met twice to monitor the progress of the project. Minutes of the meetings are in Appendix II and III).

The beneficiaries completed a number of monitoring forms in accordance with the ESF. These were:

- an Individual Action Plan, filled in at the beginning of the course
- a Beneficiary Evaluation of the Course and an Exit Strategy, filled in at the end of the course
- and a Follow Up sent to beneficiaries three months after the end of the course to assess whether the course has helped with employment.

In addition, half way through the course the project managers discussed with each beneficiary how they felt about the course and work experience to identify any problems that needed to be sorted out. These interviews were recorded on Plumpton College Tutorial Record forms.

4. The Course

The course was an introduction to the practice and theory of organic horticulture. It was delivered by Plumpton College, a provider of further and higher education in agriculture and other land based industries. Beneficiaries gained hands-on experience working by working on a local organic horticulture enterprise.

The course was developed by Plumpton College with some initial help from a local organic grower. Ten places were funded. Child care expenses, travelling expenses and protective clothing were provided. Beneficiaries attended the College one day a week and worked on an organic enterprise one day a week (a total of 16 hours a week). The course and work experience ran for a total of fifteen days spread over a four and half month period (accommodating holidays and other events). There were two farm visits, a day's visit to the Stanmer Organic project with an introduction to permaculture and an optional weekend training course on permaculture in Dorset.

Since the course was relatively short, it was not certified. The beneficiaries took a City and Guilds certificate in Amateur Gardening and also received a certificate of attendance from Plumpton College.

5. Beneficiaries

5.1 Recruitment

In anticipation of the project, Common Cause Co-operative had prepared a data base of third sector organisations helping people back to work in East Sussex, funded by ESCC. Beneficiaries were recruited through a variety of means including:

- advertisements in the Friday Ad and the Big Issue
- brochures distributed to job centres and third sector organisations, ESCC library service, and village shops in the Rural Development Area.
- Articles in the local newspapers
- Radio interviews.

Publicity and advertising was designed to avoid recruiting candidates from Brighton and Hove since the funding was only available to people living in East Sussex. Over the three weeks that the course was publicised fifty-four people requested information about the course and out of these twenty people applied to go on the course.

Table 1: Number of people requesting information in response to the different modes of publicity

Friday Ad	Big Issue	Newspaper article	Job centre	Library	Other (or not known)
15	2	2	10	3	22

Table 2: Location of People requesting information

Lewes, Uckfield	Seaford, Newhaven	Crow-borough	East-bourne	Hailsham	Bexhill Hastings Rye	Brighton
9	4	2	6	4	19	10
16.6%	7.4%	3.7%	27.7%	7.4%	35%	18.5%

5.2 Selection

The applicants were assessed according to the information that they provided on the application form and priority given to those applicants who stated that they were looking for employment in the organic industry. Ten beneficiaries were given places on the course. One person dropped out after the first week and so another person was selected. Another person dropped out half way into the course and was not replaced.

Table 3: Location of beneficiaries offered places on the course

Lewes, Uckfield	Seaford New- haven	Crow- borough	East- bourne	Hailsham	Bexhill Hastings Rye	Brighton	Total
3	1	1	1	2	2	1	11
27%	9%	9%	9				100%

One place was offered to a candidate living at Emmaus, a community for homeless people, in Portslade which comes under the Brighton and Hove Unitary Authority. This decision was made in consultation with ESCC. Emmaus supported the development of the OATES project and it was decided that the OATES course offered an important opportunity for the individual applying and for the organisation.

The project also worked with another Third Sector organisation, Workability Rural, who were very enthusiastic about the opportunities offered by OATES for their clients. In the event, though, there was not sufficient time to place any of their clients.

5.3 Individual Action plans

The Individual Action Plans asked beneficiaries about previous work and training experience, career/employment objectives, key skills they are aiming for, and additional skills they would like. The beneficiaries expressed a range of employment objectives including growing organic vegetables on a professional level, growing on allotments and marketing food in the community, being a nurseryman, running a smallholding, and being involved in community horticulture projects.

5.4 Beneficiary Evaluation of the Course

The standard ESF Beneficiary Evaluation of Course forms were used. An extra point, *13. Work Experience*, was added. The results are in the table below

Table 4: Beneficiary Evaluation of Course

	Excellent	Good	Acceptable	Poor	Not applicable
1. The course organisation	0	4	4	2	0
2. The course content	0	4	3	1	0
3. The teaching	2	6	1	0	0
4. The learning materials	0	6	2	1	0
5. Education Advice	0	2	3	0	3
6. welfare/accommodation advice	0	2	1	0	6

7. Usefulness of student handbook	0	3	1	1	3
8. Activities, visits, trips	1	6	2	0	0
9. Tutorials	0	4	4	0	1
10. Marking and Assessment of course work	0	0	0	1	6
11. Accommodation and Facilities	0	1	2	1	5
12. Equipment	1 clothing	1	5	1	1
13. Work Experience	1	4	1	0	1

In general, beneficiaries found that the:

- course organisation and content was good to acceptable
- the teaching was good to excellent
- the learning materials were good
- the visits and trips were acceptable to good to excellent
- tutorials were good to acceptable
- the accommodation and facilities were acceptable to poor
- the equipment was acceptable, with one person scoring the protective clothing excellent
- the work experience was good

Other comments included:

- improvements and suggestions for course content
- disappointment in lack of practical sessions and actual growing of crops
- disappointment in lack of opportunity to use College library
- disappointment in the short duration of the course and desire for a whole year course
- benefits of meeting other students and exchanging ideas and experiences
- the range of work experience gained on the organic enterprises.

5.5 Course Appraisal

Tutorials were conducted with all the students to assess how the beneficiaries felt about the course. Problems identified by beneficiaries on the course were addressed at the Steering Group Meetings. Where possible Plumpton College and the Project Managers sort to make improvements. Problems which were not possible to solve will be addressed in future courses. Feedback from the students during the course was on the whole very constructive and helpful. One of the major problems identified was the lack of suitable ground to cultivate and gain practical experience. This was because of the heavy clay soils at Plumpton which, unless well prepared in advance, are unsuitable for vegetable production.

5.6 Exit Strategy

The beneficiaries filled in ESF exit strategy forms asking information on *course achievements/benefits, plans on leaving the course, and future advice needs.*

Course achievements/benefits: In general beneficiaries felt that they had increased their knowledge of growing organically and gained useful work experience on a commercial enterprise.

Plans on leaving the course: Most of the beneficiaries wanted to go grow their own organic food, obtain land to start their own business or gain employment on a farm or plant nursery.

Future advice needs: Most of the beneficiaries wanted information on job opportunities, further training and voluntary options.

5.7 Follow Up

The Beneficiaries were all sent follow up forms three months after the end of the OATES course. A book token was offered as an incentive to return forms. Six beneficiaries filled in and returned their forms.

- Four of the beneficiaries were currently employed, only one felt that their employment was a result of the OATES course.
- Five of the beneficiaries were either volunteering on an organic farm or growing their own vegetables.
- All six beneficiaries described future plans for growing or working in organic horticulture.
- Other benefits of the course mentioned included increased confidence for finding employment, making new friends and contacts, and helping to make a change in direction in life.

6. Work Experience on Organic Horticulture Enterprises

6.1 Recruitment of Farms for Work Experience

Farms on the Soil Association list of certified organic farms in East Sussex were invited to offer work experience placements for the OATES course. Nine farms responded. Five of these were considered appropriate since they were commercial market gardening enterprises and offered the best opportunity for work experience that complemented the course. Five farms were also chosen to allow the ten course participants to work in pairs.

There are very few organic market gardening enterprises in East Sussex and every effort was made to find farms throughout the county. There are a disproportionate number of market gardens in the Lewes District which reflects the distribution of the farms selected (see Table 3).

Table 5: Farms selected for Work Experience Placements.

Lewes District	Wealden District	Rother District
Ashurst Organics	Heron's Folly	Scragoak
White House Farm		
Barcombe Nurseries		

The selected farms were visited to check on location, size of establishment, crops grown, and to discuss the sort of work that the trainees would be doing. They were also sent Health and Safety forms used by Plumpton College.

Two of the farms subsequently dropped out of the project. One because it had a non-smoking policy that did not suit the beneficiaries (Scragoak) and the other because it did not have regular suitable work (Herons Folly). The beneficiaries on these farms were transferred to the remaining three farms. These farms also had a health and safety check by a representative of Plumpton College.

6.2 Farm 'skills needs' Survey

A questionnaire survey was sent to 54 organic horticulture enterprises, organic farms, and non-organic small scale producers in East Sussex. The aim of the survey was to assess the need for trained labour and the types of skills required by farms. The information would be used to inform the design of future courses in organic production.

Seven questionnaires were returned. There was not sufficient time to follow up the survey and encourage more returns. The sample returned was too small to make any general conclusions. The skills described by the farmers that did return the survey is of interest, though, since it is indicative of the range of skills required by farmers diversifying to add value to their produce. These included:

- beef and dairy husbandry
- fruit husbandry
- meat cutting, packing and processing red meats
- farm maintenance including fencing, hedging, drainage, irrigation, machinery and building skills
- vegetable and fruit packaging
- record keeping, computer skills

- marketing skills including presentation of goods, stock control, cash and payments control
- managing people

7. What could have been done better

The following would improve future courses:

- a 12 month course to experience the annual growing cycle.
- include more practical aspects to the course
- ensure suitable land for practical work and allow each student their own plot of land to work on for the duration of the course
- running the course at different locations to benefit students from a wider range of locations (in particular to run courses accessible to people from Hastings and Bexhill and from Brighton)
- work with and develop just one or two farms for work experience
- provide more time to prepare the course and involve the farms in the course development
- provide business training support
- provide support for acquiring land to set up horticulture businesses.

8. Products

- Recruitment data base
- Qualifications and work experience gained by beneficiaries
- Employment of beneficiaries
- Increased management experience gained by Common Cause Co-operative
- Increased training experienced gained by Plumpton College

9. Conclusions

- The OATES project was successful in delivering organic horticulture training and work experience to 8 out of an original 10 beneficiaries within a six month period.
- The large response to the publicity for the course indicates that there is a demand for the training by unemployed people living in East Sussex. There is a particular high demand in the Hastings and Bexhill area.
- The work experience on local farms was a success at some farms but not at all. The small number of commercial organic horticulture enterprises means that locations for work experience are limited. This may partly reflect the farmers' lack of experience working with trainees rather than volunteers.

- Beneficiaries felt that they had increased their knowledge of growing organically and gained useful work experience. Beneficiaries wanted to go on to grow their own organic food, obtain land to start their own business or gain employment on a farm or plant nursery and most wanted information on job or volunteer and further training.
- The farm skills survey suggests that farmers diversifying to add value to their produce are looking for a wide range of skills in their employees.

10. Recommendations

An accredited course in organic horticulture and rural skills should be established to include:

- A minimum period of a year to cover all of the growing season
- an emphasis on teaching practical skills with training plots for students to cultivate their own crops
- wider topics such as the environment, sustainability and the rural economy
- business planning and support
- practical experience on a commercial organic enterprise - working with just one or two farms to develop a training programme that best benefits the students and the farm.

Delivery of the course should be expanded to other locations and course deliverers to make training more accessible to people living in different parts of the county.

The potential of a “Land Trust” to enable people to lease land to set up small scale commercial horticulture should be researched and developed.

10. Appendices

Appendix I

OATES I Steering Group members

Nick Wolfenden	ESCC	Tel: 01273 481323
Gillian Hyde-Thompson	ESCC	Tel: 01273 481323
Topsy Jewell	Common Cause	Tel: 01273 473351
Katharine Rayner	Common Cause	Tel: 01273 486050
Maurice Shorten	Plumpton College	Tel: 01273 890454
Liz Nuttall	RDA	Tel: 01424 871045
Caroline Adcock	SRCC	Tel: 01273 473422
Peter Haynes	Ashurst Organics	Tel: 01273 891219
David Wix	Course participant	Not on the phone
Mark Mansbridge	Course participant	Tel: 01273 478882

Appendix II

Minutes of the OATES Steering Group

February 10th, ESCC, County Hall, St. Anne's Crescent, Lewes

Attn: Steering Group members

From: Topsy Jewell

13 March 2000

Present: Nick Wolfenden, Gillian Hyde-Thompson, Topsy Jewell, Katharine Rayner, Maurice Shorten, Caroline Adcock, Peter Haynes,

Apologies: Liz Nuttall

1. Progress report and general comments on finances.

Recruitment is underway for the course and a sufficient number of farms are interested in offering work experience placements.

The project officially started on 15th December 1999 and must be completed by 30th June 2000. Any expenditure before 15th December comes out of the grant awarded by ESCC to Common Cause to establish the project.

Katharine distributed information about the current state of funding and expenditure. This included itemised projected expenditure by monitoring period and expenditure to date (pre- ESF project expenditure to the 15th December and ESF project expenditure 15th December - 31st December).

We are still waiting to confirm South East of England Development Agency (SEEDA) funding. (Since this meeting, SEEDA funding has been confirmed)

It was noted that it is important to keep hold of invoices for up to five years.

The European Social Fund (ESF) need to be informed of any underspend.

Further finances from ESCC depends on how much is spent this financial year.

2. Where to after June?

The ESF funding finishes at the end of June 2000. Depending on how the course is going, the response from applicants, etc. we need to think about whether we want to

apply for funding to continue the programme. No decision was made at this meeting about future courses/funding although we discussed various training issues.

There are various options in terms of training including repeating the same course, providing further training for those who have completed the first course, providing a different course suitable for a different time of year and or level of skills (eg machine skills in the Autumn/Winter months) and so on.

The present OATES course does not provide any qualifications. 15 weeks is not sufficient for an NVQ. Peter pointed out that although March to June is a critical part of the year for cultivation, trainees need experience of the full growing season. Maurice suggested that the OATES course can be linked to an NVQ if a portfolio approach is adopted. There is currently no organic horticulture NVQ although some other colleges offer City and Guilds organic horticulture training. There is a problem in that if Plumpton are receiving ESF money they can't apply to the government to fund a certified course. Maurice thought that if an NVQ course is to be set up from scratch accreditation needs to be obtained before the course is started which can take 8-12 months. If this is the case, the ESF timescale is too soon for accrediting a new course.

Maurice agreed to find out more about a) existing certified courses in organic horticulture and b) the procedure for establishing a new NVQ (or other) course and its implications for further ESF funding (including time-table and whether the course can be set up before certification has been awarded).

It was suggested that market research is done by the project to evaluate a) what labour skills the commercial organic horticulture industry needs and b) whether there are potential employees. Maurice suggested contacting the NFU's Land based Training Association (LANTRA), Elm Farm and the Organic certification organisations for help. The original ESF bid included doing this sort of research so this should not be a problem.

3. Update on the course content

The final details to the course are still being worked out. Topsy suggested that Peter should help steer the content of the course to make it relevant to the experiences of commercial horticultural growers in the area.

4. Next Meeting

Two more meetings of the Steering Group will be arranged for the life of this project. A representative of the beneficiaries of the training programme will be invited onto the Group. Date of next meeting to be arranged.

Appendix III

Minutes of the OATES Steering Group
15th June 2000, ESCC, County Hall, St. Anne's Crescent, Lewes

Present: Nick Woolfenden, Maurice Shorten, Caroline Adcock, Mark Mansbridge, Topsy Jewell, Katharine Rayner.

Apologies: Liz Downs, David Wix, Peter Haynes, Gillian Hyde-Thompson

Agenda Item	Action
<p>1. Minutes of last meeting and matters arising</p> <p>The minutes of the last meeting were agreed. There were no matters arising.</p>	
<p>2. Project Update</p> <p>Topsy circulated an April - May Monitoring Report detailing the project update for this period. Plumpton college were keen to support and enable opportunities for follow up training as appropriate. Mark suggested that beneficiaries could participate in a weekend permaculture training event in Dorset and would pass on more information to Topsy. Maurice suggested the possibility of providing a college minibus to transport students to the farm courses and would be able to confirm the offer once he had dates.</p> <p>Katharine distributed tables on the current financial situation of the project and likely under/over spend on the current spending plan. Most items are on target, some slightly underspent. Katharine has already discussed with GOSE using some of the underspend to finance more farm visits up to £500.</p> <p>Although the cut off date for the project is 30th June, the course will run for two Mondays in July (3rd and 10th). An additional week after this will also be needed to round everything off and complete the final report. The steering Group agreed that the project managers should be paid for this three weeks of work. Because no invoices can be made after June it was agreed that the Managers should increase their current salary by the equivalent amount for the three weeks during the project time.</p> <p>We still need statements of time in kind from partners and farmers and these should be chased up. Maurice will obtain signatures from farmers who are participated in farm visits.</p>	<p>MM</p> <p>MS, TJ</p> <p>TJ MS</p> <p>MS, TJ</p>

3. Course Feedback (Maurice)

Following the feedback from the beneficiaries at the last Steering Group meeting, Plumpton undertook a survey of the students on the OATES course to gather more information. Maurice distributed the results of this survey. The survey asked the students whether:

- they felt each topic on the course had been relevant to organic growing
- the level of course material was too easy/about right/too difficult
- they had enjoyed the topic.

The responses were varied. For many of the topics the students felt that they were relevant, pitched at the right level and enjoyable. For some topics such as health and safety, world wide web, and portfolio building students were less positive.

On Monday 26th June Plumpton College is closed for a Strategic Development Day. Rather than add another day to the end of the course in July, (which is difficult for budget reasons) Mark suggested contacting Pippa James who is involved with Stanmer Organics. Topsy will contact Pippa to see if a days visit and training can be organised.

TJ

4. Beneficiaries Feedback

- Overall, students are much happier with the course, the first half of which felt a bit “abstract”. The farm visits have been particularly good, making the course topics feel more concrete.
 - The feeling about farm placements varies from “very positive” to “not so sure”. Some students are keen to carry on volunteering at their farms. Students at Ashurst are particularly happy and the visit to this farm by all the students was very good. Less positive comments have come from the other farms, particularly about the level of information provided. Mark suggested that there should be an agreement with the farms about the level of information provided so that the work being done by the students is put in context. The feeling that there is an equal exchange between labour and training is important and students shouldn’t feel that they are just providing “free labour”. There is also a problem that some farms are very specialised. Barcombe Nurseries for example is largely under glass and Mark suggested that placements could be rotated. Topsy said that she had tried to do this but that students who were happy with their placements were very reluctant to change or couldn’t change for logistic reasons (transport, child care arrangements, etc).
- It was suggested that in the future the course could be designed to work with just one or two farms. A selected farm or farms could participate more actively in

<p>developing the course and work experience and take on a larger team of students perhaps spread over a number of days (or whatever best suited the farm’s schedule). Ashurst was recommended for a number of reasons including the good experience students have had on the farm, the fact that Peter Haynes has already been involved and helpful in developing the OATES programme, the farm is very close to Plumpton College. Other farms such as Barcombe could offer more specialised training in glass house production. The students experience also supported the idea of setting up a dedicated training enterprise at Plumpton’s Ivylands Farm near Battle. This location could serve students resident in this part of the County where there are very few certified commercial organic horticulture growers. Maurice said that Ivylands manager, Simon Bishop, is currently converting the farm to organic status with the Soil Association.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some students have missed a lot of their work experience days on the farm. This raises a question about whether they would qualify for a College Certificate and how flexible the certificate could be. Students who have completed all their work and college days may feel resentful if the certificates are awarded to those who have missed days. Maurice suggested that “profile guides” could be filled out by the farmers which would act as a reference for employment. It was agreed that Topsy would ask students what they felt would be most useful to them. • Some students requested knee pads and gloves as part of the protective clothing provided by the course. • Some students wanted to know if they can continue to come to Plumpton after the course to check the notice board for notices about jobs. Maurice said that this would be ok and that the college is open all the year around (although courses officially finish 16th June this academic year). 	<p>TJ</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is still a problem of suitable land for cultivation at the College. The course has been structured so that afternoons are dedicated to practical work or farm visits. The college organic plot however has been unsuitable for cultivation because of the wet weather. Mark felt that this has meant that students have missed out training particularly in tool use. One possibility is that the practical work is done at Lewes Organic Allotment Project (LOAP) where there is suitable land to cultivate. Clare Ferguson (487834) or Trevor Watson (486423) at Lewes District Council Recycling Centre can be contacted about this. • Mark suggested that students may want to continue meeting informally after the course to discuss growing projects they are involved with. 	<p>MM, TJ</p>