Prime Minister reveals investment in engineering at Harper Adams

David Cameron says precision farming centre "great for UK"

Prime Minister David Cameron announced today that Harper Adams University College is to be awarded nearly £1.5m to help it develop a new engineering building to accommodate and support the National Centre for Precision Farming, and related teaching and research activities.

The announcement of the award, from the Higher Education Funding Council for England’s Catalyst Fund, was made from Brazil. Harper Adams Vice-Principal Professor Peter Mills has joined the Prime Minister on a two-day trade mission to Sao Paulo and Brasilia, furthering the University College’s role in the Science Without Borders initiative, which will fund Brazilian students to study agricultural engineering at Harper Adams from 2013.

The Prime Minister said: "It's great for the UK that Harper Adams is establishing the National Centre for Precision Farming. This new higher education and research facility in Shropshire for engineering and farming students will lead to the creation of 160 jobs.

"I'm delighted that the university has joined Brazil’s science and education programme and that Brazilian students will start studying there next year. It will help to strengthen the links between the UK and Brazil and will bring in increased revenue for the university.”

The HEFCE Catalyst Fund contribution will be combined with funding from the Marches Local Enterprise Partnership, the University College and two philanthropic donations from the Douglas Bomford Trust and the Eric Lea Estate to deliver the new Harper Adams engineering centre, which is expected to create 160 jobs through graduates entering the engineering sector.

Principal, Dr David Llewellyn, said: "Harper Adams University College has unique expertise in agricultural engineering, including precision farming techniques, and is the only provider of undergraduate agricultural engineering programmes in the UK. The University College will therefore play a critical role in developing an advanced engineering response to address Government policy priorities, help support this important STEM subject area and contribute to agricultural research and education via a cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional initiative.

"In February 2012, Harper Adams launched the National Centre for Precision Farming to act as a catalyst for research and education, innovation in the application of precision farming and job growth in order to support the adoption of precision farming technologies for the benefit of the agricultural and food production sectors. We believe there is also considerable potential for ‘crossover’ applications in other related ‘all terrain engineering’ fields such as construction, defence and relevant sections of the automotive industries.”

The building will supplement existing facilities and will provide a physical resource around which university/industry collaboration can be stimulated in a new field supporting innovation in high-technology food production. The NCPF will also have unique features, such as a novel full-scale "all terrain" vehicle simulator room, that will support product development and training, but will also provide a means to verify health and safety measures in the design and development of new agricultural machinery and precision farming applications.

A scheme has already been developed for the new building, planning permission has been obtained and the project has been tendered. The overall cost of the project is £2.93m and the facility is expected to be ready and in use by October 2013. Dr Llewellyn adds "Working alongside our considerable agricultural production expertise, our engineering staff will play a critical role in developing, with private sector industry partners, other universities and research institutes, new strands of applied research to implement and ‘join-up’ precision farming technological developments; educate future generations of engineers and farmers on the application of precision farming; provide updating courses to develop the precision farming skills base of the current farming community; and act as an independent source of advice on precision farming methods."

Harper Adams engineering graduates, with their applied skills and can-do attitude are highly sought after by global engineering companies such as JCB, CLAAS, John Deere and Jaguar Land Rover. Thanks to these strong ties with industry, Professor Mills was invited to join the Prime Minister when he opened the new £63m JCB factory in Sao Paulo yesterday, having become involved in the trade mission through the Science without Borders programme.

Harper Adams has been selected to provide agricultural engineering education through this initiative, which will provide scholarships to send 100,000 Brazilian students, over four years, on undergraduate sandwich courses, PhD sandwich courses and full PhDs in science, technology, engineering, mathematics and creative industries at top universities around the world.

The HEFCE Catalyst Fund, under which Harper Adams was today awarded nearly £1.5 million, has two major goals, both focussed on delivering the public and collective student interests in HE: to manage transition - to and through the new finance arrangements in HE, so as to protect students and sustain important activities; and to support key objectives by promoting and enhancing activities that address HEFCE and/or the Government’s key policy priorities where an innovation could lead to a step change in achievement and efficiency widely across HE.

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