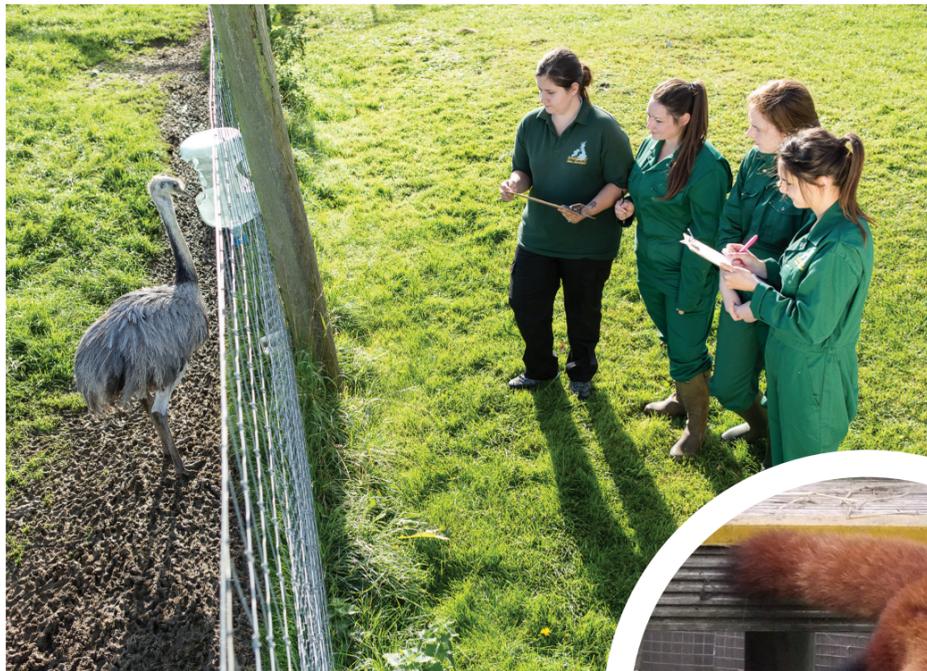


# Animal magic is putting college zoo on the map

*Sparsholt's zookeeping course is gaining acclaim – and learners – worldwide*

WILL MARTIN



**RHEA WINDOW:** Learners get to study a number of exotic animals

AS THE Sparsholt College-branded jeep passes a working farm, an aquatics centre and a zoo containing more 1,200 animals, it quickly becomes apparent that this is no run-of-the-mill FE institution.

Sparsholt, which is situated five miles outside of Winchester in rural Hampshire, is one of England's 14 land-based colleges. Thanks to its pioneering work with zoos overseas, its name is becoming known across the globe.

The college offers courses in agricultural and rural subjects, and has almost 5,000 full- and part-time learners on its books. In 2006, its Animal Management Centre became a licensed zoo; today, it holds more than 200 species.

## Feeding time at the zoo

Despite the storm howling outside, principal Tim Jackson insists that the college's star attraction – Mya the red panda, who arrived last year (pictured, right) – is doing well. Other exhibits include meerkats and lemurs, while the reptile and amphibian department alone is home to more than 700 residents.

The zoo, which hosts private events throughout the year but is not open to the public, is

largely run by Sparsholt students who are currently enlisted on the college's courses on animal management. Students dressed in the centre's dark green uniforms can be spotted transporting sackloads of animal feed from enclosure to enclosure.

Only a small portion of the students' time is dedicated to such tasks, explains vice-principal Martin Simmons. The bulk of their time is spent learning how to look after the animals and how to make their living environment as natural as possible.

Sparsholt's animal and zoo management courses cover everything from animal care to zoo husbandry, but it is the Diploma in the Management of Zoo and Aquarium Animals (DMZAA) for which the college is gaining a global reputation.

The two-year programme, one of the most respected and sought-after courses of its type,

is designed to cover many aspects of the zoo-keeper's role. "It's so much more than picking up poo," Simmons explains.

Back in 2005, the college formed a relationship with the British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums (Biaza) and began to offer the DMZAA in the UK and Ireland. Owing to the challenges of accessing appropriately qualified staff, the college soon began to develop online learning strategies in order to deliver the programme remotely.

Sparsholt now offers the course to up to 80 students annually from partner zoos in the UK and overseas. A zoo professional in each region acts as a coordinator, supporting the learners and ensuring that they adhere to the same set of standards. The DMZAA, accredited by the City and Guilds awarding body, begins with a four-day residential at Sparsholt, with the rest of the programme delivered online.

The impact is being felt around the world; one former student has even set up a zoo in Latvia. "She became a coordinator and we now run a distance learning programme based in Riga," Simmons says. "We've pulled in people from Moscow Zoo and [Leningrad Zoo in] St Petersburg, and we've also got someone in the Middle East. They're like Sparsholt College outposts."

## International offering

In order to broaden Sparsholt's international offering, the college has been busy setting up "outposts" as far afield as China and India, which work by using international coordinators to facilitate zoo-keeper training using the Sparsholt system.

The partnership in China has proven more challenging than some, but after a trip there last year, Jackson is confident that his ear-popping travels between Beijing, Shanghai and Chengdu's zoos will prove fruitful.

"The challenge for us, particularly in China, is language," Jackson says. "Whereas in Riga and the United Arab Emirates we've done the course in the English language, in China, it has been trickier."

Simmons adds: "I know as far as the Russian ones are going, they are using a lot of Google



## Sparsholt: a history

- **1899:** The college is established as Hampshire's first farm school
- **2003:** Begins offering its Diploma in the Management of Zoo and Aquarium Animals (DMZAA)
- **2005:** Becomes a member of the British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums
- **2006:** Awarded its first zoo licence
- **2013:** Sparsholt's DMZAA is launched in the United Arab Emirates
- **2014:** The college's animal and zoo management department is rated outstanding by Ofsted
- **2015:** Mya, an 18-month-old red panda, is introduced to Sparsholt's Animal Management Centre

Translate. When you do technical translations [it's more straightforward] than love letters, which have got lots of nuance, metaphor and idiom. People describing in very dry terms what the right materials to use are for an enclosure actually translates quite well. We're not getting complete gobbledygook back."

## Employer engagement

But, in spite of the language difficulties, at the heart of Sparsholt's approach is a desire to work closely with employers to ensure that their workforce is properly skilled and qualified to deliver. "This is employer engagement at its very, very best," Simmons says.

So what is next for Sparsholt College? An initiative to put zoo supervisors through a CMI (Chartered Management Institute) suite of qualifications will be launched in March. Plans to expand the range of animals living at the zoo, in order to broaden the experiences of its learners, are also afoot.

But irrespective of which exotic species will be the next to arrive in the rolling hills of Hampshire, the welfare of the animals is Sparsholt's main concern. "While people have different standards of what a zoo should be, every zoo aspires to the best standards," Jackson explains. "European and American zoos are probably the leading zoos in the world, so the standards of care tend to get cascaded and emulated. Within time, this will become a worldwide standard."

But the ethical dilemma that comes along with keeping an animal in captivity is particularly tricky to weigh up, Simmons acknowledges. "How do you square the fact that they've got a lion behind bars in terms of ethical considerations?"

"As a punter gets more intelligent about what they're expected to find at a sanctuary or wildlife area, so we train our students on how to be better versed and able to articulate what the ethical and welfare concerns of the animals under their care are."

Thanks to students trained by Sparsholt, that message is now spreading to zoos across the world. ●

@willmartie

## FERRET

# Swept under the MAT



## Strength is power

Ever since chancellor George Osborne made the grand announcement back in November that sixth-form colleges would be able to become academies, speculation has been rife about which institutions would be allowed to make the transition.

If it hasn't already arrived, the long-awaited official guidance on this should finally be landing in principals' inboxes next week. And, if the early version stuffed into an unmarked brown envelope that ended up in FERret's paws is anything to go by, clarification is finally here.

The primary opportunity for academy conversion is for institutions looking to join or set up a multi-academy trust (MAT), the document reveals. Here are the "four main scenarios" in which the government envisages the transition could take place:

- An "educationally strong" college with strong finances (ie, rated "good" or "outstanding" both by Ofsted and in terms of its financial health) becoming a sponsor and establishing a new MAT.
- An educationally strong college with sound finances (ie, satisfactory or better) joining an existing MAT.
- An "educationally weak" college (likely to be rated "inadequate" or as "requiring improvement") joining a strong MAT with "the capacity to drive improvement".
- A "financially vulnerable" college joining an MAT in a more secure financial position.

In cases where a college opts to become a standalone academy, it will need to be "financially and educationally strong"

(so rated either "good" or "outstanding"), and set out a range of partnerships with schools and other local providers.

In short, the plans allow for sixth-form colleges in positions of either strength or weakness or make the transition to academy status. But their strategic influence on the emerging MAT landscape will be very much defined by their current educational and financial strength.

## The lady's not for turning

Stephen Grix, the chief executive of MidKent College, is not in FERret's good books this week. Fair enough: his sage advice in Further earlier this month about not letting work get in the way of family life was a crucial message for those of you who regard yourselves as slaves to the FE sector ([bit.ly/GrixBalance](http://bit.ly/GrixBalance)).

But Mr Grix's "important reflections we can all learn from", as one reader described them, may have cost FERret a few bob. Rewind back to September, and the retirement of FE's grand dame Lynne Sedgmore from the 157 Group. Despite the irrepressible Dr Sedgmore's insistence that she really was exiting FE for the final time, FERret was willing to bet that she wouldn't be able to stay away from her beloved sector for long (not least because her first attempt at retirement lasted about the same length of time as the average tenure of a Leeds United manager).

But now it transpires that, just as Dr S was about to crumble and apply for a position serving on a board in the sector, Grix's "brave and beautiful" words on the importance of putting family first persuaded her against it. Damn it, Grix...