

## Transforming forestry students into forestry professionals

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# Scottish group to produce Skills Action Plan

Scottish Forest & Timber Technologies Skills Task Group met recently in Edinburgh to review progress towards the production of a Skills Action Plan for the sector. The Skills Group, which operates under the auspices of the SF&TT Industry Leadership Group, plays the lead role in identifying the key skills gaps in the sector and has the remit to facilitate collaboration between industry, further and higher education and key public agencies to address the sector's needs.

Members of the group are drawn from a wide range of backgrounds and organisations, including Forestry Commission Scotland, ConFor, ICF, UKFPA, LANTRA, educational institutions like UHI, SRUC, and Edinburgh Napier

University. Scottish Enterprise and Skills Development Scotland are actively engaged in the work too and there is collaboration with those involved in skills agenda south of the Border.

The group aim is to agree collective action across the sector on priority skills issues. The Skills Action Plan is currently being developed around five key themes:

- talent attraction
- new entrants
- workforce development
- forest machine operator training
- curriculum review

Each theme has a working group exploring priority actions which are being drawn together and distilled to shape the Skills Action Plan.

The first step was the completion of the SFTT Skills & Training Scoping Study prepared by Inverness College UHI on behalf of Skills Development Scotland, which was carried out to highlight current issues for our industry and initiated further consultations that will feed into the creation of the Action Plan.

A good start has been made, but no-one is under any illusion about the scale of the challenge. A high level of collaboration is already apparent and it is hoped that this will bring focus to the issues, address opportunities and barriers and identify opportunities for action and improvement.

[www.forestryscotland.com/about-us/sftt-leadership-group/ilg-skills-group](http://www.forestryscotland.com/about-us/sftt-leadership-group/ilg-skills-group)

## Transforming forestry students into forestry professionals

by **Dr James Walmsley**

As any forestry professional will tell you, it is one thing to have knowledge, expertise and experience in areas such as silviculture, GIS, mensuration, management planning and ecology, yet it is another thing to succeed in getting a great job in forestry requiring such skills. To land such a job, a rather different skill set is required; a skill set that traditionally has not been taught as part of a university degree.

Acknowledging this, the forestry degrees at Bangor University now include a final year module called 'The Forestry Profession' which is designed to help students gain the skills and abilities they require to a) secure an interview and b) succeed at interviews. Firstly, students explore what the forestry profession is, who it is and where they fit into it. What few of them recognise at first is where they fit, as final year students, into the profession. It comes as a surprise to many of them that they in fact can define the future quality and standard of the forestry profession.

Much of the module is taught in small groups, ideal for exploring many of the realities of the job application process, such as:

- which CVs end up in the bin and which end up on the shortlist? Why?
- what personal characteristics are particular employers looking for?
- what is a good answer to an interview question?
- how should I behave in an interview?



Students gain insight into the forestry profession and where they might 'fit'

(Body language, eye contact, projection, confidence, appearance)

- what are the power dynamics of an interview? How might I use them to my advantage?

As part of the assessment, students have to research current job opportunities and prepare an application (such as a covering letter and professional CV) for their preferred job. They are then interviewed for that job by staff at Bangor, who tailor the interview according to the job concerned.

This is an unusual module in many ways, including the way students receive feedback. Students are informed within a day of their interview how they performed – in person – when the experience is still fresh in their minds. Shortcomings are highlighted and suggestions given for how to improve. They have to share

with their fellow students one thing they would do differently the next time they are in an interview, requiring self-reflection and professionalism. As most readers will know from their own experiences, the likelihood of failure in the job application/interview process is high; coping with failure and recognising how to learn from it is a skill which is vital for future success.

I would be delighted to hear from any ConFor members their 'do's' and 'don't's' for interviews that we could feed into future versions of this module, or indeed any horror stories that we could share with our students to demonstrate important lessons.

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