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Every sandwich needs a filling

All final-year BSc students who have undertaken the optional sandwich placement year at the National School of Forestry, University of Cumbria, have job offers prior to graduation in 2019. These are students on BSc (Hons) Forest Management and BSc (Hons) Woodland Ecology and Conservation. The National School of Forestry also currently delivers an FdSc Forestry with a compulsory placement and a BSc Forestry top-up, to enable foundation degree students, on our course and similar ones, to progress through to BSc immediately or after some time working in the forest industry.

We are proud of all our students, but it is clear that employers look for graduates with a combination of a good academic qualification and some relevant forestry experience. We do not consider our students to have completed their education when they graduate, but think they are ready to continue their learning on graduate schemes or in other early-career-development positions.

It is also clear that applicants want to obtain a combination of education and experience from their university studies. Our data on current applicants for next year's intake shows that 86% of those applying for the BSc programmes (which can be chosen with or without sandwich placement) wish to take the 'with sandwich placement' option. In addition, as the FdSc students must take a placement on their course, this means that we will be looking for at least 17 placements for students commencing in September 2019.

The headline figure that all final-year students who had undertaken sandwich placement years have job offers prior to graduation is great, but must be set in the context that there are only six of them. At least one of their cohorts failed to obtain a placement, despite good grades, and had to transfer on to the straight-through version. I feel it only right to add that this was the only female student in that cohort. Interpret that as you see fit.

86% of applicants to BSc programmes in the National School of Forestry choose the 'with placement year' option

As part of this month's focus on education, Dr Andrew Weatherall of the National School of Forestry, University of Cumbria, considers the importance of good placement opportunities for 'sandwich' year students.

Current students completing second year now are struggling to find placements (only five out of 13 have found places). Others will find them, but in my opinion, it is late and stressful for students to be looking for placements as the academic year ends. So, although we can provide the academic skills (the bread) they expect, reinforced by our practical focus (at least one third of our courses are delivered in the woods), I am concerned that we may need to transfer some of these new students to the straight-through version before the end of their course because placements (the filling) cannot be found.

The National School of Forestry does not expect to offer students automatic sandwich placement positions. It is correct that placements should be competitive

and awarded on merit. It is also fair that our students compete not only with other forestry students, but also with students on arboriculture, ecology, environmental, conservation and geography courses, and even from less obviously related

courses. However, I do hope employers (for placements or subsequently for graduate jobs) always remember the academic background of the students if they find that they do not have the passion or the skills they expected.

My ambition is for the National School of Forestry to be able to point students towards sufficient opportunities, so that those with good grades, previous experience or a developing track record of work/volunteering during their course have a realistic chance of obtaining a placement.

Of course, times are hard and our hope that our sandwich year students are paid makes it difficult for employers, especially in the private sector, to provide placements.

However, we do not wish to adopt the practice of providing unpaid internships, which is unfortunately so prevalent in the conservation sector. This practice is criticised when financial and legal firms do it in the city. It should be equally unacceptable in the rural sector. This is one reason why our Woodland Ecology and Conservation programme has a strong forestry core and students and recent graduates have the skills to get placements and jobs with Scottish Forestry, Scottish Woodlands, Tilhill Forestry and others. Despite the financial challenges, I would like the forestry and woodland sector to consider these benefits that providing placements can give:

1. YEAR-LONG JOB INTERVIEW

Some of our current placement providers only offer placements in years when they are considering expanding their workforce. The placement selection is similar to a permanent job interview, but the year is, essentially, a probationary period with an easy release for both parties at the end.

2. JOB SATISFACTION

Every professional forester I have met is passionate about their career and keen to encourage the next generation to join and develop. This is a practical way to contribute. Our students are like sponges, so keen to learn, especially by doing, rather than sitting in lecture rooms listening to me.

3. RETURNING THE FAVOUR

Anyone reading this who benefitted from a sandwich placement year themselves (as I did) should think carefully about whether they are now at a point in their career where they can give others a similar opportunity. Anyone who had a frustrating placement year (it happens sometimes) might wish to show that they can provide a better one.

4. GOOD STUDENTS

Once individuals and organisations start providing placements, we find that they tend to keep doing so. Our students are not perfect – they have much to learn, often about working habits as much as forestry knowledge – but over a year they are capable of giving a net benefit to the placement provider.

5. UNIVERSITY SUPPORT

The sandwich placement year is a module. Students have to keep a work diary or a blog, they have to do a technical report (which should be on something beneficial to the provider). They may also start their dissertation data collection (so potentially do a larger piece of useful research).

Providing an opportunity for a year can be daunting, but we are interested in creating portfolio placements where two or three employers in one location (so the student can rent accommodation for the year) might offer a combined opportunity. This could give a fantastic insight into the forest products supply chain.

This article is from my perspective as a lecturer in the National School of Forestry



A student on placement with Egger Forestry, who returned to full-time employment with them following his final year BSc (Hons) Forest Management with placement.

and does not necessarily reflect the feelings of my colleagues. I have not consulted with staff at other institutions, although recent social media posts suggest more placement opportunities are needed, to the benefit all students studying forestry courses. I do know that if more students did

get placements from our courses and then progressed on to graduate employment, we would all use this in our marketing to attract more students to our courses. Thus, providing placement opportunities is to the benefit of us all – students, higher education providers and the wider forestry industry.