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DISTANCE LEARNING IN FORESTRY

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE NATIONAL SCHOOL OF FORESTRY

Two years ago the first students enrolled in the first forestry course to be taught by distance learning. **Andrew Leslie** from the National School of Forestry describes the rationale behind the course, the lessons learned and its future development.

Introduction

The National School of Forestry (NSF), since 1998 part of the University of Central Lancashire, has been providing education and training in forestry and related subjects for over thirty five years. The School has built up a considerable reputation in the sector and its culture is strongly student and learning centred.

In 1999 the NSF began to investigate the viability of providing its well-established BSc top up degree through distance learning in addition to conventional delivery. The top up degree is a course that allows students with a Higher National Diploma (HND) in forestry to study an additional year full-time and obtain a BSc (Honours) degree. This course had proved popular but one constraint to student enrolment was the necessity of being on campus for the year. By 2000 the distance-learning course, the first such forestry course in the UK had been validated and the first cohort of students of 25 UK or Irish students and 23 Cypriot students was enrolled that September. This article discusses the rationale for adopting distance-learning, the approach taken by the NSF, the lessons learned and the scope for future development.

Rationale for adopting a distance-learning approach

The nature of forestry in the UK and worldwide has changed markedly with the focus broadening from a technical approach to a broader one that also encompasses social and ecological aspects. Thus forestry should not be considered as an isolated, distinct sector but must be viewed in its broader context as a means of social and economic development. In addition, the UK has become more integrated into a global economy and taking a world view of

forestry issues is crucial.

There have also been considerable developments in the use of technology in the sector, for example the widespread use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and Global Positioning Systems. Never before have forestry graduates had to have such a diverse range of skills. These changes offer opportunities for provision of resources for professional development and re-training within the forestry sector. This source of potential students is important given the general decline, since 1994 in students applying to study full time forestry higher education in the UK.

The activities of the forest sector are spread throughout the UK, yet the number of people employed, at 29,500 full time equivalent is relatively small. These characteristics make the development of distance-learning courses in forestry attractive. Much of the learning can be undertaken away from the confines of a campus, an attraction to the student and also it is beneficial to the educational institution in that there is the potential for larger cohorts. In addition, it was considered that a distance-learning course could build upon the success of the part time HND and Higher National Certificate in Forestry and allow progression for those students. Currently the NSF has a greater number of students in part-time higher education than full-time.

Distance learning provides an attractive means of delivering certain elements of a forestry education. Most students must work part-time due to financial circumstances and a distance learning or part-time approach makes balancing work and study more feasible. Furthermore, many of the students undertaking the top up degree at the NSF are mid-career

professionals and the distance learning delivery allows them to continue in their current workplace whilst studying.

The development of distance learning at NSF also reflects the culture of the University of Central Lancashire, which emphasises the importance of broadening access to education. Seed funds were provided by the university to employ a research assistant to assist in the development of the course.

In general, distance learning is considered to have certain potential advantages over campus-based learning. These include improved access to learning for students, flexibility in place and time of delivery and reduction in costs through more efficient use of tutor's time. These benefits have largely been realised by the NSF through the distance learning degree.

The programme

The BSc top up degree was chosen as NSF's first foray into distance learning because the course was equivalent to one year of full-time higher education rather than three years for a full BSc programme. Under the University's modular learning structure for qualifications, six modules were required to be developed for the top up degree and this was considered feasible with the resources and time available.

Prior to the development of the qualification, some basic market research was conducted to ensure that the content and methods for delivery would meet the needs of prospective students and employers. Although the number of respondents was small, the results showed that there was considerable interest from both employers and former HND students in the course and that most employers would be prepared to support employees in studying the top up degree. Other crucial information that was collected included a ranking of proposed modules and details on the preferred mode of delivery; paper based, internet or CD-ROM.

To simplify the administration of the course and to reduce development time, no optional modules were to be offered. Selection of the six modules was based on the research, with only one new module being written, on strategic planning. This module was included in response

to 71% of employers in the survey wanting business skills to feature in the course. The decision was made to produce the learning materials as paper workbooks (which contain the 'lectures') and study packs (which contain relevant journal articles) with the workbook also being provided on CD-ROM to allow the use of hyperlinks for accessing relevant websites and electronic documents. Web based provision was not considered as attractive an option by the ex-students who responded, perhaps because of the cost of internet access. When considering media it is pertinent however that the success of distance learning is largely related to the management of the teaching and learning experience rather than the media of delivery.

Provision of field courses and practical sessions was considered important for certain modules and also all of those ex-students that responded in the market survey wanted residential sessions as part of the course. There are three residential sessions through the course and examinations and tutorials are also scheduled within these periods.

A crucial aspect of any distance learning course, if student retention is to be maximised, is the provision of quality academic and administrative support. Students studying by distance learning will feel more isolated than those undertaking campus-based courses and also many have the additional pressures of work and family life to contend with in addition to the demands of the course. Telephone tutorials are arranged at a set time every week for the module that the students are studying and they can also telephone or e-mail at other times.

Administrative support is provided by a research assistant and a course administrator. The research assistant maintains the website and an on-line bulletin board and is responsible for electronic media and materials. The bulletin board allows students to have a general forum for discussion about the course. The course administrator is responsible for all other activities excluding those that are purely academic.

The university has also provided library support to distance learning students, enabling them to access any book within the university's libraries. The library catalogue is on-line which

allows it to be viewed on the internet. This support has yielded benefits with student retention being higher than predicted. Of the 48 students that enrolled in the first year, only 2 had withdrawn and 7 had intercalated by the end of the first year.

Lessons learned

There were few difficulties with the functioning of the course during its first year, largely due to the careful planning prior to its launch. However an aspect that few appreciated was the time required to write high quality learning material, despite five of the six modules being already offered on the campus. This was a major cost, although such materials were also valuable resources for the campus-based versions of the modules. It is crucial that any organisation embarking on developing distance-learning provision budgets sufficient time and resources to make the venture a success. The printing of the paper-based materials was also time consuming and expensive, yet they are part of the student's perceptions of the quality and value of the course. Providing all materials as electronic files that can be downloaded would reduce costs but also possibly the value for money and quality as perceived by the student.

The delay between providing feedback must be short and the feedback itself must be clear and comprehensive, especially for the initial assignments. Many of our distance-learning students have been away from formal education for many years and require reassurance and to obtain an idea of the rigour of marking, which is higher than for a final year HND.

Before the launch of the course consideration was given to the chronological sequence of the modules. It is daunting re-entering higher education, particularly through distance-learning and it was decided that the first module should be advanced silviculture, a subject in which all forestry professionals have some background. This decision proved wise as students found it easier to begin by studying a familiar topic while learning the discipline and learning techniques associated with learning at a distance.

Future developments

Given the financial and other difficulties involved in undertaking full-time campus-based studies there is considerable potential for the growth of distance learning courses in higher education and in other areas of forestry education.

Specific modules within the programmes at the NSF have potential as part of a programme of continuous professional development (CPD). The GIS module is already endorsed by the Institute of Chartered Foresters as an element of their CPD programme. In addition, some of the modules in courses provided by the NSF could be converted into general interest courses. There is considerable public interest in woodlands, for example, the Woodland Trust's membership has increased by 60% over the last two years to over 100,000. It is likely therefore that a general interest course on woodlands would have a market.

Also the use of distance



Distance-learning students on a practical at Whinlatter Forest, Cumbria.

learning modules would allow students at other campuses at the University to study forestry modules. The NSF is currently preparing a tropical forestry module for provision via a web-based media. This would allow students based at the Preston Campus studying subjects such as geography, environmental management or biology to take this module as an option, without attending at the Cumbria Campus, where the NSF is located.

Conclusion

Distance learning offers considerable potential for education and training in forestry, both in purely distance learning courses and also as an additional pathway for learning in campus-based courses. The NSF's top up degree has proven a success both in terms of student numbers, retention and satisfaction, largely due to careful planning, support structures and in the most part the use of paper-based learning materials.

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Andrew Leslie joined the staff of the National School of Forestry in 1999. His interests lie in the silviculture of natural and plantation forests, the sustainable management of tropical moist forests and the opportunities and constraints for forest development in general. He has worked mainly overseas on forestry development projects, as a forest researcher and in project management in countries as diverse as Somalia and Vanuatu.

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