

Forestry in further and higher education

CONFOR RESPONSE TO SCOTTISH FUNDING COUNCIL CALL FOR EVIDENCE

Introduction

Confor is the not-for-profit organisation for sustainable forestry and wood-using businesses in the UK. We have more than 1,500 member companies, representing the whole forestry and wood supply chain. Confor focuses on the strategic issues that are vital to the success and sustainable future of the sector. These include helping to build the market for wood and forest products, creating a supportive policy environment and helping members to become more competitive and successful.

This paper responds to the relevant question in the [SFC Call for Evidence](#) on coherent provision and sustainability in further and higher education.

Summary

- **Training a forestry and timber workforce is of critical strategic importance to delivering Scotland's ambitions for a green recovery and zero-carbon economy.**
- **FE and HE courses are inadequate to meet these needs, and are under threat due to the costly nature of training which at present is subsidised by the training institution.**
- **It is essential that the SFC review results in a funding framework which supports training, skills, and course development in forestry and wood.**

How can SFC, alongside government and other enterprise, skills and education-focused agencies, best support colleges, universities and specialist institutions to make their full contribution to Scotland's inclusive, green and education-led recovery?

A key economic sector

Forestry and wood-based industries are a crucial sector of the Scottish economy, worth around £1bn per year. It is a major employer, particularly in rural areas, of around 25,000 people.

It is a growing sector, at the heart of measures to address carbon reduction and the climate emergency, and delivering other natural capital benefits alongside a healthy economy.

It is an innovative sector. Improving nursery stock, more sophisticated silviculture, smarter machines, developing wood science all enable forestry and timber to utilise land more effectively, and deliver more and higher-value products alongside greater environmental benefits.

Gaps in provision

Growing a skilled workforce is vital for the future of the sector, which at present it is characterised by a relatively high age and a lack of diversity.

Forestry and timber companies already invest substantially in training their own workforce, through apprenticeships, graduate traineeships, internal mentoring and professional development through the Institute of Chartered Foresters. However, this cannot deliver the full range of skills required for the strategic resilience and growth of the sector.

The training of Forest Machine Operators (FMOs) is one example of a gap in provision, as a high proportion of these are self-employed or in microbusinesses, with low capacity for recruitment or training. FMOs are critical to the operation of the sector, undertaking the felling, thinning and harvesting which results in forests being managed and timber delivered to sawmills and processors. UK forestry has been able to draw on FMOs from Europe, but with labour movement uncertain and FMOs more in demand within Europe, the importance of resilience in this highly skilled workforce is critical to the future of the industry.

Overall, if Scotland is to develop a forest and timber economy, it needs a strong national programme to recruit and train talented, enterprising and ambitious entrants to continue to improve our industry.

What is needed to deliver the forestry and wood skills Scotland needs?

At present, the funding environment which has standard rates for delivery of training means forestry and wood courses struggle to compete. They are more expensive to deliver, so universities and colleges must subsidise them from other income. University forestry courses have already closed due to their lack of cost-effectiveness. In the seriously straitened financial circumstances faced by HE and FE providers across Scotland, no forestry course can consider its future to be safe.

Forest Machine Operator training is particularly costly: it involves expensive equipment, and can only be taught practically in small groups, and it has complex Health and Safety considerations. At present universities have to subsidise these courses.

Moreover, there is no funding under the present structure for developing new courses. The maturing forestry and timber sector in Scotland needs new courses developed, such as wood science and timber in construction.

The review must ensure that adequate resources are designated to ensure forestry and wood courses at FE and HE level are protected, developed, and promoted.