

Research and Exchange Post Mobility Output 1: Project Overview

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Introduction

Forests world-wide make a fundamental contribution to environmental, social and economic objectives in what is recognized as a dynamic and increasingly uncertain world. Given the multiple contributions associated with forests, ensuring sustainable forests for the future requires approaches to forest management to recognise the following: prevalence of competing conceptualisations and expectations of forestry; varied interest groups; and the preparedness of forestry professionals to navigate a complex landscape. Against this background, three closely related themes have been the subject of much debate in many countries of the Global North: (i) declining student recruitment (ii) skill shortages; and (iii) how to facilitate current and future forestry professionals to navigate multiple and potentially conflicting roles, goals and sectoral interests. Public policy intervention has a critical role to play in addressing these challenges. However, policy development and intervention is contingent on institutional (e.g. governance, regulations, etc.) frameworks, socio-economic, cultural and political interests and appropriately equipped professionals, which international comparisons are particularly well suited to elucidate by exposing taken for granted assumptions.

This report provides a brief preliminary overview of research¹ undertaken during a three month mobility period between May – August 2017 hosted by Oregon State University (OSU) and funded by the RPLC, Research and Exchange Network and the University of the Highlands and Islands – Inverness College.

Research Aims

The aims of the three month mobility in Oregon were:

- (i) To develop an understanding of current forestry professionals' working realities to inform how professional educational and recruitment might contribute to ensuring effective policy making and policy implementation
- (ii) To compare the results from Oregon with findings based on research undertaken in Britain².

¹ A more detailed analysis of the data will be undertaken after I have submitted my PhD in July 2018.

² This is the focus of a larger study undertaken as part of my PhD in the UK, funded by The Forestry Commission and the Scottish Forestry Trust, based at the University of the Highlands and Islands, Inverness College, Scotland. The fieldwork took place between November 2014- October 2017 and I am at the stage of drafting my thesis which is due to be submitted at the end of July 2018.

Methods

The data collection and participant sampling and recruitment methods for the Oregon-based study drew on methods used in my PhD research. Purposive sampling was employed to achieve a diversity of forest interests and sectors and suitable groups were identified with the help of OSU staff. An initial literature review was conducted which further informed the sampling process. OSU ethics approval was obtained prior to participant recruitment. Prospective participants were identified using official directories and online resources and were contacted via email. In total, eight interviews were conducted which lasted between 45 to 75 minutes. An interview guide adapted from the British study was used for the interviews.

The audio recorded interviews will be transcribed verbatim and coded using a qualitative research software package (QSR NVivo). The coding framework will resemble the coding structure established for the British study with modifications and adaptations in accordance with contextual, structural, social, and cultural differences between the two study regions. The data will be subsequently analysed and compared to the Scottish data set.

Preliminary Findings³

The two study regions presented distinct social, environmental and political contexts. Interviewees referred to marked differences in for example landownership patterns, historical contexts, landscape features, and forest governance and policy structures. Further, size and structure of forest related economies varied considerably. Despite the fundamental differences of the two study regions, there were similarities in the roles forestry professionals performed within society with transferable implications between both contexts.

Job roles in both study regions were described as including a whole range of management, collaboration, communication and education tasks. Many policies forestry professionals referenced reflected a change of values ascribed to forests within society. These were apparent in, for example, the creation of Forest Collaboratives in Oregon and the community forestry movement in Scotland which both had an impact on forest governance. As a result, participants in both contexts described that their day-to-day work included collaboration with and consultation of a broad range of stakeholders. The historic contexts of both study regions point towards long standing conflicts between various land use communities. These conflicts between competing land use communities has led to an increased demand for mediation, communication and problem solving skills of forestry staff. Forestry professionals from both study regions described their working realities as largely influenced by policy aspirations aiming to broaden stakeholder participation in decision making related to land use and forests in particular. Further, overall job merits were regarded as directly reflecting diversified policy aspirations with regards to forest use and the roles forests are expected to perform for society but also with a view to facilitating adaptation to and mitigation of climate change and related environmental consequences.

Understanding how policy shapes professionals working realities can be a useful tool to identify unforeseen policy impacts on society and the environment. Further, the capacity to respond to unforeseen changes in society and environment can be increased by fostering communication between diverse forestry professionals and policy makers. Lessons learned can also be fed back to education providers and help to facilitate a dialogue between professional, policy and education communities which is currently missing.

³ The data for this research exchange is not yet analysed (see footnote 2). However an in-depth report will be prepared, outlining recommendations on future policy making, implementation and areas of research later in 2018