Professional forestry education in Canada

Studying forestry in Canada could be a life-changing experience, reports Edward Wilson.

Taking the opportunity to study overseas is one way to stand out from the crowd and gain a fresh perspective on the world of forestry.

This article considers educational opportunities in Canada, home of not only a vast forestry sector, but also some of the most exciting, academically challenging and prestigious forestry schools. With a good number of graduates of Canadian forestry schools professional members of the Institute of Chartered Foresters, it is clearly possible to ‘go west’ and then make a successful return to full-time practice in the UK.

Overview

A wide variety of forestry courses are offered, both undergraduate and postgraduate, at universities across Canada. The forestry schools at the University of Toronto, University of British Columbia (Vancouver) and the University of Alberta (Edmonton) form unitary faculties, or departments, within top-tier international universities, located in major metropolitan regions. In contrast, the universities in Thunder Bay, ON (Lakehead University), Edmonton, NB (University of Alberta) and Prince George, BC (University of Northern British Columbia) are situated in the heartlands of the forest products industry, and provide direct access to the forest for training and research.

Others, such as l’Université Laval (Québec, PQ) and the University of New Brunswick (UNB, Fredericton, NB), date from the 17th and 18th centuries. In the case of UNB, founded in 1785, only six universities in the UK (Oxford, Cambridge and the four ancient universities of Scotland) are older, debunking the myth that Canada has no history.

All of Canada’s professional forestry schools are research-led and offer superb field and lab facilities, with strong links to the forestry and conservation sectors. Many of Canada’s forestry professors are global leaders in their fields, and are well supported by both federal and provincial governments, and by the forestry sector. All faculties incorporate the latest teaching and technologies in forest management, conservation and biological sciences; many are also recognised as centres of wood technology, chemistry, design and engineering.

Undergraduate courses

Traditionally, few UK students have consid-
a significant course load, with a solid grounding in research methods, statistics, bioethics and advanced specialist topics, as in the US.

Also, Canadian doctoral degrees include a "comprehensive", approximately half-way through, which is a rigorous oral examination by a panel of professors. This encourages breadth and depth of knowledge in the forest sciences. Once over this hurdle, candidates are able to focus on their research project and thesis. While it might appear daunting, it is very common for Canadian postgraduates to finish with a solid list of research papers already published, or in press. Undeniably, this gives a significant advantage in the job market!

**Postgraduate funding**

Checking funding and application deadlines will be priorities for anyone planning to study in Canada. It is also important to make early contact with a prospective supervisor.

Postgraduate studies in Canada are typically longer than in the UK, but most students are supported by scholarships/fellowships, or employed by their supervisor as research assistants. Another potential source of funds is a teaching assistantship, designed to support a professor in undergraduate teaching, demonstrating and marking papers: invaluable experience for anyone considering an academic career.

Admission usually goes with a minimum package of guaranteed funding. In recent years, various prestigious awards have been available, the most generous being the Future Forests Fellowship at UBC, valued at $60,000 CND per year, for a four-year programme. Most are not so well resourced, but will cover fees and subsistence. With a TA position and additional support from their supervisor, most postgraduates enjoy a reasonable standard of living and manage an annual visit home.

The best known UK funding is the Commonwealth Scholarship Programme: highly competitive and open to candidates across all fields of study.

**Final thoughts**

Regardless of the school, applications for study can be competitive and require evidence of a commitment to excellence. This should not be a deterrent to the dedicated and enthusiastic student. Study at a Canadian forestry school includes not only a rich academic experience, but all the excitement of meeting new people and living in a new culture. Depending on the region you choose, you will have plenty of opportunity to develop your spirit of adventure, outdoor skills and sports. You will never be far from Canada’s truly awesome lakes, woods and trees.

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