

# What exactly do we expect of our forestry graduates today?

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I had somewhat mixed views when I recently accepted an invitation to be a Visiting Industry Fellow at the NZ School of Forestry, University of Canterbury. Although it was great to be able to mingle with the current crop of students and have “earnest” discussions with staff members, I was a little uneasy about the topic of my lecture to the Year 3 and 4 students - *What Industry Expects of Forestry Graduates*. As a person who has been in the industry for the best part of 30 years, it was assumed I would know exactly what industry’s requirements of forestry graduates would be.

However, on reflection I found the topic threw up some interesting issues that I think need to be discussed not only with the graduating students, but also with the wider membership of the profession of forestry.

When looking at the Supply and Demand dynamics for the employment of forestry graduates in New Zealand, one is always confronted by the interesting direct relationship between the numbers of students enrolling in forestry courses and the general public perception of the health of the forestry industry in New Zealand. Graduate numbers with the B.For.Sc. degree from the NZ School of Forestry show this boom or bust pattern with a 4-5 year lag effect. Currently enrolments at the School are in a recovery phase following a low of 13 B.For.Sc. graduates in 2003 resulting from the negative outlook for the industry associated with the Asian crisis in 1998/99. The need to address the poor image of forestry as a career option for young people in New Zealand is recognised by many in the industry, and it is heartening to see planned activities being implemented in some regions targeting this specific issue. It is however a national issue, and the recent research commissioned by Forest Industries Training on perceptions of the forest industry for employment opportunities will hopefully result in enhanced communications to target groups throughout the country. Any upside from these activities should result in improved enrolments on forestry courses.

Another issue that crops up is the change in forest management emphasis over the last 20 years, from a reliance on the technical science of forest ecosystems and the economics of forest production, to a more holistic view incorporating environmental and social factors as well. It is recognised that the multiple dimensions involved in resource stewardship require a shift away from

traditional, single-discipline approaches to one that integrates knowledge from the ecological, economic and social sciences. Over this same period, the nature of forestry employment has become more diverse, often associated with small enterprises, with increased opportunities available in the consultancy, environmental and processing sectors.

This is a global phenomenon and many traditional forestry university courses worldwide have consequently been significantly under-subscribed. In response, a range of new and applied courses have been developed by universities under the banner of Environmental Science and Resource Management with majors or Masters specialisation in forestry. Our New Zealand School has, I think, quite rightly resisted such radical change, but has over time made significant changes to the content of the B.For.Sc. programme; introduced concurrent degree options (eg. B.For.Sc./B.Com) and the IPENZ accredited B.E (Forestry) degree, and actively contributes to the Environmental Science degrees offered by the University of Canterbury.

To highlight these changes to the students I outlined my own career in forestry and contrasted that with the vastly different employment scenarios facing them today.

I took the opportunity whilst interfacing with the students to carry out a little research myself and obtained written responses to the question *What were the key motivating factors for you to choose to study toward a degree in forestry?* The top tier responses were:

- to be part of a growth industry with positive career options;
- the outdoor/indoor work environment; and
- an applied science degree.

Second tier responses were:

- to be part of a primary industry;
- will lead to a job that makes good money;
- recommended by family members; and
- provides overseas work and travel options.

This then led to the key question of *What does industry expect of forestry graduates?* My initial response to the students was “*Superman*” - indicating a tendency for employers to have an over-expectation of young graduates. However, I modified this with my observation that a number of forest owners were now introducing graduate

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