

Enterprise and Learning Committee

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Skills shortages in the environment charity sector - a contribution from RSPB Cymru

RSPB Cymru is grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's inquiry into the economic contribution of higher education.

The RSPB is the nature conservation charity specialising in birds and their habitats. Its operations in Wales, RSPB Cymru, have been running for over 90 years. From humble beginnings the organisation has expanded as membership support has grown. Today, in Wales, the RSPB employs between 130 and 150 staff, most of whom are in full time continuous employment (and 1700 across the UK).

Nature conservation requires staff, and the RSPB in Wales is like any other SME business, subject to all the pressures in the jobs/skills market. In the last 10 years, the operation in Wales has expanded considerably, with an approximate doubling of the staff. This, as well as staff turn-over, has led to a major annual recruitment programme to fill the vacancies. Finding the potential employees with the right skills and training for the jobs available has been a significant challenge, and one that has become more difficult than hitherto.

Our contribution has also been assisted by informal comments from the National Trust, the Butterfly Conservation Society and the Cardiff School of Biosciences which we have included to broaden our submission.

We hope that this contribution will inform the Committee's deliberations, especially in respect of the contribution that HEIs can make to the skills agenda and the collaboration with employers' organisations, Sector Skills Councils and trade unions, and whether they are meeting the needs of businesses.

Supporting/Background detail

The RSPB, like other environmental charities in Wales, requires staff for jobs that encompass a wide range of skills, eg from administrators, finance, land agency, media and education specialists to reserve managers, ecologists and biologists. The greatest difficulty in recruiting is to those posts that require ecological knowledge, either in general or in depth, in the form of land management skills including knowledge of farming, and of wildlife of all taxonomic (ie species) groups, but especially in the RSPB's case birds. Two decades ago, there was a significant number of graduates in the ecological fields, sometimes on Manpower Services Commission schemes, who were recruited to organisations such as the RSPB. These individuals had a knowledge and skill set based on their formal education, and on their subsequent work experience, that made them well suited for some of the posts described above. That supply has largely disappeared.

Butterfly Conservation Society has not experienced the same difficulty in recruitment, perhaps by virtue of the smaller numbers required, but as with the RSPB would struggle if Welsh was an essential requirement of the post.

There is a widely reported lack of taxonomic/identification skills in the environmental sector. This needs to be addressed earlier (during GCSE/A levels) to help HEI. The sector should look at links to other organisations (eg the intensive courses offered by Field Studies Council) so students could select from a range of taxa (not just botany, though that would be a start!).

The supply of suitably qualified graduates is also shrinking. In Wales, there has been a 50% drop in graduates in ecology from Cardiff School of Biosciences between 1995-7 and the present, and at the same time the proportion of students electing to take an extra professional training year for work experience has dropped from around 70% to 40%. Over the same period the number of graduates in zoology (studies of behaviour or veterinary biology for example) has increased, but such graduates rarely enter the environmental charity job market.

The scarcity of some skill sets is likely to worsen as demographic changes are predicted to lead to fewer children of HEI age by 2020.

We are not aware of what HEIs have done to engage with the market needs of the environmental charity sector. From experiences to date we have only been approached by individual lecturers who either have an interest in birds or butterflies and/or nature conservation, or have worked with us, while studying, as volunteers or on research projects. These are mainly from HEIs outside Wales. Elsewhere in the UK, for example, the RSPB has supported PhD students undertaking studies of relevance to our work, but this has not happened in Wales.

The Butterfly Conservation Society has tried to provide a student placement but has found HEI bureaucracy an impediment, and the RSPB has not attempted to do so recently. There seems to be a lack of understanding of how the environmental charity sector works, ie a lack of understanding of the business need. There is also a lack of flexibility with timing within the academic year eg undergraduate projects in February and March restricts opportunities for students to engage in applied ecological projects (as few birds are breeding then, and few butterflies are flying).

The National Trust has undertaken vocational training at its properties with several professional placements from vocational courses from various universities, but the placements generally do not stay long enough to get significant value from it.

There is a shortage of resource within the sector itself to manage, educate, train and coach placements, which itself is a barrier to increasing involvement.

There is a sense that HEI is even more driven by need to attract funding than the charity sector, hence an inbuilt disincentive to work with a sector that cannot provide major funding. This leads to the need for the HEI to work with the environmental charity sector on grant applications.

Another barrier to our engagement is that the quality assurance requirements make it difficult for voluntary organisations to act on their own - most of the organisations do not have the capacity to deal with the administration burden (whereas Colleges are set up for it).

Summary / Recommendations

The environmental charity sector is an expanding employment sector in Wales, and is likely to continue to provide employment particularly in rural areas with a specific set of skills needs.

There is currently a significant skill shortage, particularly for ecological skills and specific knowledge of species groups, which is part of a worsening trend

The education sector generally could work better with these organisations to provide a better skilled workforce

Parts of the way the current arrangements with the HEI sector work do not deliver the best outcomes, and miss opportunities to do more.

Dr Tim Stowe, Director RSPB