# FIEPF Student Accounts

## Confor Policy Conference | Thursday 8 December 2022 | QE2 Centre, Westminster

Students on forestry and land-related courses attended Confor’s London policy conference thanks to generous support from the Forest Industries Education & Provident Fund.

The seven students had their travel expenses and entrance to the conference - Timber! Why The UK Need The Wood and the Trees - paid for by the Fund.

They were all asked to summarise how they benefited from attending the event. These are their responses.

### Dara Hunter Blair, Harper Adams University

This year’s CONFOR conference was a really positive experience. Having grown up on an estate in southwest Scotland with a father who is a professional forester, I have attended my fair share of Royal Scottish Forestry Society, CONFOR and Scotland’s Finest Woods events. At these events I have experienced the views and demands of foresters, both in terms of policy and practice, the need for more planting, the need for better understanding of the sector, and the need for more pragmatic and practical government support.

It is encouraging to see action finally being taken on some of these policies as the full understanding of the task the forestry sector faces on the road to net zero starts to be addressed. As a student of Land and Property Management at Harper Adams University and someone who is currently on placement as an assistant estates surveyor with the Duchy of Lancaster, I can clearly see the need for forestry to play a part in any private estate’s portfolio. The consensus at this year’s conference of the need for more coniferous commercial plantations, particularly in England, has given a student like me the confidence that there is a future in forestry that will encourage private landowners to invest in new planting schemes capable of delivering long-term returns. The recent focus on broadleaved mixed plantations may have discouraged some landowners from investing in woodlands in recent years, with many seeing the continued management of woodlands as an ongoing cost to the estate which offered little or no net benefit.

I would like to thank CONFOR for the opportunity to attend this year’s conference through support from the Forest Industries Education & Provident Fund. This event has enabled me to have a greater understanding of the sector and provided an excellent opportunity to make connections in the industry.

### Katy Faulkner, University of Warwick

As a current Soil Science PhD student at the University of Warwick, I was fortunate to receive a student award from the Forest Industries Education & Provident Fund which enabled me to attend the Confor Policy Conference 2022 held in Westminster, London. This was an excellent opportunity to meet Confor members, discuss important issues related to UK forestry, and to learn more about the forest industry.

As I previously completed a doctoral placement within the Welsh Government Forestry Policy team, I have a strong interest in issues related to tree planting, woodland creation, and the timber industry. Hearing more about the progress made in overcoming the challenges related to these areas was really encouraging and interesting. A particular highlight of the conference was the introductory talk from current Forestry Minister Trudy Harrison MP which offered promising pledges on future UK tree planting. The wide range of presentations offered at the conference provided an excellent overview of the drivers of tree planting; considering ecological, community engagement, and financial aspects.

Attending this conference was incredibly useful for my career development, as I am close to completion of my PhD studies and hope to continue my career within forestry. I am very grateful towards Confor for the opportunity to attend this conference, and to all the forestry and timber professionals I had such insightful conversations with.

### Liam Galashan, University of Cumbria

As a student from the University of Cumbria, Ambleside, I was delighted to attend the Confor policy conference for pressures facing the forestry industry within the UK. Studying forest policy as part of a Forestry Management module, I was excited to see not only governmental organisations such as Natural England, but also many faces from NGO’s like the RSPB and independent landowners.

With ‘Net Zero’ targets by 2050 and 80% timber imports being hot topics for the conference, it was refreshing to see most organisations agreeing on solutions for the ambitious targets the UK has been set. Previously opposing parties have now come together to meet the highly challenged 30,000 trees per year by 2024. This target has fallen short over the recent years due to policy blocking new woodland creation for landowners. and land use pressures facing forestry and agriculture. As an advocate for Agroforestry, the bridges that are slowly being built between landowners is encouraging. CEO Richard Stanford from the Forestry Commission has admitted failure in application processes, however as a newly appointed CEO, he is actively solving these issues with results already being positive. Although the debate around Grey Squirrels has been a sour topic amongst some attendees, it is incredibly important that the conversation is being had.

Creating a conference around these topics has opened more discussion so that we can work together to bring to life the outreaching targets. The issues on land use pressures and debates around this has inspirited my studies and will almost certainly steer my career path towards alleviating the crisis facing the UK in this current political climate.

### Christopher Moodie, University of Cumbria

As a second year Forestry student from the University of Cumbria the question “Why the UK needs the wood and the trees?” is an extremely pertinent one. To try and answer this question Confor brought together a very exciting and balanced panel of key speakers. Friends of the Earth, the Forestry Commission, Lords and MP’s and the Forestry Minister herself took the stage to try and answer it and thanks to the generous grant from the Forest Industries Education Provident Fund I was present in Westminster to hear the expert’s thoughts first hand.

I would need a “double page spread” in the next issue of Forestry & Timber News to do any review of what I personally took away from the conference justice but the main themes were current and relevant. The passion with which the key speakers spoke and their willingness to engage with probing and sometimes quite difficult questions from their audience was admirable.

The access I was afforded to such knowledgeable members of the sector was invaluable. I loved chit chatting during the breaks with so many interesting Confor members eager to share advice and support and even the odd email or phone number. I felt more inspired than I did when I took the decision to leave my successful career as a wine manger to study a Forestry degree in the first place.

I left certain to my core that whilst we strive to overcome difficult economic and environmental crisis in the current geopolitical world the forestry sector has a voice, a loud one! A voice that we must use to extol the virtues of the industry and its many dedicated practitioners of which I hope to become one in the not too distant future.

Thank you Confor!

### Benedict Walker, Bangor University

Firstly, I would like to extend my gratitude to Confor for the opportunity to attend this conference, it’s the first time I have been to a conference and found it highly engaging and interesting and look forward to attending some more of this event held by Confor in the future.

The event was well attended by a good mix of different angles from the forestry world, which I feel highly important to discussions such as this. From private estates, to the RSBP, Natural England, the Woodland Trust, and Green Peace, to DEFRA, there seemed to be a representative from many different areas of the industry. This is essential for effective talks and decision making surrounding the direction in which forestry and woodland management in the UK is going. I feel everyone’s voices should be heard and reflected on for a well-rounded plan to be made.

One of the major talking points/ concerns during this conference seemed to be the rate of tree planting in regard to England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Irelands Forest Strategies. As at current projections we will not reach the targets set by the government. This being a concern for both the conservation and productive forestry sectors, as this may lead to lower levels of wood for both purposes in the future. This also links into one of my main take aways, which is why are these two sectors not being linked? We have evidence showing timber can be produced to satisfy the needs of both the conservation and productive sectors, why not implement more woodland management of this type? And take inspiration from some countries on the continent.

Overall, I have found myself thinking over the conference since, and it was a delight to meet some of my fellow foresters.The event will focus on the strong policy drivers for enhanced planting and wood use, and the barriers holding back the level of progress that our economy and environment needs. It will also examine how to recreate a wood culture in the United Kingdom, and highlight Confor's proactive work with communities, and in changing attitudes towards forestry.

### Olivia Williams-Stokes, Bangor University

My experience at the Confor conference was an insight into the economic and political management side of forestry.

The overall experience of the conference felt well managed with many breaks allowing for discussion of what had just been presented by the speakers.

Studying forestry has been great, however, I have noticed a lack of women in this sector, it was nice to see a handful of female speakers, especially Trudy Harrison.

The forestry minister has qualities I wish more ministers would possess, the ability to really listen and take on advice from the citizens who are affected by decisions made in parliament. Hopefully laws in relation to land referencing change to give easier permission for forests to be planted in the UK, I am confident the minister will make action on this as she seemed confident in her promises.

I have always wished to own my own nursery growing and selling garden trees. Being able to speak to business owners of tree nursery’s, put into perspective the achievability of this goal, allowing me to start thinking about what steps I can take now to help me achieve this in the future.

There was a general agreement that forestry should be understood as a form similar to agriculture, conifer trees planted in stands to produce timber may seem negative however, it is just like a monoculture of crop grown over a field. One speaker stressed that conifer trees in plantations take in more carbon than native woodlands. This statement scientifically may not be true as we have not compared the amount of carbon stored in the pedosphere (soil) via roots of older trees. This gave me a great hypothesis ‘native forests lock more carbon in the pedosphere than plantations’ which I have been inspired to answer in my dissertation.

### Rowena Young, Bangor University

*Timber!* marked something of a watershed for commercial forestry. Emerging from a long and fractious episode with the environmental movement, a new consensus has broken out.

Natural and semi-natural woodland is the tool of choice for preserving native species, enhancing and expanding biodiverse habitat. But the plantations have it when it comes to tackling the climate emergency. Net zero waits for no bryophyte and with the clock ticking, only a rapid expansion of fast-growing conifers can sequester carbon in time to hit targets.

In a turn-about-face, NGOs are among the strongest advocates to say both are needed.

For the commercial sector, the effect is galvanising. Developing pace is the necessary touchstone given timber production is forecast to drop out just as demand rockets. The minister with responsibility for trees and forestry grasps the opportunity.

If the zeal is also reminiscent of the drive that led to expansion this time last century, and the problems and concerns the sector is only now overcoming, it is important to recognise a renewed licence to operate stems from lessons learned.

The penny has dropped that relying on imports is a fool’s game. So too, that transforming demand for circular products is critical to extending the carbon sequestration cycle, and net gain where they replace energy-intensive concrete and the like. The days of biomass-as-fuel are numbered. Timber palettes will surely attract growing scrutiny.

Meanwhile, efforts to design and manage landscapes and woodland for improved social and environmental outcomes is continual work-in-progress.

It would have been good to hear more about a growing focus in research on what it will take to sustain performance and productivity in the face of a changing climate and already-compromised ecosystems. More about what it will take to negotiate a wider mandate to challenge current land use and bring forestry’s working landscapes to regions less habituated to them. The decolonisation debate was also absent.

Perhaps these were inevitable casualties to a powerful call to action.

But before the celebrations are over, it pays to reflect on what’s enabled forestry to take its place in the vanguard of climate and economic recovery.

Would there be the appetite to increase plantation forestry were we not in the middle of a crisis of our own making? Probably not. Can we envisage a time when the stocks and flows through broadleaf and mixed woodland play a greater part in fulfilling needs and regulating environments? You have to be an optimist, and believe the stars can align among so many other dependencies to do so, but then forestry – here and abroad - is nothing if not a long game.

Maintaining capacity to respond to changing contexts will, paradoxically, be key to realising forestry’s urgent potential. It will be the sector’s demonstrable values, principles and behaviours, not its silver bullets, that guard against the return of hubris and prevent it repeating past errors that cast shadows over generations.

As the to-do lists are drawn up, the renewal of culture and governance deserve to be among them.