

## Expanding Horizons: Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarships

### Growing Partnerships for Sustainable Management of Tropical Forests

Bangor University has been offering a Master's Degree in Tropical Forestry as a part-time, distance learning course since 2000. The Commonwealth Scholarship Commission has funded a total of 99 Scholars to study for this course since 2013.

The programme aims to provide students with detailed knowledge and expertise that are directly relevant to the work of a modern forest manager and those working in associated disciplines, focusing on scientific, academic, and practical principles which underpin forest management, conservation, ecosystem function and livelihoods. The part-time nature of the MSc enables students to study alongside other work or personal commitments.



Bangor University.

As part of the review into the outcomes and impact of the Commonwealth Distance Learning Programme, in-depth interviews were conducted with Dr James Walmsley, Senior Lecturer in Forestry at Bangor University, Dr Ernest Foli, Principal Research Scientist at the Forestry Research Institute of Ghana (which partnered with Bangor University in delivering the Distance Learning programme), Edwin Hara, a 2019 Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholar and Dan Ndalowa, the Scholar's Employer at the Malawi College for Forestry and Wildlife. They all shared their experiences of participating in the Commonwealth Distance Learning Programme.

#### Motivations and Expectations for Participating in the Distance Learning Programme

Explaining the motivations for participating in the programme from the perspective of the UK-based university provider, Dr Walmsley highlighted the desire of specific members of staff at Bangor University to improve student learning and exposure through offering an online, part-time degree programme to people who would otherwise never have the opportunity to study at postgraduate level. He also flagged the importance of engaging an international Partner from the outset who could offer an in-person component to the programme, **'It was motivated by predominantly two members of staff. We had a vision that the distance learning programme should not be entirely at distance. We're seeing that there's still incredible value from having a small, but very immersive and intense face-to-face experience. And running a tropical forestry programme, we didn't think it was defensible to do what we usually do, which is to host study tours in the UK.'**

Speaking on behalf of the Partner institution, Dr Foli agreed that improving student learning and exposure was the prime motivation for the Forestry Research Institute of Ghana to partner with Bangor University in delivering the MSc Tropical Forestry distance learning programme.



Forest tour in Ghana for students and staff from Bangor University in 2019.

In addition, the potential to establish networks and research collaborations, staff development opportunities, and increasing international visibility were all cited as expected benefits of the partnership, **'The motivation stems from our mutual understanding about collaborative research, promoting the exchange of students and of academic and administrative staff and the application of learning and distance learning technologies between the two institutions. For us, it's to establish some visibility internationally and to strengthen our networking with other institutions beyond Ghana. This formed the basis for the MOU with Bangor University and then the DL programme.'**

Meanwhile, Edwin Hara, a Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholar, and his employer Dan Ndalowa, found the programme attractive for different reasons. While Edwin was focused on his career development, he was not well-placed to take time off from his employment and embark on full-time studies to enhance his knowledge and skills in Forestry. Therefore, enrolling on a distance learning course gave him the required flexibility to study and work at the same time. According to Edwin, the prestige of studying at a reputable UK institution was an extra motivation for applying for a Commonwealth Scholarship scholarship for this programme, **'It's the flexibility of the distance learning course. It gives me more time to be at work and at the same time doing my studies and attending to family issues. Also, Bangor is one of the reputable institutions and I thought studying there would be of great value to my personal and professional development.'**

For Dan, the potential to improve the delivery of a similar course at the Malawi College for Forestry and Wildlife based on new knowledge acquired by his employee was a compelling incentive to support Edwin to enrol in the distance learning programme, **'This was an opportunity to hear from the Scholar how the training [at Bangor University] is conducted. Using this we have been able to tailor some coursework material for the forestry and natural resource sector here in Malawi, and to learn how we can conduct our own trainings remotely.'**

## **Origins of the Partnership**

Bangor University and the Forestry Research Institute of Ghana had pre-existing ties that facilitated the formation of the formal partnership to deliver the distance learning programme. Dr Walmsley described how the partnership was formed, **'In 2014, Mark [a colleague at Bangor] and I spent ten days in Ghana meeting with staff at prospective partner organisations as well as inspecting potential facilities, field sites and accommodation. Motivations for working with [a partner in] Ghana included the English language, that it's a relatively**

**small country with a high diversity of tropical forests, and that it is well set up in terms of safety, logistics and travel distances. The Forestry Research Institute in Ghana is experienced in hosting national and international conferences and collaborating with partners from other parts of the world. So, in terms of the CSC, the needs of our Scholars and transparency for all those involved it's been very easy working with them. There's a Memorandum of Understanding between Bangor University and the Forestry Research Institute of Ghana, which recognises the mutual benefit, opportunity, and synergy of working together in the fields of teaching, learning, and research in relation to forestry, tropical forestry, and a commitment on behalf of both institutes to work together to develop those opportunities.'**

Dr Foli added that the formation of the partnership was facilitated by long-standing personal connections maintained by several staff members at his institution, some of whom are Bangor University alumni, **'Before the distance learning programme the relations were on a personal basis, but now it's become more institutionalised. This partnership was stimulated by wanting to participate in the programme, because quite a few of us are alumni from Bangor University and have kept in touch with the staff members there. We now have a Memorandum of Understanding between the two institutions. On that basis we have been organising the summer school for the Master's Degree in Tropical Forestry programme.'**

## **The Role of the Partners in Delivering the Distance Learning Programme**

In delivering the distance learning programme, each institution has specific roles and responsibilities. As the programme coordinator at the Partner institution, Dr Foli organises Scholar activities and facilitates the interaction of students with local staff. This includes organising seminars for Scholars and lecturers from the UK university Provider to promote knowledge exchange.

The vital contributions made by their primary partner, the Forestry Research Institute of Ghana, as well as other partners of Bangor University were emphasised by Dr Walmsley, **'The role of the main partner, the Forestry Research Institute of Ghana, has been on logistics and resources in terms of staffing, academic contributions, facilities in country and providing translation services, intelligence, and access to gatekeepers. Bangor University also has a partnership with Makerere University. This has enabled a Makerere staff member with expertise in academia grounded in the context of tropical forests in Central Africa to join us in Ghana on the study tours.'**





Lunch break (with food sourced from the forest) for Scholars and staff from Bangor University during a Forest tour in Ghana in 2019.

I have been the coordinator from the institutional side, and as per the MOU, our main task has been to organise trips and activities to expose Scholars to the various aspects of tropical forestry and to what goes on in this research institution. Apart from that we support them in the development of their work, the thesis, providing them also with background information as much as possible and encouraging them in the development of the topics and the write-up. We organise seminars at which Scholars, staff from the UK partner, and FORIG [the Forestry Research Institute of Ghana] staff present their work to each other. That kind of exposure has cross-cutting benefits in the sense that everyone involved can exchange research in ways that are meaningful and improves our own understanding of what is going on in both countries.

In terms of individual responsibilities, Dr Walmsley is the primary contact person and is responsible for maintaining and developing the partnership. To effectively deliver the programme, and support Scholar learning, Bangor University created a platform for lecturers to interact with students, and for students to contact and receive support from their research supervisors. The benefits of Commonwealth Scholars having access to this platform were confirmed by Edwin, ‘**First and foremost, the lecturers have created a platform, a facility that allows Scholars to interact with our lecturers at any time and for us the students to interact. This makes learning easy and affordable. We are now doing research dissertations and we have been allocated to supervisors to help us through the process and through the platforms, we are always in touch with our supervisors for help or assistance at any given moment.**’

Dr Walmsley also highlighted that Commonwealth Scholars and Alumni play a pivotal role in supporting the partners to effectively deliver the distance learning programme. Scholars have been instrumental in stimulating collaborations between Partners and their Employers and supporting student tours and networking activities. Dr Walmsley highlighted the benefits of Scholars’ diverse areas of expertise, and the ability of Alumni to mentor new students, promoting knowledge exchange.

Prior to starting their studies with us, all Scholars are already engaged in some way or another with governmental, non-governmental, private sector, and third sector organisations. The extensive expertise and backgrounds of our Scholars provides the basis for an incredibly rich learning experience for all involved. On the 2019 study tour in Ghana, we had one Scholar who was simultaneously a member of staff at the Forestry Research Institute of Ghana who was just finishing his dissertation. He hosted the students at the site where he was doing his dissertation, in collaboration with his employer and with another stakeholder, a butterfly sanctuary. So, the students who hadn’t yet started their dissertation were able to get an insight into what it’s like to engage with that part of the programme and get a sense of just what’s possible.

### Enhancing International Expertise, Networks, and Reputation Through Partnerships

Partnering to deliver the distance learning programme has offered individual and mutual benefits for Providers and Partners. The student study tours and resources provided by the partner in terms of staffing, academic contributions, and facilities and expertise in country were highlighted by Dr Walmsley as important contributions which have facilitated the effective delivery of the programme by Bangor University. The partnership has enhanced academic expertise and created a global network of Alumni, Scholars, other students, and professional experts through which international research collaborations and partnerships have been established. Dr Walmsley highlighted the importance of these international networks, ‘**It’s great for our full-time MSc students to engage with the Distance Learning Scholars who have such diverse expertise and cultural insights to share. We have our own private Forestry at Bangor LinkedIn group, which is open to all current students and alumni.**’

He added that delivering the distance learning programme in partnership with other organisations has also improved the profile and reputation of Bangor University, **'We work with the Forestry Students' Association to host online guest speaker events that are open to all our students. When we've been on the study tours, of course we've engaged with all sorts of different organisations and individuals. Working with organisations like the Forestry Research Institute of Ghana has helped us build our international network as well as raise our profile and reputation.'**

Dr Foli confirmed that the partnership has created a platform for networking opportunities and contributed to capacity building for staff, including those from other local institutions. The visibility of the Forestry Research Institute of Ghana has also increased through its participation in the programme, **'The key benefit has been networking opportunities with other scientists from Bangor University. The association has also provided us with a chance to be visible. Some of our staff have benefited in a sense that they assisted the students with data collection, and that enhanced their own capacity. In addition, the other institutions, especially from Ghana, whose staff are participating in the distance learning programme certainly benefit in that the staff come back with enhanced capacity to do better at their jobs.'**



Students and staff from Bangor University exploring the Tano Boase sacred grove in Ghana, 2019.

## Impact for Scholars, Employers, and their Communities

While studying, Edwin has already started applying the knowledge and skills acquired through the programme to deliver his work tasks more effectively. He has also had opportunities to immediately transfer the knowledge gained from his studies to his local community. To develop his career, he has taken up internships to gain exposure to the work of other organisations, which has been made possible by virtue of being a Commonwealth Scholar, **'Being a lecturer, it always requires one to have more knowledge in the subject matter so that you can teach and deliver better. Studying this programme is helping me to grow academically so that I can execute my day-to-day routine work more effectively. The programme is having enormous impact on my work and profession especially on my ability to transfer knowledge and skills to students. The course work covered so far by Bangor is already making a meaningful contribution to the courses I teach and the knowledge imparted into students will go a long way and benefit the whole country. At the same time, being a master's student, it has opened more opportunities for me so far. I have been exposed and participated as an intern in national forest inventories and in different projects which have allowed me to do the practical part after covering the theory of the course work.'**

Dan, the Scholar's Employer, confirmed that Edwin's expertise relating to the courses that he teaches has improved and he directly transfers the knowledge gained from the distance learning course to his lectures, improving the quality of teaching in their workplace.

He highlighted that with more staff acquiring higher qualifications and gaining exposure to different learning systems would significantly improve the service delivered by the institution in the long-term.

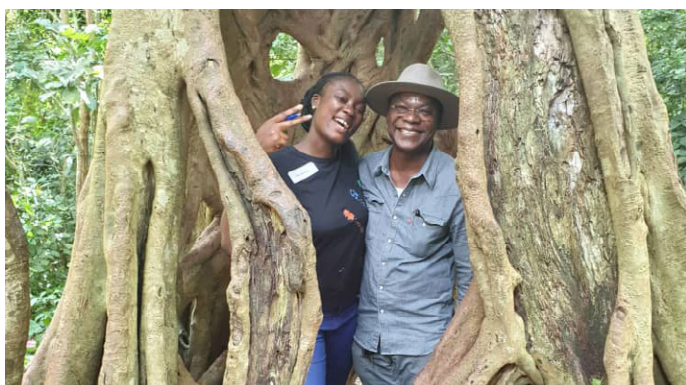
**'I think in the short-term it's a plus to the institution to have an individual just being able to get an upgrade. And that's huge on our part because we're trying to grow and that adds value especially on the qualification side. In the long-term we see ourselves having a group of professionals who have been exposed to various learning systems. Our institution plans to incorporate what Edwin is learning now into the courses we deliver here, which would ultimately make this a better institution in the long-term.'**



To enable the Scholar to smoothly balance his studies alongside his work duties, Dan reduced work tasks for Edwin to create more time for studies when required. He highlighted that he also offered support in the form of resources, such as internet facilities, **'We have given him the liberty to communicate when he notices that the programme's demands are high. Because we're coming from a background where we had a Scholar in the [distance learning] programme who decided to quit. We halved Edwin's tasks so that he has as much time as he can to deal with the programme needs.'** Edwin confirmed the value of the support he has received from his Employer, **'The college, my employer, is taking a good part when it comes to the internet facilities which I access from my office. When I got into the study programme the principal and the teaching staff agreed to remove some of my duties from college plantation where I was attached so that I could now concentrate on the studies and do the teaching only. This allows me to finish my school assignments and tasks on time.'**

## Professional Development and Wider Benefits: Provider and Partner Perspectives

Dr Walmsley and Dr Foli concurred that the distance learning programme exposes the Scholars to diverse expertise and backgrounds, sharpening their technical skills and knowledge as well as their soft skills, essential for collaboration and team building. Dr Walmsley emphasised that the programme also enhances the Scholars' understanding of research practices as they gain exposure to facilities not available at their local institutions.



Dr Foli (right) with a Scholar in roots of a fig tree in Ghana, 2019.

Dr Walmsley also highlighted the benefit to Scholars of being able to immediately apply the skills and knowledge acquired from the studies to work tasks, realising better outputs, and experiencing accelerated professional advancement, **'Since doing the Distance Learning Programme, many of the Scholars have been promoted to senior positions in their organisation. And they are practising and translating much of what they learnt studying with us, into projects and initiatives and policies relating to much of what goes on in their home country in terms of forestry and land use, soil erosion,**

**hydrology, water utilisation, forest regeneration and sustainable livelihoods.'**

Dr Foli confirmed the opportunities for career progression enjoyed by participants of the

Often the Scholars don't have what I'd describe as the fundamentals of research skills, research training, research expertise, understanding of the principles of experimental design, appropriate statistical analysis, how to organise data, what software to use, and how to present that data. We run a module on forest inventory assessment and monitoring, and one of the things about the module is about helping students use open-source software, which allows them to identify, assess and manage forests without leaving their desk.

Commonwealth Distance Learning Programme, **'The Scholars work as technicians in the research institution and taking on the distance learning programme to enhance their capacity means that they progress to become researchers. It benefits them in the sense that it builds their capacity as staff members. The chance to work and study at the same time is an added advantage for the Scholars and without this opportunity they would not study because they wouldn't have the chance to do it full-time.'**

Dr Walmsley added that through research training and mentoring provided by senior research scientists from Bangor, some Scholars have developed expertise in supervising student research projects in their own workplaces, which in turn benefits their employers.

Having a Master's qualification also increases the credibility of Scholars within the workplace, as they are **'more likely to be able to make better decisions for the betterment of the forests and people's livelihood,'** according to Dr Walmsley.

Looking at the longer-term benefits of the programme, beyond the benefits to individuals, Dr Walmsley highlighted a wider contribution to the improvement of the environment and delivering Sustainable Development Goals. He emphasised that by applying the knowledge and skills gained through their studies, Scholars are contributing to raising societal awareness of environmental issues, informing decision-making, policymaking, and the adoption of more sustainable practices to improve the environment and livelihoods, **'We do believe that it's benefitting not just individuals, but also our environment, our forests, our future, and delivering on many of these Sustainable Development Goals. The number of Scholars that we've had, the diversity of professions, backgrounds, employers that they've been based within, cumulatively,**

the long-term impact is, and will be, better-informed decision making, policymaking, more sustainable practices in our forests and tree landscapes across much of the Commonwealth.'

## **Built to Last: The Future of the Partnership**

We learned from Dr Walmsley that the Commonwealth Distance Learning programme has had a positive impact on the establishment of potentially long-term relationships with Scholars and Alumni who contribute to the ongoing strengthening of the partnership, **'We have Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholars who are 'double agents' because they're also embedded in organisations such as the Forestry Research Institute of Ghana, and other institutions in Ghana. So, the partnership gives us an opportunity to work with our 'double agents', to deliver far more than we could ever possibly do if we were working with only one partner, and none of those links existed. The more established we become, the more alumni and stakeholders and partners within these organisations have buy-in and ownership of the partnership.'**

Moreover, having worked with a Partner organisation to deliver the programme, and seen how effectively the Partner delivers the programme activities, Dr Walmsley reported that Bangor University plans to continue collaborating with the Forestry Research Institute of Ghana in delivering the Tropical Forestry distance learning programme, as well as in research and other areas, **'When we were in Ghana in 2019, we had several discussions with research scientists in the Forestry Research Institute of Ghana. Two of my colleagues have developed research proposals with staff [there], one was a Royal Society grant application, and that was successful. When you have partners that you can trust and you know, you're much more able to respond or develop new opportunities on the back of those. We are continuously exploring similar research opportunities with Makerere University in Uganda.'**

Dr Foli also foresees more opportunities to exchange research ideas through collaborations between his institution and Bangor University. He confirmed that the distance learning programme has strengthened his organisation's ties to the UK institution, and to staff in other local institutions involved in the distance learning

programme, **'As an example, the staff for the sister institutions who have been engaged in this programme now work more closely with our staff. I would say that it's strengthened the relationship between staff and the two local institutions, which is positive. Relations with the UK Provider have improved because engaging in the programme offers an opportunity to exchange ideas, research ideas, and to embark on collaborative research programmes.'**

The Forestry Research Institute of Ghana also plans to establish a research centre of excellence and to provide opportunities for postgraduate training locally which will allow staff from both institutions to benefit from exchange of activities and research collaborations.

As envisaged by Dr Foli, this has the potential to create greater opportunities for teaching and learning and expanded involvement of staff in distance learning activities, either as Scholars or in delivery of the programme.

**'We hope we can partner with the UK institution to strengthen our own position to be able to establish the centre of excellence. We have already reached out to the university and got some positive responses. We hope to provide an opportunity for postgraduate training, especially at PhD level, locally. Staff from both institutions will benefit because of the exchange opportunities and scientific collaboration. I can see greater opportunities for teaching and learning and expanded involvement of some of our staff. Also, opportunities for some of the staff to participate in the programme and better exchanges in terms of scientific collaboration between our team and the UK partners, especially through joint publications and research collaborations, because much is to do with research.'**

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