



A degree of success

James Hutchinson, an Assistant at Fairhaven Golf Club, in Lytham St Annes, describes how he went from someone who had not studied for 20 years to the proud holder of a Foundation Degree in Sportsturf Science

“ At the time of writing I have just completed three years of study for an on-line degree in Sportsturf Science and I am well chuffed. In fact I am over the moon!

The Foundation Degree in Sportsturf (on-line) is designed to enable students to achieve a vocational Higher Education qualification through part – time study at a distance from Myerscough College. For those employed in the sportsturf industry traditional modes of attendance are not possible and this qualification will help to overcome this barrier and enable sports turf professionals to take that next step



Ransomes Jacobsen has provided grants to the value of £134,320 to 120 grateful BIGGA members through the Scholarship Fund programme since 2002 and the company has expressed its commitment to continuing its support to students studying Higher Education courses.

in their career. If you are seeking to develop your skills and knowledge in sports turf provision and management and want to progress to more senior positions at the many prestigious sporting venues around the world this is the course for you.

These words are Myerscough’s description of the course and were among the first to sway my decision to step up to the computer table and plunge head first into on-line learning.

In all honesty, I had not studied for around 20 years and I initially found it difficult to shift my brain into learning mode. There were times during the first few months when I thought to myself “Why am I putting myself and my family

through this?”, while on one memorable occasion I can remember being face down on the keyboard, writing a long line of `|||||` with my face! I can also remember asking a question via MOLLNET (Myerscough On Line Learning Network) regarding plant growth at around 1.15am, and receiving an instant reply. This meant that other people were also awake and studying, so I wasn’t alone in my geekyness! However, the highs far outweighed the lows and soon enough I was developing graphs and curves in an Excel document with consummate ease.

The Foundation Degree is made up of 14 modules consisting of subjects such as: plant cell biology;

soil science and ecology, all of which I have found to be most useful in my professional and personal life and they have all altered the way I now look at grass growth and golf course management. In fact, last year I was awarded the title of Conservation Greenkeeper of the Year and did my learning in the ecology module help to secure this title? You bet it did. Along with the title came a trip to the US to study one or two top end golf courses such as Isleworth and the Nick Faldo-backed, Grande Vista.

The trip to the US was a great learning curve and the knowledge I gained during my three year course meant I was able to hold engaging conversations with the American Superintendents I was introduced to while not looking completely dumb.

The cost of the FdSc degree averaged at £1400 per year, but for current course costs I would contact course enquiries at Myerscough. I believe that university fees are set to almost triple and I am unsure as to how families of aspiring young (and older like me) greenkeepers are expected to fund themselves.

When I set out on the degree path, I contacted numerous Government backed schemes enquiring about possible funding and financial help. Unfortunately, as my family and I have always worked for a living and earned our own way in life, there was to be no help. I can't help thinking that if I lazed around all day and did not want to work then there would be funds galore on offer - just being honest!

I had thought about giving up on the whole idea of study as we couldn't possibly afford it, then I read that BIGGA offered a "Return of Fees" scheme for spraying courses and chainsaw certificates etc.... I saw this as an opportunity to maybe find some assistance and financial help so I contacted BIGGA and, to cut a long story short, I was offered a place on the Ransomes Jacobsen Higher Education Scholarship Scheme and, I don't mind telling you, that I was over the moon - a phrase I was to use a lot over the next three years.

I mentioned MOLLNET a little earlier and I would just like to give you a brief indication of how the system works. The assignments and course module documents are sent via MOLLNET and are simple to access as during the first week of study you are allocated your own personal page. Apart from one or two 'externals' such as soil sample analysis and the exams, everything is completed through MOLLNET. I

will say, however, that you should ideally be computer literate before approaching any on-line study. I found out this 'Pearl of Wisdom' early on in the degree, when I was asked to produce a 'mean plant growth graph' in an Excel document. This is the point in my study where the long line of `iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii`'s first appeared and I can assure you it wasn't to be the last.

I found most of my reading help in the form of BIGGA's lending library. BIGGA now has a wide range of topics available and are keen to share their library with any of BIGGA's members. I took full advantage of this offer and by the way, where else can you obtain in-depth Plant Science literature for the price of a stamp?

Year One included soil technology, plant biology and ecology. Year Two was based around business planning, principles of mechanisation and cultural practices while Year Three was pests and diseases, drainage construction and golf course design. Prior to your final year of study, you are given a year long project to work on.

The project should be industry related so I chose the Introduction of Native Wildflowers into a Golf Courses' Ecological Rough.

We had already started to introduce wildflowers onto an out of play area at my place of work so I already had an indication of the type of growing medium they preferred. During the project, I posted a question on BIGGA's bulletin boards for member's help re pictures of wildflowers on a golf course. The response was fabulous and I thank all those who helped the project to run smoothly. I must also give praise at this point to Andy Owen (Course Tutor), Stewart Brown (Team Leader) and the tutors from on-line team, who guided us through the degree and their lightening fast responses to questions and queries aimed in their direction.

Three years zipped by and the morning of receiving my final grade was one of excitement and panic. Excitement because I had completed a degree which was something I thought that I could never do, and panic because I wanted to progress onto a BSc but you needed to pass your FdSc at 60% or above to be accepted.

As luck would have it, I did manage to receive more than the required grade so I applied for acceptance onto the BSc and the outcome is that I start studying for the BSc degree in September - over the moon again! Preparation for graduation could now begin.

Looking around the Myerscough graduation ceremony, I could tell that the look on the graduates' faces was one of excitement and contentment while the look on the faces of their families was one of sheer pride even if their son or daughter was dressed as batman. The gown I hired for the day came in either two sizes: Large or Small, so, being around the same height as Bilbo Baggins, I opted for the small but this, however, was still too long and all I could think of while waiting to be called up to graduate was "please do not trip over your gown onto Myerscough's Principal and, in turn, pull the curtains down over the band". As luck would have it, all turned out fine and I managed to make it back to my seat with my scroll and dignity intact.

If I were asked to give advice on the degree programme (try and stop me giving advice by the way!) then it would be to do precisely as the course tutor asks you to do. For instance, if you are required to produce 2000 words on a USGA spec green then write 2000 words on a USGA spec green. Do not mention

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that your dad's sister's cousin once played on a natural 'push up' green and found it to be nothing like the USGA spec type; if you do include nonsense then you can watch your grades quickly descend - trust me, I know!

I could talk for hours on my thoughts on Myerscough's teaching and the help that I have received from BIGGA and Ransomes Jacobsen, but I may need a few more pages in Greenkeeper International - trust me, the aforementioned words are the revised version!

May I also quickly take this opportunity to thank Fairhaven Golf Club for their help understanding, also my work pals, Craig, Jaymo, Mike, Pete and Tom for putting up with three years of an over excited James Hutchinson and his constant talk on grass, sand or whatever he had learned about the night before - now for two more!

