

TRAINING TO HIGHER QUALIFICATIONS FOR THE EXISTING WORKFORCE

Some colleges offer BTEC Higher National Certificates in crop production to be studied on a day-release basis over 2 years. These consist of 10 units and have a content which, when combined with work-based projects, is the academic equivalent of a BTEC Higher National Diploma. It is possible, by studying further part time modules, to convert an HNC to an HND if desired. Staff may wish to pursue post HND/HNC part time academic study. Degree courses can be offered at the discretion of awarding universities, typically over 2 days per week over a 2-year period. The availability of such courses will take into account the potential applicant's suitability and the structure of the course, so the possession of an HNC/HND will certainly not guarantee acceptance.

CONCLUSION

Training and education currently available in the United Kingdom appears to be complex in structure and the presence of different Training and Enterprise Councils do mean that access rules are not universal. However, in terms of both location for study, accreditation, and potential progression right up to degree level there is more scope for achievement and recognition for people in employment than at any time in the past.

Horticultural Study by Correspondence

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INTRODUCTION

The first correspondence college was the International Correspondence School which started in 1887 in America. It is now big business and all the colleges not already offering open learning or distance learning packages are catching up as fast as they can. The Horticultural Correspondence College (HCC) in the U.K. was started by a Mr. Ibbett in the early 1930s.

THE HCC CORRESPONDENCE PROGRAMME

Each student member receives lesson texts (usually 10 in all) to work through. These contain both information and questions. Some contain self-assessment material. The courses may commence at any time of the year and the college does not require answers back at specific intervals. The member is invited to send in their worked answers to the set questions. These are marked by their tutor, who returns the work together with a set of specimen answers, a marks profile, and a letter of encouragement. Most student members take about 1 year to complete a course. Help with further information is available from the tutor appointed by letter, and from ourselves via post, telephone, fax, and Internet.

When the student member is half way through there is a review of their progress and at the end of the course the tutor makes his or her recommendations for a grade

of certificate. The student member is invited to comment on the course programme at the beginning, the middle, and at the end. This has been very helpful in eliminating weak areas from our delivery and packages.

BENEFITS OF CORRESPONDENCE LEARNING TO EMPLOYEES AND EMPLOYERS

Learning Basic Principles. During the working day employers rarely have time to spend with a staff member to explain how and why it is important to take certain steps. Even the most fundamental factors are frequently not appreciated and these may influence issues including growth rates, plant quality, and the use of resources. A correspondence programme of systematic study, working through texts and occasionally references, can be used to provide a foundation of knowledge.

Appropriate Use of Horticultural Technology. There are similar rhythms for the cropping cycles and activities from seed time to harvest. All horticultural crops have a cycle of growth and development. It is not always easy, with the demands of the working day, to see that there is this common pattern and that a management strategy can be developed to make the best use of the time, equipment, energy, technology, and skills available.

It is often useful on a nursery if members of the craft team are familiar with this kind of thought process. If someone is thinking alongside the management then there has to be a bonus if they are really interested in what is going on; they can be co-operative in different ways including anticipating future needs and in noticing and reporting at the time when there is a chance that something is going badly wrong. While some craft teams may be concerned only with the "Thank God its Friday Pay-day" moment, there may be others who are more closely involved and who have a feeling for a shared objective. These people may be the ones who will ensure that the plant material or other work in hand is left in the best possible order on Friday at the end of their shift.

Aspects of Concern to Management. These may include the importance of following instructions, and of not making changes to rates of application of liquid fertilisers or in recording the use of pesticides, as just two examples. Some employers may find it possible to set aside study time for an employee at specific times but for the majority, correspondence study means staff are able to contribute a full working week. The HCC finds very few of its student members obtain any study time off, except perhaps for examinations and there is very little for their staff manager to do other than to monitor progress from time to time.

Improved Morale. As an individual begins to gain knowledge they gain self-confidence and an appreciation of the value of work done well. Work becomes more interesting and indeed the individual may come to work better prepared to do the job in hand, more fully resourced both in mind and spirit to do the work required — hopefully with a more flexible approach to the need for change, with a faster learning curve and especially where his/her studies have a relationship to the work. To a certain extent knowledge is power and most employers highly value their knowledgeable team members who understand and can express themselves.

It is important that an employer notices when their employees have begun to improve and that the staff member knows how to bring their zeal to the attention

of their employer in the most appropriate way. It may or may not be fashionable to work willingly and hard. In a team it may be only the line manager who knows who is delivering the most and it may be that a good worker represents a threat to that person's employment "if they should rise above their station". Most employers are probably very glad to see their staff enthusiastic for study.

THE IMPACT OF CORRESPONDENCE STUDY ON STAFF MOVEMENT IN THE HORTICULTURAL INDUSTRY

The HCC receives many enrollments from individuals who seek to enter horticulture and some undoubtedly do. We only know if they tell us and it has not been our policy to keep a database with this type of information. So far we have not developed a specific course programme on plant propagation but a course is in preparation.

The bulk of our work is for the amateur gardener. Most of the HCC College Members study for a year, either for an examination such as the Royal Horticultural Society's General Examination in Horticulture or for the knowledge that is gained by working to a study programme, for which HCC offers a course completion certificate. A good number continue to study for a further year or more on related courses. The HCC claims that its Course Completion Certificate, coupled with the student's portfolio of work would provide a powerful piece of evidence about the enthusiasm, knowledge, and dedication for that individual. Handed over at interview this material does enable the employer to ask questions and test the insight of the candidate.

For the employer whose staff undertake such a course there is sometimes the fear that it may enable an employee to seek greater rewards elsewhere. This is balanced when an employer advertises for staff and finds suitable candidates who have already benefitted from correspondence study.

COURSE DEVELOPMENT AND ACCREDITATION

The HCC maintains accreditation and membership of the Open and Distance Learning Quality Council. It is costly but provides an external assessment of validity.

HCC commissions new texts from its own tutor group or from other specialists, edited by an external editor and proof reader.

Offering student programmes via the Internet seems the most likely next development.