

# MSc degrees in Managing Sustainable Mountain/Rural Development at the UHI Millennium Institute

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## Abstract

Rural areas in general, and mountain regions in particular, face complex and rapid changes, and are moving up policy agendas. These diverse changes tend to be interlinked, and thus need to be addressed in interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral ways. People living in rural and mountain areas need new approaches to ensure the sustainable development of these areas. Recognising the various potential markets, the UHI Millennium Institute has developed an on-line MSc in Managing Sustainable Mountain/Rural Development. Most of the taught course structure is common to both named degrees; the differences are with regard to initial core courses and assessed work. The first students started in September 2004.

## The context: a need for integrated approaches

There is growing national and international recognition of the value of rural areas in general, and mountain regions in particular. In the UK and other countries, and within the European Union as a whole, issues relating to these regions are moving up policy agendas. Recognition of the escalating importance of rural issues has been affirmed by the Council of Ministers of the European Union in allocating a new budget heading for Rural Development from 1995, and subsequently in the formulation of 'Agenda 2000', the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, and proposals in July 2004 for more integrated rural development from 2007. Similarly, the importance of mountain regions, both to their inhabitants and to the people of Europe as a whole, has been increasingly recognised since the Rio Earth Summit, where 'Agenda 21' included a specific chapter on mountains, and especially during and since 2002, the International Year of Mountains. During this year, many events took place in Scotland and more widely across the UK; initiatives supported by a number of Directorates-General of the European Commission have provided a new focus on mountain regions, in the context of both sustainable development and Community cohesion policy (e.g., European Commission, 2004).

These trends reflect the fact that rural and mountain regions are facing continued rapid change: to their natural environments, their economies, and their societies. The complex and linked changes affecting these regions bring new problems and demand more sophisticated and responsive solutions. Over the past few decades, growing realisation of the complexities of achieving real improvements in the quality of life for people living in rural and mountain areas has led to demands for more integrated approaches to assure their sustainable development. This typically means that economic issues, social initiatives, environmental activities, and matters of social equity need to be considered as inter-related, rather than addressed by isolated disciplines as they have been in the past. It has slowly come to be recognised that, when these main disciplines are applied individually, they provide only partial solutions to needs and opportunities in rural and mountain areas; applied collectively, they provide powerful tools for change and improvement. In the policy arena, there is a clear need for integrated, rather than

sectoral, policies; this implies integration at all levels and at all stages in the cyclical process from evaluation of options, through implementation, to analysis of outcomes and the development of new policies.

The declining importance of agricultural production and other primary industries, coupled with increases in leisure time, disposable incomes, and the availability of technological innovations, has meant that future participants in change in rural and mountain areas will be able to take advantage of a far wider range of development options than has hitherto been possible. Central to the desire to provide secure livelihoods and stable communities is the need to stem population drift, especially of young and professionally skilled people. This can be achieved in various ways, but generally involves securing a range of alternative employment opportunities, and encouraging the ability to maintain a quality of life which is perceived as at least as good as in urban and suburban locations. At the same time, it must be recognised that a key basis for the long-term future of rural and

mountain communities is the sustainable management of the environmental resources on which they depend; and that increasing numbers of people are coming to these communities as 'amenity migrants', for whom earning a living may no longer be a primary concern.

*A key element of the UHI is the use of ICT for the delivery of teaching and research tuition*

## The UHI Millennium Institute

The Highlands and Islands of Scotland are predominantly both rural and mountainous. In 2000, the UHI Millennium Institute (UHI) was created as the only Higher Education Institution based in the region. It provides university-level education and research through a partnership of 14 colleges and research institutions linked to about 100 learning centres across the region ([www.uhi.ac.uk](http://www.uhi.ac.uk)). A key element of the UHI is the use of ICT for the delivery of teaching and research tuition, as well as for networked administrative tasks such as committee meetings (Bryden et al., 1996; Rennie, 2000).

Two interdisciplinary undergraduate courses in the field of sustainable development have been running within the UHI for some time: a BSc in Rural Development Studies, offered by Lews Castle College since 1994 and now across the UHI network (Rennie, 2003); and a BSc in Sustainable Development and Environmental Management, offered by Orkney College since 2000, drawing on collaboration with Heriot-Watt University's International Centre for Island Technology in Stromness. Experience with these degrees led to the establishment of an on-line part-time MSc in Managing Sustainable Mountain/Rural Development.

## Designing a new MSc degree

The MSc degree came about through the collaboration of Frank Rennie, the original course leader of the BSc in Rural Development Studies, and Martin Price, who established the Centre for Mountain Studies at Perth College in 2000. The

former had recognised the potential for progression from this course and others within the UHI, and had commissioned an independent study in 1998 which indicated substantial interest in a taught postgraduate qualification in sustainable rural development. The latter had been active in issues relating to sustainable development in mountain areas both in Europe and globally, and saw the opportunities of using the UHI network as a basis for postgraduate training, especially in the context of an expanding European Union, as many of the accession states have significant mountain areas and populations.

While they came from different perspectives, discussion between the two proponents led to a recognition that issues relating to sustainable development in rural and mountain areas are generally similar, and consequently that much of the taught content of an eventual degree should be in common. At the same time, there are certain differences between the two types of areas (e.g., mountain areas are not necessarily wholly rural; and there are specific policies for these areas), and there seemed likely to be different markets for two named courses. Thus, a course with a rural emphasis was expected to draw mainly people working in rural development, particularly for continuing professional development (CPD), as there is a gap in educational provision because many, if not most, individuals employed by local authorities and development and environmentally-focused organisations have 'drifted' into the field of their employment from other specialist, but not directly relevant, areas of expertise. While in no way wishing to detract from the valuable experience of many of these professionals, the growing appreciation of the close inter-linking of economic, environmental, and social issues in development has created the need for individuals with a new type of education and training.

While many of these statements are also true for people already working on various aspects of the sustainable development of mountain areas, the potential market for an MSc course with a mountain emphasis appeared to be more diverse. It would include not only people working on various issues related to sustainable development in mountain areas, and thus seeking CPD in the context of their current position, but also those wishing to move into work with a mountain focus, and also people who might take the course because of their interest in mountain areas per se, rather than as a setting for work (e.g., retirees, mountaineers).

Given the differentiation of markets, it was decided that the course structure would be as follows. Students would start with a core module either with a specifically rural focus, for the 'rural' course; or with a specifically mountain focus, for the 'mountain' course. The other core modules would address key themes providing a foundation for managing sustainable development: developing communities; policy frameworks and analysis; sustainable development. However, in these modules and throughout the remainder of the degree, while taught content would be common to both courses, all assessed work would have to be on the theme of the course for which a particular student was registered: i.e., either mountain or rural. Following completion of the core modules, students would have a choice of a range of optional modules, allowing them to construct their own programmes of study and develop more in-depth knowledge and skills in specific areas. New optional modules to be developed for the course include: biodiversity management; environmental impact assessment, geographical information systems, the information society and rural development, sustainable tourism and interpretation, and water management. A

further three optional modules – developing potential through placement, developing research capability, ICT and professional development – could also be chosen from those already being offered in UHI's MA in Professional Development. Students would have the option of leaving the course after the four core modules with a Postgraduate Certificate or, after also taking four optional modules, with a Postgraduate Diploma. However, it was hoped that most would complete a dissertation to gain the MSc.

## Delivering the degree

The degree went through its validation process with Open University Validation Services (OUVS), which validates all UHI degrees, in 2003. It was validated for delivery from September 2004, but only to residents of the UK. This was primarily because of concerns relating to student support; it is hoped that, when it is revalidated in 2006, this will be for delivery at least across Europe – though this will bring new challenges! During 2004, despite a relatively low level of formal marketing activity, a good first cohort of students signed up. Many of those applying for the mountain course did so after reading about it in the press, after coverage in various Scottish local and national papers, and also UK dailies. The experience and interests of the 27 students starting in September 2004 spanned the entire spectrum of the anticipated market; and four of those accepted on to the 'mountain' course were from England and Wales.

The student experience is not entirely on-line: the course starts with a weekend induction during which the students are registered, have time to get to know each other – which greatly helps in subsequent interactions, mainly online – and to practise how to use both the Blackboard™ Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), on which all modules are hosted, and online search software (McAlister et al., 2001). The modules are delivered using a variety of technologies. Blackboard™ is password-protected and provides a continuously available, consistently structured site that offers familiarity for the learner. Easily identifiable signposts indicate learning resources labelled 'Course Information' 'Course Documents' 'Discussion Board' etc. and are consistent for modules across the programme of study. The VLE can host documents (with internal and external links), graphics, photographs (still and moving - including full webcasts) as well as discussion 'threads' for computer conferencing, and a space for course announcements. In addition, for nine of the 12 weeks of the initial core module for the mountain course, lectures using Microsoft Producer, which allows Powerpoint slides to be spliced together with a video of the lecturer, were provided to students on CD. This software will probably also be used for other modules where visual images are essential elements of the learning experience (Mason and Rennie, 2004).

The staff involved in developing the course, from five of UHI's colleges, have significant experience in delivering online learning, and recognise its significant attraction for students who are part-time, have family and/or work obligations, are based in locations remote from the tutor, and/or are spread across a wide geographical area (Rennie and Mason, 2004). Equally, though students do not have access to a physical university library, they can use UHI's well-developed electronic library system, which can be used to access resources 24 hours a day, seven days a week (MacKay, 2001); and key references are provided as pdfs through Blackboard and, sometimes, on CD. The students can work at their own pace – except for delivering assignments! – and also develop new skills and competence in a variety of ICT

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**UHI Millennium Institute**

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 Managing Sustainable Mountain Development  
 Managing Sustainable Rural Development  
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 Primary Teaching with Gaelic  
 Theological Studies

**MSc Managing Sustainable Mountain Development**

This is an inter-disciplinary taught masters programme with exit awards at postgraduate certificate (PgCert), postgraduate diploma (PgDip) and masters (MSc) levels. Individual modules deal with social, environmental, economic, and professional development issues in the mountain areas of the UK and Europe. This courses is ideal as continuous professional development for people currently working in the management of development in mountain areas, or for those seeking such employment.



**Entry requirements**

An ordinary or honours undergraduate degree in a relevant subject discipline.

**Features**

On-line accessibility. This is a unique course for anyone interested in the development and uses of mountain areas.

**Employment opportunities**

Management positions with public sector, voluntary organisations or non governmental organisations working in mountain areas in the UK and Europe.

Done

applications, which may be useful either at work or at home. This is a new venture, and we have yet to see how it will fare. The students have now completed their first core modules and are now into the second semester. Feedback has been positive, and applications are coming in for next year.

We have learned four key lessons in the process of preparing and delivering these courses. First, start early, with a clear, concise module descriptor; this avoids hurried deadlines or disconnected learning activities, and may save considerable costs in terms of both time and resources. Second, the realisation that context is frequently more important than content has allowed us to write shorter, more focussed, pieces of academic orientation on the VLE, but to link these in a 'layered' style to other deeper and wider learning resources for different learner needs. Third, constant attention to the need for diversity – in types of resources, assessments, communication tools, and learning activities – not only creates greater flexibility for learners to customise their learning, but provides a self-reinforcing learning environment of creativity and innovation. Finally, with on-line access, and at least given the current small numbers of students, they are able to ask tutors for advice or feedback on a one-to-one basis, and we can provide this rapidly – and from anywhere in the world with internet access! Together, these lessons demonstrate a considerable 'learning advantage' over more traditional, less flexible courses. We believe that not only will this pair of courses be sustainable, but that they will contribute to the sustainable development of rural and mountain areas both in the UK and across Europe.

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