



# A NEW COLLEGE – VIRTUAL YET LAND-BASED

## EDUCATION & TRAINING

**Leigh Morris** reports on the setting up of the National Land Based College (UK), which aims to champion skills development for land-based industries.

The National Land Based College (NLBC) is a new initiative to support and develop the education and training of all the vocations that involve contact with the land and natural environment, encompassing all sectors of horticulture. Its overarching aim is to involve land-based industries and employers far more in education, training, skills development and careers promotion.

### Why a national land-based college?

After a period of sustained financial pressure and perceived marginal importance, land-based industries are now regarded as increasingly significant, not only as custodians of the countryside,

but also on economic and social grounds. There is an increasing demand on our farming, horticulture and associated industries, while the challenges they face are growing.

The world is changing dramatically; food and water shortages, concerns about public health and the drive for environmental sustainability, are all raising the importance of horticulture and the wider land-based sector. There is a pressing need to develop our overall quality and productivity and the improving of workforce skills has a fundamental role in enabling this to happen.

The skillset we require to meet these global and commercial challenges is far wider than ever before, particularly considering the diverse range of specialisms across just horticulture, each of which requires specific resources and teaching skills to deliver effectively at the levels required. This highlights the huge importance of specialist land-based education and training and the need to be more strategic and collaborative across the whole sector. The agreed solution was to establish NLBC as a virtual college with intrinsic links to the existing land-based colleges and universities.

### Early development

The development of NLBC was led by a consortium of land-based sector colleges and universities with support from the Agriculture & Horticulture Development Board (AHDB) and other industry-led groups. The initial proposal for the NLBC (the membership organisation representing specialist land-based colleges and universities – see their website: [www.landex.org.uk](http://www.landex.org.uk)) in response to the Department for Business Innovation & Skills' (BIS) call for the establishment of specialist national colleges.

The subsequent development of the NLBC was co-steered by representatives of land-based industries, which will be key to achieving its vision and making the step-change required to develop a more highly professionalised industry. The link with the AHDB, together with a range of other organisations and professional bodies, will ensure that NLBC has mechanisms through which it can engage with the small and micro-enterprises that form such an important part of the sector.

An NLBC Development Board was established



**Left:** The NLBC office at the Rural Innovation Centre, Stoneleigh Park, Warwickshire. An appropriate second line of our address!

**Right, from left to right:** The NLBC Team at the House of Lords; Leigh Morris, Jo Cummins (PA to CEO), Sarah Purdell (Programme Development Manager) and Lord Curry (Board Chair).

**Below:** NLBC will operate in a hub and spoke model – supporting, linking to and co-creating courses and training programmes with existing land-based colleges around the UK.

in July 2015. Chaired by Lord Donald Curry of Kirkharle Kt, CBE it is made up of 21 Directors; ten Principals from UK land-based colleges and/or universities and 11 senior representatives from land-based industries (including Lord Curry). NLBC was incorporated in July 2015 as a Company Limited by Guarantee and a Registered Charity.

In terms of initial finances some 30 of the specialist land-based colleges and universities have acted as guarantors of the NLBC and these institutions, along with Landex and City & Guilds (C&G), from their National Proficiency Test Council fund, have provided our initial development funding. Beyond the set-up phase NLBC will operate on a 'not-for-profit' basis, with a percentage of the income from all C&G land-based qualifications delivered, being paid to NLBC going forward. There are potentially several other income streams, delivering specific industry-driven tasks and/or projects.

I commenced my role as the first Chief Executive in April 2016, initially based alongside Landex at the University of Northampton. The first task was to organise our official launch at the House of Lords on May 10 and we were delighted at the attendance, enthusiasm and subsequent engagement from many.

Undoubtedly, the success of NLBC will depend on its ability to work well with others and to this aim I have carried out a significant amount of networking in the first few months, which will be invaluable to us as NLBC moves forward. When I started in post I set myself the target that by the end of month six I would be running something, rather than be setting it up. Therefore I am delighted that following on from our launch, we now have our branding, initial website (with main site soon to be live), social media channels, our



own office at Stoneleigh Park, my first colleagues, an outline strategy, revised governance plan, established financial systems and key work packages underway.

### Championing skills

Reducing the perceived skills gap is vitally important for horticulture and the wider land-based sector in the 21st century and NLBC aims to deliver the UK Government agenda set out in the *AgriSkills Strategy* (February 2010), *UKCES Employer Skills Survey 2015: UK Report* (May 2016) and the *Post-16 Skills Plan*, (July 2016).

The *Post-16 Skills Plan* in particular is a key document for the future of UK technical training and offers massive potential for the land-based sector and NLBC. This report identifies one vocational route for Agriculture, Environmental and Animal Care and horticulture is included within this. It identifies the need for National Colleges to lead on the design and delivery of technical skills, particularly for higher levels (4-6); puts employers firmly in the lead position in terms of skills development; clearly states that

technical qualifications must be attractive to all (not just failed A level students); has a clear expectation to see 'innovative ways of working across further education, higher education, providers and industry', and clearly targets the development of over-arching strategies for digital training and careers guidance.

### Positioning and purpose

It is important that NLBC establishes a clear position within the land-based sector. I describe NLBC as sitting in the middle of a triangle between land-based industries, education providers and awarding bodies. Our ambition is to take a wider more altruistic approach and use our brand and position to bring individuals and organisations together, linking existing initiatives, adding value and developing joint strategies, working, partnerships and synergies.

NLBC will specifically seek to achieve a range of clearly defined work packages, which will develop in parallel, but at different 'speeds'. It will:

- Maximise engagement with land-based industries to ensure that the availability of training provision matches their current and future needs. It will develop strong links to industry, existing groups (e.g. CIH HorTECC) and creating NLBC groups/forums as required.
- Work with industry sectoral bodies to ensure that Continuing Professional Development (CPD) needs are provided nationally and co-create a range of programmes from one-day training courses, up to degree level programmes.
- Champion important initiatives such as the development of apprenticeship trailblazers and the expansion of higher apprenticeships.
- Establish awarding body arrangements that are responsive to the needs of learners and employers in the land-based sector and produce a suite of NLBC-endorsed land-based qualifications 'fit for purpose'.
- Promote professionalism and clear employment progression in land-based industries and champion the full spectrum of land-based careers, linking with and building on the work of existing sector careers



**Right:** Key figures at the launch of the National Land Based College at the House of Lords (in May 2016) are, left to right; Chris Moody (CEO Landex), Leigh Morris (CEO NLBC), Minister of State George Eustice, Kirstie Donnelly (CEO City & Guilds) and Lord Curry of Kirkharle.

initiatives, such as Bright Crop and Grow Careers.

- Establish a land-based registration scheme linked into existing industry membership and registration schemes, which enables tracking and encourages participation in ongoing professional engagement and development activities.

- Bid for national education and training contracts.
- Promote and deliver land-based education, skills and training activity internationally.

### Operating model

NLBC is an employer-led organisation operating virtually through a hub and spoke model, with a central hub of infrastructure and staffing, located in the heart of the UK, supported by the 'spokes' – high-quality centres of excellence and individuals in other organisations around the UK. These spokes will provide the geographical coverage that is crucial for ensuring local access to a relevant range of professional development programmes. They will include the Landex member colleges/universities and industry workplaces, building on existing capacity and capability.

This model provides the best fit for a widely distributed industry with a high volume of smaller enterprises. The courses themselves will be developed in partnerships, using a variety of business models and delivered by college/university staff and/or seconded industry staff using a range of contemporary learning methodologies.

NLBC will look to link with existing initiatives, draw on the best current specialisms, enhancing these and adding coherence and consistency. Importantly, NLBC will aim to add value and develop joint working, partnerships and synergies across the sector, resulting in a world class infrastructure for intermediate and higher level skills.

The use of a range of contemporary on-line interactive technologies is fundamental for NLBC. The core will be our website, providing information, a portal to other organisations, a connection to digital streams and a gateway to online learning and proposed CPD register.

### Qualifications fit for purpose

In 2015 the NLBC Development Board tendered for an awarding-body partner to work with us. City & Guilds (C&G) were appointed and a Joint Services Agreement (JSA) with them was signed in 2016. We are delighted to be working with C&G who, through the National Proficiency Tests Council (NPTC), have very strong and proud historical links with the land-based industry. We are excited at the great potential of our partnership, particularly the ability to utilise the excellent C&G digital tools and wider vocational training expertise.

We share a common vision of championing skills through a diverse range of high-quality courses and qualifications designed to benefit a host of career paths and together we aim to create and deliver a suite of superior qualifications for use in the existing land-based colleges that meet the NLBC Centre Awarding Criteria.



A C&G/NLBC Strategic Partnership Group (SPG) has been formed within our JSA to identify the priorities and approaches. Our initial joint focus has been working with representatives from Landex member institutions on the final development of the new Level 2 and Level 3 Technical Qualifications. A key role of NLBC is to ensure that the right people from Landex members and industry are involved in strategic planning, qualification writing and development. In simple terms we aim to ensure that the right people sit around the right tables to create the qualifications and delivery mechanisms required.

### Trailblazer apprenticeships

Probably the most discussed topic within vocational education currently are the new Trailblazer Apprenticeships. The Government is committed to putting employers more in control and there are some excellent examples of sectors that have grasped this opportunity with both hands. This includes the arboriculture, forestry and horticulture routes, facilitated by Ros Burnley, and NLBC is delighted to have been invited to join the steering group for the process.

The Government aim of putting industry in the lead is admirable, however, land-based colleges still have a fundamentally important part to play in the delivery of the training. The Government's *Post-16 Skills Plan* sets out a clear vision for technical training, with each technical route offering comparable college-based and employment-based (apprenticeship) training. To deliver on this Government aim NLBC/C&G plans to develop superior technical qualifications that industry is clamouring to have within their apprenticeship frameworks. This will mean that any young person, (in either a wholly college-based or apprenticeship route), will receive the same key underpinning knowledge for their chosen sector. It will also mean that training resources can be developed applicable to all.

### Horticulture to land-based

After spending over 30 years being mainly focused on horticulture, plants and latterly biodiversity conservation, I now find myself in a much wider land-based world! There are huge synergies and overlap between land-based disciplines and great potential for stimulating efficiencies, strategic alliances, government support and funding

through closer working under this wider banner. I do believe, however, that NLBC will have a clear positive impact for horticulture and already we are involved in horticulture trailblazer apprenticeships, having discussions around the development of commercial horticulture training, with both Agritech Register and Training for Innovation and Skills (ARTIS Training at [www.artistraining.com](http://www.artistraining.com)) and British Flowers ([www.flowersfromthefarm.co.uk](http://www.flowersfromthefarm.co.uk)), working closely with AHDB (through Tess Howe, Skills Development Manager and Jane King, CEO who is on our NLBC Board) and working to linking Grow Careers to a wider land-based careers agenda.

My foreword in the Spring 2014 issue of *The Horticulturist* was entitled 'Horticultural Education' and highlighted what I believe to be the need for greater collaboration between education providers and industry, the need to re-invent centres of excellence and the great potential for post-college training, industry groups, more dynamic apprenticeships and online and blended learning.

These needs are precisely the same across the whole land-based sector and through our mission of 'championing skills for land-based industries'. I'm inspired about the potential for NLBC to link organisations and initiatives, drive collaborations, add value and make a genuine contribution to enhancing education and bridging the land-based skills gap. It is fantastic to now be leading an organisation which is driving the ambition I've had for horticulture for the whole land-based sector and I'd be delighted to hear from any organisations which would like to help us take this forward.

### Leigh Morris C Hort FCIHort

Leigh proudly started his career on a Youth Training Scheme, before studying horticulture at Askham Bryan, Pershore and Writtle. He managed Pershore's commercial nursery for seven years then moved into education at the Welsh College of Horticulture in 1998. From 2004-14 Leigh led education and learning at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, before joining the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland as Director of Community Conservation. In April 2016, he became the first Chief Executive of the National Land Based College (UK). Leigh was President of the CIH (2012-14), Chaired Grow Careers (2006-14) and is a Trustee of the Marine Conservation Society.

