

# The International Forestry Students' Association (IFSA) and Forestry Education

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## **Abstract:**

This article aims to introduce and explain some actions of the International Forestry Students' Association (IFSA) in the field of forestry education as well as the students' role in improving it at local, regional or global scale. We will especially focus on a survey made by IFSA in 2008 among forest students and forest universities staff in order to identify regional or global trends in term of forestry education.

**Key words:** forestry education, forestry students, IFSA, global survey, forestry universities.

## **Introduction:**

In our fast changing world, foresters are more and more asked to use and adapt their knowledge in order to ensure a sustainable future to our forests. One of the main steps to meet this societal need is certainly to teach the society and the current and next generations of foresters.

Over the past years, forestry education has suffered different crises (gap between programmes and employers' needs, less enrolment of students, insufficient means) and it is now needed to solve these problems in order to be more prepared to upcoming global challenges (environmental, societal and economical) and needs (e.g. improve internal and external communication of the forest sector).

Forest students felt also this need of communication some years ago and decided in 1990 to create the International Forestry Students' Association (IFSA) which aimed to exchange ideas, experiences and views and to represent them at the international level. For more information see IFSA's website (IFSA, 2008), Schoenenberger (1998) and Pfothner (2004).

Nowadays, IFSA aims also to contribute to the improvement of forestry education and to better prepare students to professional life. IFSA provides thus many opportunities to develop and improve students' open mind but also important soft and forest related skills and knowledge.

More than offering opportunities to improve personal learning, IFSA participates also to improve global and/or regional forestry education. A nice sample is the role played in the promotion of international forest MSc courses in Europe which permit people from all over the world to study forestry with very good means.

In 2008, IFSA also implemented a global survey which aims to populate a database gathering information on forest MSc courses around the world, to identify the most important needs at global and regional scale in term of forestry education and but also to compare students' feelings with the universities' offer.

## **Methodology**

### 1) Elaboration of the questionnaire

The global scheme of the questionnaire has firstly been proposed by IFSA to several partners: IPFE, IUFRO, EFI and Silva Network. Amongst the numerous inputs given by these partners to enrich the survey we can cite for example the suggestion to make it not only among students but in parallel with both students and universities' staff in order to get a interesting point of comparison between students' feelings and universities offer in term of study programmes.

A similar questionnaire for both entities has been elaborated which contains questions on different points like trends in students' enrolment, students' gender distribution, curriculum fields covered by the study programme, place of practical and field work in the study programme, links with research, employers and others universities and a final part on the employment of graduates. The complete questionnaire can be found on the IFSA's website, (IFSA 2008).

Finally, the survey has been translated into Spanish by the language commission of IFSA in order to reach the Latin American continent as well.

### 2) Spread of the questionnaire and answers returned

The questionnaire has been sent in a Word document by email to the different IFSA mailing lists to reach about 3000 forest students from all over the world. It was also asked to the student to transmit it to someone from their university's staff able to answer the questionnaire correctly.

In parallel, emails have been sent to different IFSA's contacts (about 60) working in different universities in the world.

After having filled out the questionnaire, people had to return it by email.

- 45 students from 40 universities has answered the questionnaire
- 27 answers from university's staff has been received which represents also 27 universities.

### 3) Analyse of the answers

The answers have been collected into a small database and we did some analyses to see if we can already identify some trends.

## **First results:**

### 1) Trends in enrolment at international scale:

The first trend observed internationally is decreasing numbers of students choosing to study forest sciences as compared with a growing number of students opting to study new "environmental" sciences. In parallel, we observe also an increasing percentage of women choosing to study forest sciences.

### 2) About link between universities and research, employers and alumni:

Networking capacities of forest faculties and departments of universities at the global scale seem to be linked quite well to forest research, which is also reflected in the study programmes.

The links between universities and potential employers are generally good which is also quite encouraging.

Less encouraging are the links between universities and their respective alumni as few universities are keeping track of their former students. More efforts need thus to be done on this point and the formulation of a common tool to follow the careers of the graduates, as it has been proposed during the Silva Network Annual Conference 2008, could meet the students' needs in term of information on the work available once graduated; it could also promote some teaching successes of an university and serves as advertisement tool in order to recruit students in forest curricula.

### **General results:**

A first comparison of the views or feelings of students and university staff reveals:

- (i) Concerning the percentage of field work in a study programme:  
68% of the students would like to have more field and practical work, while 65% of university staff think there is enough field and practical work;
- (ii) Concerning enrolment in forestry programmes:  
At global level, students think that there is an increasing enrolment whereas university answers indicate enrolment is decreasing. It seems so that at global level, students are not well informed about the trends in enrolment.  
This is not true when we take only answers from Europe, as students answers are generally the same than universities' staffs ones.

### **Conclusion on the survey:**

To conclude on this study, we think that such a survey should last for a longer period if we want to reach all our first objectives and mainly establish a good database at global scale. Comparing students' and university staff's views is not an easy task and for that we need to have at least one answer from both sides of each university to do it properly. Gathering this information at global level is quite a large task.

On the rate of answer received we can say that it is quite low; a big effort needs to be done in order to encourage more answers from students' part but also universities' one. This is maybe due to the not very comfortable way this survey was made, it takes much more time for example to download the survey, fill in it and send it again in an email than filling in an online survey directly online.

Finally, even if we got some elements of answer thanks to this survey, we need to think how we can gather in more efficient ways similar information, and how this information can be made available for everybody.

### **Perspectives of work and role of IFSA and forest students as a whole in forestry education:**

Large events such as the World Forestry Congress (WFC) 2009 (Buenos Aires, Argentina) and the IUFRO international conference 2010 (Seoul, South Korea) but also smaller ones such as the Silva network annual conference and IPFE Workshops are the places to discuss important and relevant issues in forestry education because all the stakeholders of forest sciences (education) are present at the same place and at the same time.

IFSA needs to come to these events with examples of actions and above all with proposals of actions and ideas to improve forestry education. Identify trends and problems is

already a first step but propose solutions to face the difficulties is what IFSA really has to do in the future.

In this way, after having read the provisional programme of World Forestry Congress 2009 (<http://www.wfc2009.org/>), IFSA considered the attention given to education too small and we started to discuss with FAO and the local organisers in order to propose a special session on forestry education into the programme of WFC, proposal accepted at the end of 2008. IFSA and especially its FAO focal person Nicolas Dolidon, is working intensively in order to organize this session in partnership with the International Partnership for Forestry Education (IPFE). You can get more information by contacting the "Students to WFC 2009" coordination team: [students.wfc@gmail.com](mailto:students.wfc@gmail.com).

To prepare this session, the focal point of IFSA is to understand more the students' needs at local and international levels (facility to study, motivation to study forestry, main problems in their country and university, and solutions to those problems). This will be done in two times:

- Online survey among students
- Workshops at the International Forestry Students' Symposium (IFSS) in August 2009 in Indonesia

Those two points should permit to know well the students' perspective and to propose as well local solutions than wider ones.

Concerning the elaboration of a public and online database, the reflexion on what this database should include and how it will work is still in discussion, the outputs of the next WFC should already give an element of answer on this point.

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