

Education

RFS Qualifications in Arboriculture, Forestry and Silviculture

The RFS Certificates in Arboriculture, Forestry and Silviculture are nationally-recognised qualifications for arboriculture and forest operatives that combine technical knowledge, skills and safety. **Ted Wilson** and **Adam Todd** explain what is involved.

Skills and training are very much at the top of the agenda for the arboriculture and forestry sectors in Britain at the present time. Without a highly engaged and well-qualified workforce, it will not be possible to deliver the ecosystem services that society requires from our trees and woodlands. Uncertainty about the resilience of our forest resources due to economic and environmental change implies we need a workforce for the future that is adaptable and innovative.

In this article we provide an outline of the RFS Certificates in Arboriculture, Forestry and Silviculture, which are nationally-recognised technical qualifications. Holders of these certificates combine good theoretical knowledge with the practical skills needed to succeed as an arboricultural or forestry crafts-person or operative.

Background

Traditionally the arboriculture and forestry sectors lagged behind other professions in terms of training and qualifications. As recently as 1990 nearly 60% of the workforce had no qualifications beyond secondary level (Eurostat, 2010). This had changed by 2010 to the extent that 75% of the workforce has further and higher education qualifications (Eurostat, 2010). However, there remains a perception that arboriculture and forestry are low-skill industries (Wilson et al., 2017). Well-established training pathways are essential if we are to attract new entrants to arboriculture and forestry. Evidence suggests that young

people, in particular, are attracted to jobs where there is excellent training, skills development and opportunities for progression (Leslie et al., 2006).

For over 40 years the Royal Forestry Society has awarded the RFS Certificate in Arboriculture. This is a highly successful qualification, and to date over 520 people have completed all the course requirements. The structure for this award was based on the RFS organising the training and administering the examinations. However, in more recent years, there became a need for change and modernisation so that the RFS qualification could be brought into line with the national Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), now called the Registered Qualification Framework (RQF).

In 2014 the Royal Forestry Society entered into a partnership with ABC Awards, a leading national awarding organisation that develops diverse, high-quality vocational qualifications. This enabled the Society to build on the RFS Certificate in Arboriculture, and devise new awards in Forestry and Silviculture. Under the leadership of Phil Tanner, former education manager with the RFS, the aim was to provide a flexible pathway for people already working in these fields to complement their training and experience, and to formalise their existing knowledge. An additional element of our awards has been the emphasis on health and safety, which is a key concern for all arboriculturists and foresters. Through training and skills development it is possible to promote safer working practices in our sectors, where sadly there has been for too long a poor safety record.

Course structure

Each RFS Certificate comprises a taught course at QCF Level 2 (Arboriculture, Forestry) or Level 3 (Silviculture), plus a suite of eight practical certificates of competency. Each element is a stand-alone qualification. When combined as a portfolio of academic and skills competencies, candidates are eligible to apply for their chosen RFS Certificate. The structure of RFS Certificates is illustrated in Figure 1.

The RFS does not provide direct delivery of any course material. Each programme has been designed so that candidates can complete each element at their own pace, and with approved educational and training providers of their own choice. There are several learning routes, including full-time, part-time and distance-learning options that make it possible to fit learning around work commitments. Many of the practical training courses are offered through colleges or independent training providers on a day or block-release basis.

Candidates should ensure that the courses and training they take meet programme requirements, by checking the RFS qualifications web pages (www.rfs.org.uk/learning/rfs-qualifications) or making contact with the education team at RFS head office. Candidates can only apply for the RFS Certificate when they have completed all the required elements (i.e., theory qualification and practical certificates).

Theory qualification

The Level 2/3 Certificates in Arboriculture, Forestry and Silviculture are validated by ABC Awards. RFS has worked closely with ABC Awards to develop the curriculum for each certificate. For this reason, the ABC Level 2/3 awards are recognised as the 'qualification standard' for the theoretical component of RFS Certificates.

The ABC Level 2/3 qualifications are as follows:

- ABC Level 2 Certificate in Arboriculture
 - leading to RFS Cert Arb
- ABC Level 2 Certificate in Forestry
 - leading to RFS Cert For
- ABC Level 3 Certificate in Silviculture
 - leading to RFS Cert Silv

Each ABC Level 2/3 Certificate is a stand-alone qualification. It is a theoretical course at craft/operative level and is assessed by a portfolio of evidence (i.e. as a general rule there are no exams). Each ABC Certificate is composed of 3-5 mandatory units (subject courses) and 1-2 optional

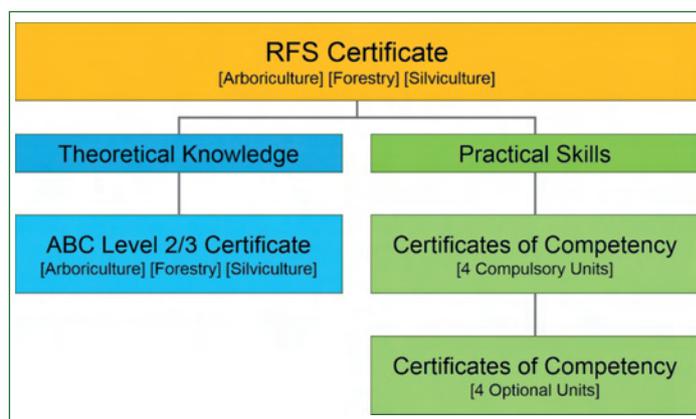


Figure 1. The structure and requirements for RFS Certificate qualifications in Arboriculture, Forestry and Silviculture.

units. The RFS has worked with ABC to develop the curriculum for each unit. However, it is important to note that the ABC qualifications are not the same as a full RFS Certificate, which requires the additional practical certificates of competency.

The Level 3 Certificate in Silviculture was introduced to offer a progression route for those who already hold a Level 2 award, and it therefore contains a more advanced and focused curriculum.

Equivalency recognition

In 2016 we conducted an interim review of our qualifications and decided that we would consider alternative theory qualifications on a case-by-case basis, so long as the relevant award is at Level 2/3, or above, and accredited by a recognised examination/qualifications awarding body, such as City and Guilds. For advice and information about the acceptability of alternative qualifications we advise candidates to contact the education team at RFS at the earliest opportunity.

Practical certificates of competency

For the certificates of competency in practical skills, the RFS recognises qualifications awarded through NPTC (City & Guilds) and Lantra. These are the leading awarding bodies for land-based and environmental training courses and qualifications in the UK.

The practical component of the RFS Certificate comprises a suite of eight certificates of competency or licenses to practice. Four of these are prescribed as compulsory units, and four must be selected from a list of optional units. Titles and coding for compulsory and optional certificates of competency are provided on the course web pages. RFS

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can only accept certificates of competency that are formally assessed as licenses to practice, not lesser certificates of training or attendance. We adhere strictly to our qualifications template to ensure all candidates have been assessed to meet current health and safety requirements.

Application procedure

From 1 March 2017 we have introduced a new application procedure. The entire process is now completed online, with the application form downloaded and returned complete with high resolution scans of relevant certificates. Applications can be submitted at any time and it takes up to eight weeks to be reviewed and for a certificate to be issued. There is a fee of £75 for each successful application. Full details are online on the qualifications web pages.

Holders of a RFS Certificate may use the relevant post-nominal abbreviations: Cert Arb RFS, Cert For RFS or Cert Silv RFS. Successful candidates are eligible for free membership of the RFS for one year. Details of how candidates can claim their free membership will be provided in a letter sent with the award certificate.

In line with best practice for qualifications and accreditation, the RFS has introduced a new application procedure and database that fully complies with current data protection legislation. As an awarding body, we provide verification of RFS Certificate holders to employers and trading standards authorities who may require confirmation of a person's professional qualifications. Additionally, we are in the process of developing an online register that contains the names of holders of RFS certificates. This may be helpful to those wishing to be recognised for professional reasons; an opt-out is possible for those not wishing their name to appear online.

Health and safety

Although not a formal requirement, RFS strongly recommends that all candidates for RFS qualifications complete first aid at work training, and maintain a valid first aid certificate while working with trees or in a woodland setting. This is important for personal health and safety, as well as for the well-being of colleagues. Further information about health and safety in the forestry sector is available from the Forest Industry Safety Accord (FISA). Our commitment to health and safety lies at the core of our activities. We endorse the Forest Industry Safety Accord (FISA) and want to see the forest become a safer workplace.

Conclusion

Qualifications and accreditation are a key feature of modern professional practice. The RFS Certificates are unique qualifications for the arboriculture and forestry sectors, combining key elements for technical knowledge, skills and safety. They recognise hard work, dedication and professionalism in the practice of arboriculture and forestry at the craft or operative level. In addition, RFS Certificates are recognisable to the wider public, who may not otherwise be aware of the skills and safety requirements of our sectors.

Websites

RFS Qualifications – <http://www.rfs.org.uk/learning/rfs-qualifications/>

ABC Awards – <http://www.abcawards.co.uk>

Forest Industries Safety Accord – <http://www.ukfisa.com/>

References

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Leslie, A.D., Wilson, E.R. & Starr, C.B. (2006) The current state of professional forestry education in the United Kingdom. *International Forestry Review*, **8**(3):339-349

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