

Diploma in Applied Permaculture Design

Northern Network Delivery System Design Information and Development Strategy

(Draft) Version 1.2 December 2008
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Summary

This document describes the design history, development strategy and current state of the permaculture diploma network (or work-net) in the north of Britain.

From slow beginnings, we are building up a network of support tutors and currently have the capacity to support more students (“apprentices”). We are at a stage where we want to attract more apprentices capable of rapid progress and build our capacity to support them further.

We outline our development priorities which include “design support” and a dialogue across Europe about quality assurance of final accreditations.

We have demonstrated the transition from a lone regional tutor with a few disparate students to that of an increasingly supportive work-net. We think it valuable to share and compare experiences with other regions, now, with a view to the development of an increasingly robust diploma system in Britain. We make a case for maintaining our pioneering spirit, our strength of community and our common purpose as we move forward.

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International diploma protocols

The current design acknowledges the worldwide protocols for permaculture:

- the right to use the word “permaculture” in a commercial sense (particularly in education) is vested in the graduates of the 72-hour permaculture design course
- the right to determine the development of permaculture education is vested in the holders of the diploma in permaculture design
- there shall be a minimum period of two years between graduating from the 72-hour course and being awarded the diploma

Our network upholds these protocols.

Fundamentals

Vision

A diploma process that is accessible, affordable and fun, leading to permaculture design work of the highest possible standard.

System functions

The system is designed so as to

- improve the volume, range and quality of permaculture design work carried out
- assure and refine the methods of assessing and recognising good practice in permaculture design
- reduce the isolation felt by many apprentices who want to improve their permaculture design skill
- provide support for tutors who want to help apprentices
- provide participants with personal access to a diverse, interesting (and perhaps unusual) bunch of people
- facilitate the development of local support systems for the diploma (and permaculture itself)

System elements

The elements of the system are listed in Table 1, which shows the roles, responsibilities and identifies of the people concerned with the delivery of services and the development of the system.

There are vacancies around the work on resources for tutors and apprentices (documentation in particular), also for communication systems.

We need to clarify roles and activities for system review and development, to provide a clearer process around that, and to support Angus's work with the PA(B)'s Diploma Development Team. These may then be added to the table of delivery elements.

Desired outputs

The system is designed and developed such that our system produces

- portfolios that are accreditable
- portfolios that are inspiring
- designs that are useful in teaching and learning
- competent personal tutors with experience of self-directed learning
- competent design support tutors
- feedback for system improvement
- strong support systems for every locality

Development Strategy

Rationale

Permaculture Design is a rarely-used but powerful practice that offers great promise for the future well-being of the planet. This future depends on the rapid communication and application of that practice, so that people in every community have access to skilled practitioners.

The diploma is a key step in that process, validating the ability of individual designers and building a collective body of knowledge for teaching and learning. It suggests a “college of permaculture graduates” and stimulates its further development, based on common interest.

Our apprentice designers are our future, and we have a duty to ensure that they can progress at their chosen pace to achieve a clearly-defined standard of design work.

Basing our diploma strategies on a strong sense of shared work, we can support the most able and independent students to complete their pathways as quickly as possible, so that they may become a resource for others on their pathways. Everyone in the system may contribute to its development, from their beginnings onwards

History

The development strategy we are currently using is in line with the system designed in the 1990's by a team led by Andy Langford. This was initiated at the teachers' meeting in Bristol in 1992(?) where the “peer review” approach gained the support of an overwhelming majority of those present. The system design is extensively documented. Some of the documentation appears on the PA(B) website, other pieces are so extensive that they have yet to be collated.

Key features of this design are:

- the use of a “regional” (i.e. human scale) approach to develop both tutors and apprentices
- the introduction of “action learning tutors”, to reduce feelings of isolation and ease apprentices along the pathway to the diploma
- a “pathway” that is self-determined by the apprentice, using self-directed learning
- a “soft systems” approach towards “tutors” and the provision of support (accepting the resulting “fuzzy edges”)

A robust development strategy, based on the above, was laid down and agreed by Chris Dixon (for Wales) and myself (for the north) with Andy Langford (for the south). Having examined and agreed this strategy, I have spent the last seven years testing, trialling and following it.

This document is a result of my many reflections on our practice, following on from the Bristol meeting in the early 90's.

The nature of the diploma

The current system is based on the idea of a diploma that has “intrinsic” value – it is worth doing for the experience itself, and for the recognition of other permaculture designers, worldwide.

This diploma is not held out as a qualification to do anything other than participate in the development of permaculture education and practice. Recognition by the outside world depends on the work carried out by our “diplomates”.

External “qualifications” can be designed into our systems but this presents challenges and requires additional resource (see table 2)

We have to deal with an accreditation “hangover” from the early days whereby people gained their diploma for “good work” in permaculture, or for demonstrating a “green lifestyle”, without necessarily having to provide any evidence of carrying out design work, or even referring to it. This was brought to our attention by Jo Tippett's reflective piece, written after participation in an accreditation peer group (before 1997). She makes a case for having two awards, one for permaculture design, the other for “achievement” in permaculture. Perhaps this second award could be promoted as an “honourary” diploma ?

Coherent strategies

So, the task is to:

- take apprentices through the process as quickly as possible, consistent with a high quality of design work, without putting undue stresses and strains on the tutors and support systems.
- recognise each apprentice (and each tutor) is a unique individual, capitalise on that (and also make allowances for it)
- acknowledge that students are not necessarily cash rich, but can often offer invaluable resources to the system
- deal with complexity and richness at every turn.

The problems faced in carrying this out have already suggested some solutions, (1 – 7, as follows)

1 Build relationship

We have a system that attracts talented and committed people, often with considerable knowledge and skills that are in-valuable to us. The beneficial relationships, between individuals within the work-net, reduce the feeling of isolation and provide sources of support that are otherwise lacking.

We can draw on previously successful human patterns such as apprenticeship. (Hence our preference for “apprentice” as opposed to “student”). Progression of apprentices can be rapid - there is much to do and a shortage of skilled people to do it..

The situation is urgent, but we cannot afford to rush if we are to establish a system of enduring quality. For we are all apprentices in this uncertain venture. There can be no substitute for “serving your time” (or, as we used to say in the music business, “paying your dues”). We have, at least, made a start and can celebrate the speed with which some apprentices have completed their pathways successfully and become a significant resource for others.

We need money to make progress, but there is a permaculture approach to doing business:

- We have to know when to invest and when to harvest. As tutors, we have a sense of obligation to our students, we are investing in the future, and we have to be careful of harvesting too much for ourselves, too early. In return, tutors can get all manner of support from their apprentices
- We prefer to avoid passive consumption. This puts a duty on apprentices to be active in the system and to support their tutors in whatever ways they can. In return, students can reduce some of their cash outgoings, if they so wish.

This encourages a sense of community and the strengthening of relationships. The outcome is flexibility and the development of skills around valuing, negotiating and identifying multiple yields.

2 Stay lean

We are constrained by lack of resources at present. It is very tempting to rely on electronic communications systems, rapid transport, established colleges, central funding etc. But can we carry on our work if these systems fail, or if they become inaccessible to us? If we have a core system that does not depend too much on all this, then our apprentices can take the pattern and still move forward in difficult circumstances, should they decide to become tutors themselves. Once started, we will develop our own momentum, and we can always piggy-back on other systems that are available to us.

While the work-net is young, it remains vulnerable, and efforts to make the system as robust as possible will pay off. Growing things need feeding. It is in all our interests to support each other in the development task, wherever possible, with whatever we can spare.

If we can meet inputs from within the system, then we can minimise external inputs (cash in particular). This brings us back to the quality of the apprentices we are recruiting and our ability to forge working relationships with them. Again, the principles of “shared work” and “producer, not consumer” will become important values for us.

There are areas where we need to take care with this approach, in particular managing the complexity of it and strengthening beneficial links to external systems. For complexity, the rules are:

- simplify the problem before making the solution more complex
- simplify only as far as complexity allows (Ashby's Law)

It's all good practice for us in developing our design skills !

3 Keep a focus

With tutors as with apprentices – there seems to be so much to do that it is easy to be overwhelmed. I have found the following helpful:

- Move from pattern to detail. Get the shape of things right first. Do just enough to get going - then reflective learning can kick in
- Prioritise ruthlessly - question the need to do something, at every turn.
- Apply Pareto's 80:20 rule, go for the 80 per cent of the work that can be done in 20 per cent of the time that it takes to do the job “properly”. (Or, as my friend Geoff Corner would say “This job is perfect, but it will have to do for now”)
- When following plans, be event-driven rather than time driven. Complete each stage to the agreed standard before moving on to the next. If something is broken, stop and fix it before “ticking the box” and moving on. Often, what we think to be deadlines turn out to be just that – dead lines.
- Get help (see “Build relationship”)

So much for urgency. As for the really important work, I try to capture the timeless quality of what we are doing, and concentrate on that. All else will ebb and flow, and may easily distract us from our core task while it does so

Our development priorities are listed in table 3

4 Match supply and demand

Any increase in the number of apprentices must be matched by the capacity of tutors. The limiting factor at the moment is the number of experienced design support tutors, and their available pool of design tutor apprentices.

Since it takes time to gain the requisite experience here, our planning has a focus on design support. Work-based learning is one of our values, so we must have diploma pathway apprentices for the design tutors (and their design tutor apprentices) to work with. But if we have too many pathway apprentices in the system then they will not get the right levels of support...

It has to be like the porridge in the kid's story – not too hot, not too cold, but just right.

Recruitment onto the diploma pathway seems to be working out well for us at the moment. It will be crucial to our success to manage this as we move forward.

If you have read so far, you might think that our diploma is not for the faint-hearted. It is not my style to “sell” the diploma to anyone. The diploma is, with the help of the PA(B) and design course organisers, selling itself while we get ourselves organised.. We have apprentices coming forward. Everyone is helping to build the system in their own way, and it's still early days.. If I am to recommend a strategy for recruitment, I suggest we concentrate on design course graduates who “get it” - that is they:

- take responsibility for themselves (the Prime Directive)
- value the diploma for what it is now (some support leading to peer recognition)
- are intrigued by us as an interesting (if unusual) bunch of people

I also make sure that my design course students understand that the course is the foundation to the diploma, so that the enthusiastic ones know that they may easily graduate onto the pathway.

5 Extend the use of action learning

Feedback loops need to be in place from the very beginning. Reflective learning is not just for apprentices. Sharing experience among tutors is proving really valuable. In the north, we are currently reflecting on:

- the current approach to “action learning” for apprentices – we need to know more about how well our approach is meeting individual needs
- appropriate styles of action learning for tutors and others involved in delivery
- action learning on the content of the diploma (permaculture design), as well as the pathway processes

6 Look for early yields

In terms of yields, it is worth investing some time identifying:

- who's who in the whole work-net, what they have to offer in terms of skill, time and money
- those close to the network who might find that interaction with us would bring benefits to themselves
- experienced practitioners outside the work-net who were not properly introduced to the diploma on their design courses (potentially a large number of people)
- senior permaculture people who have previously attributed little or no value to the diploma.

There are significant potential resources available here for development and promotion.

7 Plan to replicate

Development “regions” are not territorial, but relate to a human scale work-net of tutors and students. Growth is designed to be by replication and succession. Here we are already planning for the next “regions” to emerge and they can use the pioneering patterns we are developing, to move forward, restlessly. The pioneering spirit will live on for some time to come.

Quality Assurance

Our main focus at present is on the quality of our outputs (see above), in particular with the standard at accreditation.

The rights of Graham Bell, Steven Nutt and company, to grant diplomas, were validated by the Australian Permaculture Institute in the early 90's (?) As for current output, and current competence, the diploma accreditations we have carried out so far are personally guaranteed by least one of the following: Mark Fisher, Rod Everett, Ed Tyler, and Angus Soutar. Those of you who know us will recognise the considerable collective experience with permaculture design. We are the direct descendants (or, in Rod's case, a peer) of those early diploma pioneers .

The wisdom of time-served permaculture teachers and practitioners across the country is also available to us.

Quality of process comes next. But before quality assuring process we also need to agree on:

- what the processes are
- how to determine their quality.

However, discussions on quality of outcomes will help to build consensus. Permaculture Institutes across Europe are ready to have this discussion, which make it even more timely.

Table 1 - System elements

	Lead person	Responsible for	Supported by	Date agreed
Co-Ordinator	Angus Soutar	Development External Liaison (other regions, PAB) Load management Tutor training and support Apprentice support	Personal tutors (all) Apprentices (numerous)	Dec 2000
Personal Tutor (York)	Chris Chidlow	First point of contact for apprentices Orientation of apprentices Action learning tutorials Signposting Recruitment		Oct 2006
Personal Tutor (Argyll)	Ed Tyler			Jan 2007
Personal Tutor (Sheffield)	Saleema Imam			July 2007
Personal Tutor (Aberdeenshire)	Jonny Barton			Feb 2007
Personal Tutor (Vacancies)				
Registration services and external monitoring	Andy Goldring (PAB)	Registration Disbursement of funds "Hotline" and recourse	PA(B) staff PA(B) trustees	Dec 2000 ?
Lead Design Support Tutor	Angus Soutar	Liaison for accreditation Recruitment and training		July 2001
Design Support Tutors	Angus Soutar Mark Fisher Ed Tyler Rod Everett	Design support Explanation of criteria Portfolio-building Portfolio evaluation Accreditation	Chris Chidlow	From 2001
Education advice and support	Martine Drake	Advise tutor-developers on education process and practice, including "mainstreaming"	George Sobol Dr Jo Tippett, Ann Koldziejcki	June 2007
Apprentices	(Vacancy)	Progress their pathways Provide peer support Provide feedback Offer services	See list of apprentices (elsewhere)	
Documentation - Internal	Angus Soutar	Needs assessment Prioritisation Write - Edit	(Vacancies)	Sep 2000
Documentation - liaison	(Vacancy)	Liaison with PAB and other regions Review and integrate	Angus Soutar	
Communications	(Vacancy)	www, telephone etc	Angus Soutar Fraser How	

Table 2 - Linking the diploma to mainstream qualifications

My reluctance to prioritise “mainstreaming” of the diploma at the current time is based on:

- a desire to maintain and nurture our diploma's distinctive qualities
- a question about application of our scarce resources and our priorities

This table is offered as a discussion piece for those interested in “mainstreaming”. We support the rights of apprentices to benefit from our distinctive qualities while gaining their diplomas.

Distinctive Quality	Underpinning Principles	Possible strategies forward for integration with mainstream education
Intrinsic value	Permaculture ethics	Ethical qualifications?
Recognition of peers	Global nature of permaculture	Professional models
Person-centred approach	Valuing diversity	???
Tutor workload light and rewarding	“Greatest effect for the least effort”	?
Our diplomas may be granted to semi-literate (or even illiterate) people	“Yield is unlimited”	???

Table 3 - Our priority areas for development work

September 2008

Priority		
1	Ensure that our vision, goals and outcomes for the diploma are compatible with other regions across Europe and beyond (before engaging in any further discussions about harmonising system designs!)	
2	Agree criteria and good practice for Design Support Tutors and agree standards for their accreditation/recognition as such	
3	Liaise with other regional networks through PA(B) IDDT and the European working group about the urgency and the implications of any changes to our system, produce a forward plan	
4	Conduct a survey of apprentices and tutors to inform the design of any improvements to the system	
5	Continue the development of the people within our work-net.	