

An open letter to Sally Haynes, CEO, CIEEM

By email only

Dear Sally

I am writing to you in the capacity of director at Arbtech Consulting Ltd.

I suspect that you are aware of the problem that ecology and related-industry graduates face when trying to secure employment in our sector—I have tagged CIEEM in on numerous LinkedIn posts to this effect, which cumulatively have upwards of 1,000 likes, positive comments and shares¹. In the case that you are in fact unaware, I respectfully suggest that you give it your immediate attention.

The problem is simple.

There are many more graduates each year that seek employment in what I will refer to (for the sake of brevity) as 'ecology' than there are new posts created by the two primary natural mechanisms of the labour market: namely, a); the retirement of existing persons employed in the sector and, b); the rate of growth in the market for ecology services.

The result is a glut of graduates—indebted to their parents, banks and the government to the tune of tens of thousands of pounds—hungry to start a career in a sector that positively contributes to society. What these eager young people are met with however, is a tidal wave of rejection. With tens of people vying for every vacancy, competition is fierce. The net result is a constraint on income inflation that means graduate ecologists today are exploited to a horrifying degree in order to secure employment.

Notwithstanding the moral misalignment with what your organisation claims it stands for and does², it's bad for business. It allows shady organisations to undercut legitimate, fairer-minded employers by a considerable margin in order to win work. This is a net zero game for the entire sector. It is clear to me that CIEEM have no active interest in the predicament graduates find themselves in and are blind to or lack any active interest in the abusive practices of many of my contemporaries.

The final straw for me was seeing a Member of your organisation advertise a post (since removed) for a graduate/assistant ecologist for the summer season. This post, quite apart from demanding own transport insured for business use, asked for a bachelor's degree, on-the-job experience, a willingness to stay away from home—around the UK and finally, as if that wasn't enough, demanded the person have excellent report writing skills and could work in a fast-paced, high pressure

¹ This evidences that I am not an outlier in the views I express herein.

² <https://cieem.net/about-cieem/what-we-do/>

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environment. The reward? A zero-hour contract with a pro-rata remuneration of £17,000 p.a.

Assuming that person is 21 years old (which is realistic, since they would need to have graduated and acquired enough experience to work unaided), that is illegal.

Read that again. An annual salary of £17,000 for a 21-year-old working a 40-hour week is £56 less than the legal minimum wage³.

I recently posted about this on LinkedIn, where you can read for yourself the 100+ comments from people that are supportive of my overall aim and recount their stories of being exploited. I can further tell you that I have around 40 direct messages that contain some truly scandalous accounts of deliberate mistreatment that would be *extremely* embarrassing for some employers in the ecology sector, many of whom are Members of CIEEM⁴.

Here's a potted summary of those exploits for which I have written testimony:

- Graduates being told to share hotel rooms with people (bad enough as it is) that they have never met before (worse).
- Graduates being charged out to clients at a commercial rate while being paid nothing. *Nothing*. As in, zero pounds.
- Graduates being promoted in title and responsibility but without a raise because they have "received training and development."
- Graduates being flatly told not to bother applying for a permanent job at the conclusion of a seasonal/temporary post unless they have a master's degree.
- Graduates having PPE and other equipment deducted from their salary. And the list goes on.

Enough is enough.

It's time you (yes, *you*, as CEO) did something about it.

I recognise of course that you have no control over the aforementioned mechanisms of demand and supply for labour.

However, the problem has been exacerbated by the organisation in your charge.

Sound unfair? I don't think it is, actually.

³ <https://www.gov.uk/national-minimum-wage-rates>

⁴ Unlike the great many cowards among your membership (that will happily bleat about someone in a private Facebook group and or make professional complaints about each other without first having the courage to approach a person, offer advice and, hell, maybe even help them) I will take the matter up privately and directly with the individuals concerned. I will use the CIEEM complaints procedure only as a last resort, which is what it should be.

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Either⁵ CIEEM is out of touch with the challenges faced by graduate members to the degree that it is incompetent to represent them, or more insidiously, it is deliberately sweeping the matter under the rug. Both are an egregious betrayal of the faith placed in you by hundreds, if not thousands of young people across the UK.

Cutting to the chase, here's what I think you should do:

1 The long game

Approach the education institutions providing under- and postgraduate degrees that you "accredit" for membership and address the painful skills gap that exists between what academia gives a person and what industry expects of them: namely, a lack of practical⁶ field survey and report writing skills relevant to the UK planning and development sector.

Get people outdoors, *in the UK*, doing what they will need to do for real if they want any hope of landing a job without the need to go to extraordinary lengths to just be paid, let alone adequately. This doesn't need to be the bulk of the programme, but perhaps an elective year. Even 3-4 well-designed modules would be a good start. It might not even cost the institution much – I'm sure there's many consultants out there that would give freely of their time to help support the sector (and/or for the advantage of being in contact with tons of bright, enthusiastic young people that they may wish to invite to interview when the time comes).

You may be aware of our ASSET programme (which for reason of COVID-19 we were not able to run last year). In a short space of time ASSET sought to do something similar to what I am proposing universities that charge £27k in fees alone do on a much grander scale. Running ASSET cost my business and as the owner therefore, me, well in excess of £15,000, several times a year. Of course, there were benefits. Chief among which was that I got to put my face in front of hundreds of people that were eager to learn skills that would allow them to gain employment. To date I have recruited seven people from the various ASSET programmes (2017-2019) and trained over a hundred more that have gone on to earn money as a subcontractor for Arbtech and others. All of this rendered it worth the investment in time and resources, bearing the inevitable criticism from small-minded, bitterly jealous rivals

⁵ If there's a third option I haven't considered, please do bring it to my attention.

⁶ Bluntly, you need to tell these institutions to cut the shit about gap years in Botswana and laboratory-based teaching and assessment. If you're wanting to work in the *UK* ecological consultancy sector then more than anything else, you need to be able to identify commonly encountered species, their sign and habitat; be able to draw maps in contemporary software; word-process a report; have a solid understanding of how the law and planning policy interact with ecological receptors; and understand at a basic level how to design both surveys and mitigation that are appropriate to the scale, nature and intensity of the project on which you are engaged.

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and, as is commonplace for Arbtech, having our now proven model copied and bastardised by yet others.

The thing is, I shouldn't have to do that.

People are coming out of university with ecological degrees that you have “accredited”, having spent £27-36k in fees, and tens of thousands more in accommodation, travel, and basic subsistence, without the ability to get a job. It's farcical. And the truth is this: if you're going to allow universities to attract students who then can't get a job, on the basis that CIEEM have accredited their course, then you are part of the problem.

There is, unequivocally no need for a person to undertake a degree of any sort to work in the sector and attain professional status. Full stop. However, if you are going to allow people to advance themselves using the framework of higher education, you should not be accrediting degree programs where people graduate without even the ability to fulfil the criteria for *basic* competence (reference; your own competency framework).

People should be graduating with ecological degrees that make them eligible for at least “basic” and ideally closer to if not very actually “capable” competence to perform day-to-day survey techniques, mapping and reporting. Don't forget, these people are in full-time education for three to four years. The idea that you are accrediting degrees that in 156-208 weeks of full-time lectures don't teach a basic level of competence isn't just bizarre. It's absurd.

I think it's about time CIEEM engaged the relevant stakeholders and addressed the problem.

2 The low hanging fruit

Publish a “Fair Pay Charter for Professional Ecologists” and ask that Members voluntarily sign up, as well as requiring your Registered Practices to do it as a condition of registration.

The Charter should be drawn up in the spirit of fairness to all employees but is aimed specifically at eliminating the exploitation of entry/graduate-level ecologists. The following principles are my own suggestions except where I have footnoted otherwise. Naturally, you may wish to add to this.

1. Ecologists (howsoever defined) should not be expected to work—whether freelance or via PAYE—for less than the national minimum wage and ideally, not less than the national living wage⁷. I suggest that “work” is defined as

⁷ Latterly, with thanks to Rachel Sore.

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any activity performed by the ecologist that forms the basis of fees or expenses charged to a client.

2. That all full-time, permanent posts pay not less than £20,000 p.a.⁸ where a prerequisite of employment in the post is a bachelor's degree or equivalent qualification. This gives people a fighting chance of paying off their student loan and related debt⁹.
3. That employers have a documented method of performance appraisal and reward system.
4. That employers have a documented method of providing for CPD.
5. That employers are prohibited from advertising roles for entry/graduate staff without listing the monetary remuneration¹⁰.
6. That expenses necessary to undertake the work (defined above), such as "company laptop", "phone" and "PPE" are a); excluded from the list of benefits of employment¹¹, and b); while those items may remain the property of an employer, they are not *automatically* re chargeable or deductible from a person's salary or expense claims. (Provable cases of loss, damage or deliberate destruction could be considered sensible exemptions).

Publishing a Charter like this should bring about an end a lot of the exploitation of graduates in ecology. It can also be used as a recruitment tool, to show graduates that a business aligns with what CIEEM considers to be a basic standard of pay and conditions for the profession. It can even be revenue generating: CIEEM could ask for a modest contribution for those voluntarily signing up to the Charter in exchange for the use of a CIEEM approved logo, much as you do with the Registered Practice logo.

At this point, I take the view that I have set out sufficient criticism to draw your attention to the problem and have proposed, deliberately, two solutions: one that can be implemented almost immediately (to the benefit of existing students and graduates) and another that will benefit the graduates of the future.

My contact details are in the email to which this letter is attached, should you wish to acknowledge the letter and or discuss its contents.

⁸ I will always hold my hand up if I'm wrong. In the past I have employed people on less than £20k. Even though they were all rapidly advanced well beyond this salary level, it was still wrong. We have not employed anyone below £20k for years now, and never will again. This is the *minimum* salary at Arbtech whether you are an ecologist or administrator or anything else.

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/special-rules-for-student-loans#plan-and-loan-types-and-thresholds>

¹⁰ With thanks to Katy Perry.

¹¹ There are myriad examples of this sort of nonsense, especially among large, multidisciplinary consultancies whose HR departments like to offer a "package" to graduates, that includes their salary and benefits, but also items that are required by law (pension, PPE) and/or are required as a matter of course to do their work (laptops, phones, field survey equipment, etc).

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Sincerely yours

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Arbtech Consulting Ltd