

Caught in a web

Rosalind Newlands considers whether web-based distance learning is the answer for interpretation training

The University of Edinburgh has been working with the Scottish Tourist Guides Association to develop pioneering web-based learning for tourist guides, supplemented by practical training, tours and tutorials. This combined system is now being developed for use by others including Wild Scotland.

The advantages of web-based learning include accessibility for students who live at varying distances – we currently have students from Milan, Venice and Berlin. Students can link to approved sites and access a huge volume of information. However, this means that they must select carefully and receive on-line or direct tutor support, particularly as some don't have English as their mother tongue. Distance learning has limitations: you can learn history – but to understand geology, natural heritage, archaeology or architecture you also need to go and look!

This emphasis on field experience is supported by the experts: the guides themselves. In a survey by the Federation of European Guides about what should be included in tourist guide training programmes, guides emphasised the importance of practical training, whether or not it currently happens in their own countries.

A European standard for training and qualification for tourist guides (including wildlife guides) that is being developed reflects this too, requiring a 60/40 split in knowledge and practical training.

We can learn about the environment and interpretation theory through distance learning but we need to go and see before we can understand and explain to others. Interpretation is a hands-on profession. Use distance learning for facts and research; then get your students out and about. Teach them on site; show them best practice and let them try it out for themselves.

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