Is that on the SCQF…?
North Highlands Tourist Guiding Cert HE

By Lynn Campbell, Programme Leader at the Institute for Northern Studies at UHI

For the last four years, the course Cert HE North Highlands Tourist Guiding has been run by the Institute for Northern Studies (INS) at Orkney College/University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI). Why, might you ask is a department based in Orkney running a course centred on the North Highlands? Well, it's because for the last ten-plus years, we have been engaged in running the tourist guide training for the Orkney guides.

In Orkney we have offered simply the STGA (Scottish Tourist Guides Association) Green Badge qualification. The Green Badge is seen as a mark of quality within the tourism industry. Orkney – the UK's cruise ship destination capital (164 ships in 2019) – was voted Top Cruise Destination for Western Europe and the UK for the third time in 2019, and also received the accolade as the top Northern Europe cruise destination from passengers aboard

Viking Cruises, from a total of 46 competing ports. Orkney uses almost exclusively STGA Green Badge trained guides, and INS has been responsible for running this course for a number of years.

We built upon the skills gained in our Orkney training course, and developed a brand new course in 2014 covering the North Highlands of Scotland, which included some business and tourism skills, offering an undergraduate qualification on top of the STGA qualification – a Cert HE North Highlands Tourist Guiding. The course underwent revalidation in January 2019, and now consists of three modules which run between September - May of each year. The final guiding exam is carried out by the STGA itself, so there is an additional charge to students for this examination.

Covering a geographic area larger than Belgium, this does provide us with a few challenges. As we cannot cover the whole of the Highlands, we concentrate on Inverness and its surrounding area, and on one particular route through the centre of the Highlands. This offers students the opportunity to guide across a large variety of environments, and builds their skills over time. The highest performing tourism site across the Highlands is Urquhart Castle, which forms a large part of our training. Once you've been trained at Urquhart Castle, you should be ready to tackle most guiding situations.

Students have weekly lectures from UHI staff throughout the academic year; it is only after Christmas that the practical tourist guide training kicks in. The amount of work involved in the course can never be underestimated, but students agree that by the end of the course it has all been worth it. I rather think it's a little like giving birth. Mothers don't remember the pain of birth when they have their brand new shiny baby in their arms.

Tourism is one of Scotland's most important industries, and it creates wealth and jobs, which build upon the nation's strong international reputation. During 2017, the Highlands saw over 534,000 international visitors, totalling a spend of around £194 million. The Highlands are seeing a boost in cruise ship visits too. With six ports within the Highlands area, in 2019 the Port of Cromarty Firth (Invergordon) brought around 49,000 cruise ship passengers to the Highlands, an increase of over 50% of the figure from the full 12 months of 2016. In total, 180,000 passengers are forecast to arrive at the port in 2019, on 109 cruise ships.

As the course has gathered momentum, we have received more and more applications, but there is a limit on numbers. This is to ensure that students gain the maximum benefit from the practical training, which is undertaken between January - May, in all weathers. One of the guiding mantras is "*Guiding is Fun,*" which sometimes you have to be reminded of as the hail stones bounce off your head. In the middle of Culloden Battlefield. In February.

The key – I find – to good cheer, is regular tea breaks.

Entry will be open for September 2020 shortly.
https://www.uhi.ac.uk/en/courses/certhe-north-highlands-tourist-guiding/