

Harry Simons has 25 years of experience in technical, commercial and management roles in the E&P sector. As Country Manager and Directeur General, he led the Algerian business for Hess, managed the non-operated portfolio in the UCKS, and was the Business Advisor for the Europe Eurasia region. With Burlington Resources he was the Planning Manager and Operations Engineer for the assets run from the UK. Prior to this, as a consultant and also working in the service sector, Harry worked on and offshore. He has extensive well operations experience in both engineering and geological roles, risk management, business continuity, Health, Safety and Environmental management, and government and NOC relations.

While working in consultancy roles, Harry is nearing completion of an M.Sc. in Renewable Energy Development at Heriot-Watt.

Why did you decide to take time out of work to study and how did you decide which course? Tell us a little about the course.

My course is an Independent, Distance Learning (IDL) M.Sc. in Renewable Energy Development with Heriot Watt. I picked a course that was flexible to allow for changing work commitments. To a large extent, this flexibility helped me focus down on who was able to provide me with professional development at a pace that I could manage. While I would have been keen to attend lectures in person once in a while (say once a month), as it turned out due to the COVID pandemic, this wouldn't have been possible. Heriot Watt was already providing online lecture and recordings of prior courses for IDL students. Heriot Watt's involvement with Renewable Energy activities in Orkney and their close links with industry were important – a good balance academic and practical, commercial experience.

Unlike my first degree, the course is modular, and comprises a set number of modules that must be completed within an allotted time period over a number of years. The university suggests 10-15 hours a week should be expected for study, although in all honesty this varies from subject to subject. Some subjects have been quite intensive, particularly where my existing knowledge has been challenged (such as with Electrical Engineering), but I've enjoyed grappling with new subjects and understanding the detail behind them. Some subjects have been less challenging (such as economics), but going back to basics has been useful and I've taken the time to challenge my own understanding and make sure some assumptions I've made over my understanding of things has actually been correct.

I am required to do eight modules in total, and a dissertation. My remaining modules are marked by assignment during the semester (rather than by exam) or by project submission – effectively a practice dissertation.

What was challenging about going back to study?. Have you had the support of an employer or another organisation in pursuing this additional qualification?

Finding a structure in which I can work and a systematic way of engaging with new subjects has required discipline. Given the breadth and fast-moving nature of the renewables sector, its very difficult when researching a subject not to go off down 'rabbit holes' and find yourself many papers away from the original issue you were considering. Unlike my first degree, which involved research through libraries and hard copy papers, it is almost too easy to find information regarding a particular topic and become overwhelmed with the mass of information on the Internet.

Independent learning is a challenge in itself. It's not unknown for me to sit in the office for hours and come out a bit saturated with information. And its possible to do this without having any interaction with other people – certainly my first and second modules were done with very little, if any, interaction with other people. Only as I have become more aware of the resources available

within the University have I spent more time talking to the lecturers and asking for assistance with specific learning objectives.

I've also had to try and put aside some of my work experience and be open minded and listen to different perspectives on subjects I have been heavily involved in during my career. 'Personal experience' it turns out, isn't something that you can rely on in an academic paper.

I've had no support from an employer or other organisation during this study and have been solely responsible for the qualification. Family has been hugely supportive. In fact, the transition to renewable energy from the hydrocarbon sector has and continues to be a challenging activity.

Has it been what you expected so far, has anything surprised you? What were the key things you have learnt so far that you think will change your career path going forward?

I certainly underestimated the effort and discipline needed to undertake an M.Sc. and the independent, learning-at-a-distance aspect makes it no easier. I have a newfound admiration for friends and colleagues who have studied over the years while also having a day job. I've been surprised at how I've found studying really refreshing, frustrated that I didn't do it years ago, but really enjoying learning about new and relevant subjects.

I've been surprised at how certain aspects of renewable energy can polarise discussions, are often poorly understood and how entrenched people can be about their opinions. Have a discussion and argument about things, but do it from a position of knowledge of the subject, not by regurgitating headlines or misinformation. There is a balanced and reasoned answer as we transition to a Low Carbon economy, which I believe is exactly the right thing to do, but we have to be practical – frustratingly so at times to make sure the changes we are making now are the right ones for the future.

I believe we should be far, far more careful about how we manage and use our finite hydrocarbon resources. I am certainly committed to making sure we use these resources most effectively, and less, but certainly want to be part of the unlocking of more renewable resources for the future – wave and tidal are really exciting, particularly around the UK, but there are some great engineering and commercial challenges to overcome. Let me at them!