

'planning' for the future and setting targets. While reflective learning is important in academic studies, it is no less important in the workplace.

At PwC a comprehensive appraisal system operates whereby both line managers and clients that staff have been working for jointly appraise the person in question. There is also frequent access to a mentor and a counsellor. It is therefore vital, if staff are to prepare for their appraisals and reviews, and gain value from them, that they establish their ability to learn by reflecting on experiences.

The ability to self-assess is of paramount importance in this process, as is understanding the full value of their learning and teaching experience within the workplace. This form of experiential learning then feeds into day-to-day assignments, as well as individuals' own career and personal development plans.

Conclusion

The value of reflective learning cannot be overestimated in the workplace, and graduates from the GEES disciplines (and others) would do well to routinely assess their own abilities. Encouraging graduates to think about developing their own skills and abilities at an early stage in their academic career, and making use of personal development portfolios, would certainly bode well for their future career development, particularly at PwC. To conclude, it is not what graduates study, but how they benefit from their studies that interests major recruiters such as PwC. Personal development profiling (PDPs) can go a long way in assisting in this reflective development process.

For simulations of business situations constructed by PwC, which may be of interest to those who are teaching transferable skills, visit one of the interactive quizzes at:

<http://www.pwcglobal.com/uk/eng/car-inexp/graduate/fas.html>

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A pilot study using the mini-conference to externalise geo-assessment

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This article reports on the use of a mini-conference to assess undergraduate work by the Department of Geography at Edge Hill. The pilot scheme involves the participation of external agencies in a one-day conference organised by staff and students. Invited guests were asked to listen to student presentations on the theme of coastal change and several guests made contributions. Student presentations were based on small group research projects. The conference was deemed a great success by both students and visitors.

Introduction

The desire in geography to measure effectiveness in teaching and learning against external agents has prompted several studies which have looked at interactions with the world outside the geography department through work placements, graduate networks, project

and research links and partnership with public bodies (Buckingham-Hatfield, 1995; Church and Bull, 1995 and Jackson, 1995). It is also recognised that higher education institutions and the outside world can work together for their mutual benefit as well as for the benefit of students (Gardiner, 1998).

However, while supporting the student experience through active and co-operative learning, many links are tenuous and take place only through the activity of staff research and consultancy. The students themselves have no direct contact with employers outside higher education.

The Pilot-Study Mini Conference

Set within this context of externalising the student experience of teaching and learning and establishing employer links, the Department of Geography at Edge Hill has used a mini-conference as a form of assessment. The preparation for the conference has facilitated the widening of student access to regional organisations, their research activities and their management and encouraged external participation in student activity through a specific area of study. The pilot project is based on a new, recently validated module 'Coastal Zone Environments and Management' delivered in Semester 1 for Level 3 students. The module aims to look at the nature of coastal processes in the light of environmental fluctuations and human activity and uses the Sefton Coast on Merseyside as the location for much of the teaching and learning material. Students also use this coastline as the basis for group research projects. The validated module assessment includes individual reports based upon the group projects and an interim oral presentation is a preferred means of assessing progress with the research and reports.

Throughout the group project investigations, students are expected to make contact with several external agencies in order to aid and support their research and a list of suggested contacts is provided in the module handbook. Although the mini-conference did not originally form part of the validated assessment, a proposal to inform such agencies about their findings was made to students at the start of the semester. After initial scepticism there was broad agreement that oral presentations at a mini-conference would be a novel and effective way to proceed. It was also agreed that the undergraduates and external agents would evaluate the pilot scheme as a method of assessing student work.

The aims then of the mini-conference were to:

- foster the linkages with local and national external agencies within the context of independent research and encourage students to develop personal links with these agencies;
- prepare level 3 students for the preparation and presentation of research findings to conferences in the world of employment;
- develop an innovative programme of learning through the conference experience.

In order to fulfil these aims it was suggested that the interim oral presentations about the group research projects would form the core of the mini-conference. A number of external agencies were then invited to participate including those who were supporting student work and several of their representatives agreed to speak alongside the students together with other invited guests including academics with research interests in coastal studies.

Delivery

The module itself was delivered to 28 Level 3 Geography students through the following programme of work in order to provide support for assessment submissions and for the conference:

P L A N E T

- Weekly lectures and fieldwork in the first half of the semester together with workshops designed to brainstorm research and conference materials;
- Independent study sessions for undergraduate research activities;
- Workshops designed specifically for the purpose of preparing for the conference.

Assessment

The validated assessment strategy consists of a portfolio of work worth 60% of the module mark and a formal examination worth 40%. The portfolio includes an individual report based on the group research project together with small tasks and problem-solving exercises. Module learning outcomes validated in 2000 as yet do not include conference participation since the pilot scheme was intended for trial purposes only and relied upon the enthusiasm and commitment of the students themselves. However, it was suggested to the students that the outcomes of the pilot would include professional presentations to the conference on the subject of their group research projects, close liaison with local and national agencies and the development of transferable skills such as problem solving, external links and conference organisation.

Initially there was scepticism at the suggestion of formal presentations especially in view of the validated assessment strategy, although there was broad agreement for the need to collaborate with regional public bodies for research activities. However, once the module was underway and as group research activities commenced, enthusiasm for the conference grew. The conference idea was also welcomed by the external agencies themselves and five agreed to speak with a further twenty agreeing to attend on the day.

The presentations by the undergraduates were made in their research groups (each having between two and five members) with every student making a contribution. Two students who felt unable to speak offered posters on their research topic and such was the eventual enthusiasm for the conference that all seven groups who actually presented on the day produced poster evidence voluntarily, in itself a measure of their commitment. Conference day was the 15th December 2000 and included both morning and afternoon sessions. All the invited guests attended together with several others who had seen conference materials. Visitors, speakers and students mingled informally both before and after the conference and during the buffet lunch allowing the viewing of posters and informal talks with students and staff about research and coastal issues.

Evaluation and Conclusions

Evaluation of the project took place throughout the module using questionnaires and informal discussions. The responses of both guests and students have been overwhelmingly positive, all felt that the day itself was a great success and of mutual benefit with all the participants wishing to see the exercise continue. Without doubt the learning outcomes of the module, the student research and the conference participation have been fully realised. The motivation for student activity was certainly enhanced, considerable enthusiasm for the subject material was generated and closer links with several external agencies were established with positive consequences for departmental research activities. A review of geographical pedagogic literature revealed no evidence of the use of mini-conferences as assessment. The outcomes for the department following the conference have been wholly beneficial and constructive and in view of the positive

feedback from this exercise the use of mini-conferences in assessment can be recommended.

If you would like to know more about the conference and all its outcomes please email the author.

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QAA Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education: Career Education, Information and Guidance (CEIG)

Foreword

- 1 This document is a code of practice for career education, information and guidance in UK higher education institutions. It is one of a suite of inter-related documents which, taken together, will form an overall Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education for the guidance of higher education institutions subscribing to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (the QAA).
- 2 The overall Code and its constituent sections are being prepared by the QAA in response both to the Reports of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education and its Scottish Committee (the 'Dearing' and 'Garrick' Reports) and the consequent remodelling of the national arrangements for quality assurance in higher education. The completed Code will identify a comprehensive series of system-wide expectations covering matters relating to the management of academic quality and standards in higher education. In so doing, it will provide an authoritative reference point for institutions as they consciously, actively and systematically assure the academic quality and standards of their programmes, awards and qualifications. The Code will assume that, taking into account nationally agreed principles and practices, each institution has its own systems for independent verification both of its quality and standards and of the effectiveness of its quality assurance systems. In developing the Code, extensive advice is being sought from a range of knowledgeable practitioners.
- 3 Each section of the Code is structured into a series of precepts and accompanying outline guidance. The precepts identify those key matters that the QAA expects an institution to be able to demonstrate