

## Geographers and the Workplace: an Embedded Module

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*This article describes a subject-integrated module that has been in place for five years. It encourages undergraduates to consider career planning sooner rather than later during their programme of study, and to realise that their degree experience has long-term value. This article focuses on the learning experience which students receive through taking part in an exhibition stand competition concerned to highlight 'what can geographers offer organisations?'. The project is now also run by both earth and environmental sciences students in their career modules at Leeds.*

GEOG2440 'Geographers and The Workplace' has been run for five years for geography students at Leeds. The module learning outcomes state that 'on completion of the module, students should be able to:'

- Consider how their geography degree programme and life at University help in the development of key skills;
- Demonstrate awareness of changes in the graduate employment market, both generally and specifically for geographers;
- Demonstrate their ability to present their personal and academic qualities against occupational criteria in a manner that is effective in applications;
- Understand the value of their academic, personal and learning skills in the workplace;
- Demonstrate awareness of a range of job search strategies and an understanding of the differing patterns of recruitment in selection in different sectors - SME's, blue chip companies, voluntary bodies, etc;
- Understand decision making criteria in relation to career planning;
- Evaluate different sources of careers information.

The value of the module has been recognised by a variety of companies and has been sponsored by companies including Kingfisher, B&Q, Unilever and Accenture. A copy of the module outline and details are available from the authors.

One element of the module is the group project: 'What Geographers Can Do For Your Organisation'. The group selects an organisation, company or occupational sector and presents a 'stand' which clearly markets the skills geographers have to offer to that organisation. These may be 'Geography specific' skills (GIS, field skills) but are more likely to be the generic skills employers are seeking, and with which the study of Geography has equipped them (e.g. teamwork, problem-solving). The emphasis is on an up-beat presentation that will persuade a personnel manager, for example, that the individuals as geographers, have attributes the company 'must have'. The 'stand' is assembled for 'human resources (HR) managers', and others to visit. There are prizes for the most persuasive performances. On the day students visit each other's stands and act as HR managers to get some practice at this form of selling. Then the groups are visited by a variety of people drawn from around the university, the careers centre and externally.

The following extracts come from the feedback to a selection of the groups in 2001 commenting on their performance in this project work and on their own evaluation. They give a flavour of the exercise and the discussions.

**MI5** Good stand with a great game and some clever photo-montages. The conversation was heavily dominated by one member. Good on skills and values. The evidence was patchy and not all was justified. Tendency to the circular argument – geographers have skills which MI5 want so they want geographers, but without supporting evidence it sounds thin. Only two people really spoke, others drifted off.

**NORWICH UNION** Strong on the academic skills of geographers and plenty of evidence from course work, fieldwork and life. One person seemed to have researched NU very well and answered the tough questions; the others seemed a little lost. Wheel of Skills worked well in involving the assessor.

**ARUP** Strong on the strengths of geographers. I would have liked to see more explicit evidence tied to skills, but some good efforts. Understood well what the company needs. Good and creative material, own team logo. Needed to improve on personal illustration, a consistent team approach. Raffle was a nice touch, lots of enthusiasm.

**RAILTRACK** Good articulation of skills using graphs, PowerPoint, charts and fact pack. The biography and skills of each member were a super touch. Good research into Railtrack's needs. Each team member contributed to the presentation. Lively enthusiastic group.

**WS ATKINS** A creative and imaginative approach to the skills elements which were well articulated. Good examples from travel, cultural and environmental planning to link to the company. The company research was good, knew about the UK and global operation and where they could fit in. I like the way they made me think about what each costume portrayed. A good team effort.

**VIRGIN** This was a very good stand using colour coded and cohesive materials. The information was clearly expressed using the right language. Not so good at taking the geography degree apart and selecting the skills and experiences that it includes. I did not get a team feel from this group, one guy kept wandering off and around.

**IMPERIAL CANCER RESEARCH FUND** A dynamic team working well together. Looked at areas inside and outside the curriculum. Good video. Good at presenting specific evidence. Had done an appropriate level of research, knew what ICRF needs. Good at providing specific evidence from their own work.

**PRICEWATERHOUSECOOPERS** Graduate attributes were listed and well understood. The speaker had clearly thought through the evidence from the curriculum and made the links to PWC literature. There were some strong individual performances here, perhaps worked less well as a team. The wall and sport shirt display was good.

**ERDAS** Had clearly done a lot of research into ERDAS. Related the academic skills well. Useful links made between the company and RS/GIS, could have been hotter on links to other modules. Ability to make personal illustrations was limited, tended to the apologetic rather than persuasive. Not the most visually exciting display, given GIS potential this could have been more dynamic.

**MARS** Very keen, v. enthusiastic, well thought out visual display well used to back up the oral points. Excellent at demonstrating from own experience. Had personal examples to quote when asked. Dealt with the diversity of the company well. Liked the sweets.

### 'The things I enjoyed least' [student and tutor comments]

*'It was very frustrating trying to get the actual company to respond and get interviews and information' [this is worth remembering next year, you need to start pre-interview research well before the day before, getting info takes time and persistence.]*

*'Standing around waiting for people to talk to us, feeling like a spare part' [so get out there and make the first approach.]*

*'Being asked quite difficult questions because it was difficult to think on your feet and there was only limited time to research the company' [therefore you need plenty of time to research the company before an interview.]*

*'Some of the people were really difficult to talk to.' [this should not be true at an interview, but in every office and organisation there is someone who is hard to handle. Getting this skill going can be a great asset.]*

*'Talking to the first person, but it got better as time went on' [the message here is to realise that practising what you want to say out loud before this sort of activity, in the bath or bus stop, is really helpful and reduces nerves.]*

*'Answering questions that were outside the brief we were given, it was stressful'. [Expect the unexpected. Life is like this. You may have a brief but supplementary questions will come and suddenly an interviewer shoots off on another tack, try to keep calm, breathe deeply, listen hard and go with the game.]*

*'Getting everyone together' [time management and planning are critical, what would you do next time to make life easier?]*

*'It was tiring saying lots of things over again' [on recruitment and sales stands the staff are there all day, maybe for two or three days repeating the same information and everyone is exhausted by the end. Have a think about how information you would gain as a visitor might differ if you arrived at 9am on day one and 4pm on day three? How do you need to change your approach? What are the things that you can do as a visitor to a stand to help the speakers and make sure you get the best from their display?]*

### Synopsis

Students find this session exhausting but a very useful opportunity to use their presentation skills in a free format. They are very inventive in designing their stands and acquiring freebies, raffle items, and so on. Overall, the exercise reported in this paper is good fun and a good learning experience.

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## The Personal Development Portfolio for Geographers and Earth Scientists– a tool to raise employability awareness

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Higher education teachers use a variety of strategies to encourage students to reflect upon and evaluate their own learning experiences and plan for their own development. Personal development portfolios (PDPs) offer one such strategy. PDPs are structured and supported processes undertaken by individuals to reflect upon their own learning, performance and / or achievement, and to plan for their personal, educational and career development. This article reports on an experimental PDP document customised for final year Geography and Earth Science students at University College Northampton which is due to be introduced next academic year. The article should be of interest to course leaders in other institutions who are considering designing similar career-planning activities for their students.

### Introduction

At University College Northampton personal development portfolios (PDPs) are now well established in a number of single honours and combined honours programmes in the first year. Personal development portfolios are centred on student development.

They seek to:

- improve the capacity of individuals to understand what, how and when they are learning;
- encourage them to monitor, review, plan and take responsibility for their own learning.

This year has seen the introduction of a standard year two PDP document and a number of pilot projects to customise PDP materials and supporting workshops for particular courses and year groups. The 'Geography and Earth Science at Work' year three module (20 credits), commencing in September 2001, is one of these projects.

This module includes a portfolio whose purpose it is to draw together key aspects of academic and personal development during and alongside a student's degree studies to provide a self-marketing tool for his/her future career. As an assessed document, it is designed to form a comprehensive summary of progression, strengths and skills, and to provide an invaluable source of material for use in applications and at interviews. In particular, it is hoped that the portfolio will increase students' ability to remember and articulate those experiences which demonstrate the qualities employers value.

### Customising Materials

Recording and evaluating progress and setting goals is common practice within most professional appraisal systems in the workplace. It is hoped therefore that the PDP will be useful not just initially after graduation, but as the basis for continued self-development and learning.

In producing customised materials for final year students we were concerned to avoid 'recording fatigue' and to ensure activities are linked explicitly with the course programme: integration and