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# The Stirling Employability E-Mentoring Project (SEEM): A disciplinary focus on employability

Carol A. Salt<sup>1</sup> and Ginny Saich<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Biological and Environmental Sciences, University of Stirling, Stirling, FK8 2AT

<sup>2</sup> Centre for Academic Practice and Learning, same address

GEES Subject Centre Small Scale Project

## Abstract

The SEEM mentoring scheme has been established to provide undergraduate students in GEES disciplines with a source of support to help their career planning and ultimately improve their transition into employment. Alumni graduates working in GEES- relevant employment sectors are recruited as mentors. The scheme is based in an academic department and builds on existing links between staff, graduates and students, to provide a strong discipline-specific context and to tie in with careers activities embedded in the curriculum. Central to the promotion and management of SEEM is its web site with application forms, confidentiality agreements and guidelines for mentees and mentors in electronic format. Email is the main form of communication. Career profiles of all mentors are available on the web site in a database designed to help students select a suitable mentor. The first phase of the voluntary scheme was open to all students in their 3rd year. Participation was high amongst Honours students (34%). However, there was no participation from non-Honours students. The failure rate of mentee-mentor relationships was low (1 in 10). The brief given to mentees and mentors was kept deliberately flexible. Topics to be included were: career choices and paths, the functioning of organisations and businesses, a typical working day, applying for jobs, employer expectations, application of graduate skills in the work place and enhancing employability. At the end of the 3-month mentoring period, feedback received from mentees and mentors was overall very positive and constructive and resulted in a number of suggestions for future improvement to the scheme. The long-term viability of employability mentoring schemes is discussed in the context of longer established UK schemes.

## Introduction

One of the attractions of GEES disciplines, especially Geography, is the potentially wide career choice and hence the possibility for entrants of deferring career plans until later in their degree studies

(GEES, 2006). The GEES Graduate Employability Survey (Gedye and Chalkley, 2006) has shown that entrants typically lack well-defined views of their future career path and it is suggested that this contributes to their delayed entry into employment. The survey clearly showed that graduates would have liked more work experience, business awareness and career planning in their degree programmes. This is echoed by employers who are seeking graduates with insight into working environments. The GEES disciplines are responding in diverse ways to address these issues (Planet 2008, Issue 19, December Special Issue), however, given the large number of students involved, and their diverse interests, it is a challenge to provide direct experience of working environments for all.

Alumni mentoring is an approach to enhancing employability that has the potential to reach a large number of students and bring them in direct contact with graduates, from their own discipline, in relevant employment.

Mentoring has been defined as:

*"A one-to-one, non-judgemental relationship in which an individual mentor voluntarily gives his/her time to support and encourage another"*  
(Active Community Unit, Home Office, 2001).

Existing mentoring schemes in the UK HE sector which target employability show the potential to help specific groups, such as disabled students or students from non-traditional backgrounds as well as the student body as a whole (e.g. MentorVista at Staffordshire University, MaPS at the University of Central Lancashire, CaMP at Heriot-Watt University). The rationale behind the SEEM project (Stirling Employability E-Mentoring) was to target employability in GEES subjects by engaging mentors from amongst graduate alumni working in relevant employment sectors. This was based on the experience that most students' preferred career choices are in subject-specific employment sectors. The aim was to provide students with a source of support to help their career planning and ultimately improve their transition into employment.

## The SEEM mentoring scheme

The voluntary mentoring scheme, set up in late 2007, was promoted to 45 students in their penultimate or ultimate year studying Environmental Science, Environmental Geography and related degree programmes. This promotion was via email and via an open meeting during which students had the opportunity to feed their views into the project. Twenty-five mentors were recruited from amongst alumni who had responded to a long-term career survey and expressed an interest in mentoring. Central to the promotion and management of the scheme was a web site with application forms, confidentiality agreements and guidelines for mentees and mentors in electronic format (SEEM, 2009). The guidelines were based on those developed for MaPS – Mentoring: A Good Practice Guide (French *et al.*, 2002). Ten students volunteered to participate and most were matched with their first mentor choice. Mentees were asked to make the first contact via email. Both mentees and mentors were given advice on how to make the most of the mentoring relationship and what subjects to explore, but the brief was kept deliberately open. This included: career choices and paths, the functioning of organisations and businesses, a typical working day, applying for jobs, employer expectations, application of graduate skills in the work place and enhancing employability.

Whilst the scheme was designed around communication via email, direct contact between mentees and mentors was not discouraged as long as guidelines were adhered to, ensuring a safe and enjoyable mentoring experience. Three months during semester time were allocated for mentoring to take place and half-way through this period brief feedback was requested from mentees to ascertain progress. At the end of the period more extensive feedback was collected from mentees via a group discussion, as well as an anonymous questionnaire. Feedback from mentors was sought via email questionnaires and open response. In May 2008 all participants were invited to a social event at the University, which was attended by 5 mentors and 7 mentees.

A database of mentor details (SEEM, 2009) was established to help students find a mentor suited to their interests and requirements but also to provide an information source of career profiles for students who did not wish to participate in the scheme. The information on each mentor includes: gender, job title, employer, first graduate post, postgraduate qualifications, career path, application of degree in the work place, extra-curricular activities at University and tips on career planning (see example in Figure 1). Entries are allocated to 15 employment categories to facilitate searching (see Table 1) with some entries appearing in 2 or 3 categories.

**Figure 1:** Example of the SEEM database



### What is SEEM ?

SEEM is an e-mail based mentoring scheme which pairs Stirling graduates in employment as mentors with third year students as mentees. The scheme is designed to provide students on the Geography and Environmental Sciences programmes with relevant support and advice for career planning. Mentors have the opportunity to share their experiences and insights with students and to advise us on the relevance of the curriculum in relation to employability. SEEM is funded by the Higher Education Academy subject centre for Geography, Earth and Environmental Science.

**Project Leader:** Carol Salt (Senior Lecturer) [c.a.salt@stir.ac.uk](mailto:c.a.salt@stir.ac.uk)

**Project Office:** Russell Edgar (third year student) [rj03@students.stir.ac.uk](mailto:rj03@students.stir.ac.uk)

**Table 1.** Employment categories used in the mentor database

Advertising and Publishing	GIS, Remote Sensing, Surveying
Business and Industry	Other
Charities & NGO's	Outdoor & Leisure Industries
Conservation & Land Management	Planning
Energy	Research
Engineering	Teaching & Education
Environmental Consultancy	Waste Management
Environmental Agencies & Local Authorities	Water Management

Categories were initially selected to represent the most common types of graduate profession encountered in the long-term career survey and were finalised after consultation with students prior to the launch of the mentoring project.

### Participation and mentor selection

All 3rd year students who were eligible to participate in SEEM, but chose not to do so, were surveyed via an anonymous questionnaire. Whilst most students did not provide a reason why they had not taken part, 37% did say they had already made a career choice. When asked what would have made the scheme more interesting 60% ticked 'more explanation of the scheme' and 23% 'more employment categories'. This feedback will be used to make future improvements.

The 10 students who participated, 6 male and 4 female, were all enrolled on Honours degree programmes. This represented a 34% participation rate amongst 3rd year Honours students with no participation from students on 3-year BSc degree programmes. Mentors were predominantly chosen from the following categories: Environmental Agencies and Local Authorities, Environmental Consultancy, Conservation & Land Management, Outdoor & Leisure Industries, and GIS. Only one mentor-mentee pairing failed. This was due to lack of responsiveness on the part of the mentor. In future, an early email follow-up to both mentees and mentors should ensure that this type of problem can be addressed and a new pairing established if necessary.

### Feedback from mentees

Eight mentees attended the group feedback session and were very forthcoming in sharing their experiences. Several had encountered some difficulty in the communication process, i.e. they felt they were impinging on the mentor's time since some mentors only emailed in response to receiving a message from the mentee. Students expressed understanding of the time constraints of mentors and were hence reluctant to appear persistent. It was clear that students had thought about communication etiquette and were careful to ascertain whether the mentor had received an email when an answer was taking a while to arrive. The 2 students who met face-to-face with their mentor found this particularly valuable and other students said they would have liked to meet but did not dare ask.

The main topics covered in email exchanges were: how did the mentor get the job, details about the mentors job, qualifications required, career path, employment web sites, networking and making contacts in specific employment areas. A small number of students also received advice on an essay or dissertation topic.

The two male students who had chosen mentors working in GIS & modelling had realised through the mentoring that this employment area would not suit them due to the entirely office-based work. When prompted, 5 of the 10 mentees said they were now focussed on an outdoor-based career. Those interested in a career in conservation said

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they were now much more aware of the importance of volunteering as much as possible during their studies to avoid having to work without payment after graduation.

When asked about the relevance of skills taught at University for future employment, many replied that they had already been able to apply such skills during work experience. They recognised the importance of receiving a foundation in their subject that they would be able to build on in employment, as well as being able to continue learning beyond University.

Students said they had appreciated the relaxed approach of the scheme, its flexibility and the fact that it had been voluntary. To improve the mentor database, they suggested adding an entry specifically to describe a mentor's current employment. When asked about tips for future mentees, they stressed the need to keep the momentum going but also keeping an informal element to the communications with their mentor.

To give students the opportunity to provide anonymous feedback a questionnaire was made available in electronic form. This was answered by 7 of the 10 mentees. All were happy with their mentor choice and recommended the scheme to other students. The main benefits identified were related to receiving useful information and guidance and to the sharing of experiences. The main improvements suggested were inclusion of a wider range of mentors and a longer running time or earlier introduction in the degree programme.

### **Mentee reflections on personal mentoring experiences**

Three mentees volunteered to share their experiences with other students via a written account as well as a recorded podcast version. These are available on the SEEM web site. The following excerpts illustrate the students' reflections on their experience.

*"Interactions with a graduate in the same field of study provided a useful and realistic insight into working life, which I discovered is very different from the academic lifestyle. ....Discussing jobs and work related issues with my mentor has helped in my career path as I have now decided I would prefer outdoor rather than office-based work."*

*"Although I've maintained for a long time that being a ranger is what I want to do, more than anything, hearing about what my*

*mentor does started me to think about other options and lines of work I could consider and be happy with doing. .... I have thoroughly enjoyed the mentoring and taken a lot away from speaking with my mentor. It has started me seriously thinking about my career and not just trying to survive each term at Uni."*

*"Nearing the end of the mentoring project I reminisced on the whole experience to see what I had learned. ....I now have a more precise understanding on what I do and don't like; an idea of what it's like to work in the environmental sector and a wealth of information I didn't have or know about before. Perhaps more importantly I have a fuller understanding on what is required from me both academically and personally."*

### **Feedback from mentors**

Some mentors offered informal feedback by email, saying how much they had enjoyed being able to help a student and reconnect with their time at University. Five out of 10 mentors answered a formal questionnaire via email. All respondents had found it a valuable experience to be able to pass on advice and information to mentees. They identified as key benefits to their mentees the opportunity to gain insight into specific careers, access specialist advice and experience and discuss career options. The main disappointing aspect identified was limited communication from the mentee. When asked about possible improvements to the scheme, they suggested a longer period allocated for the mentoring, a pre-mentoring meeting at the University, introducing the scheme earlier into degree programmes and providing a description of each mentor's current post to assist students with their mentor selection.

All mentors, including those who were not selected, have agreed to continue participating in the scheme.

### **Findings and recommendations**

The SEEM project has demonstrated that mentoring can contribute to making students more career-aware and more focussed and thoughtful in their career planning. Students gave a strong impression of an increased sense of realism at the end of their mentoring, as well as a resolve to use their remaining year until graduation productively. Over the summer, all participants undertook activities that will enhance their future employability, ranging from industrial work placements and relevant temporary employment to volunteering and project work abroad.

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The participation rate was high amongst Honours students at 34% (4-year degree programmes) but no students on 3-year BSc programmes took part. The majority of students in the latter group are at the low end of academic performance and would have been due to graduate by the end of the mentoring period. It is likely that many of them already had career plans and did not identify with the careers represented in the mentor database.

The project attracted students who had already been pro-active in making themselves more employable prior to signing up for the mentoring. Almost all participants had previously undertaken some volunteering or had subject-relevant work experience. The feedback received from students who had chosen not to participate suggests that greater promotion of the mentoring scheme should be trialled.

It was apparent that some mentoring relationships lacked intensity and could have benefited from greater intervention from the project manager to keep up the momentum. There is a 'balancing act' required to retain the informality and student-led approach of the scheme, whilst providing occasional prompts and guidance as required. Since mentees would have liked to meet their mentor face-to-face, this aspect should be more encouraged, subject to agreement by the mentor, and geographical feasibility. To improve the mentor-mentee matching process an up-to-date job description needs to be added to the mentor database and students need to know that they can seek advice on their mentor choice from the project manager.

To secure the future sustainability of mentoring schemes like SEEM, it is necessary to consider which aspects can be automated to free up time for those aspects which benefit most from direct human involvement. The MentorVista programme at Staffordshire University (MentorVista, 2006), which has been running since 2005, demonstrates that many aspects can be successfully automated with customised software, for example external mentor log-in to update the database, auto-generated emails during mentoring and evaluation via electronic questionnaires.

Experience gained from mentoring schemes at Heriot-Watt University, Staffordshire University and University of Central Lancashire indicates that recruitment of mentors poses little difficulty but that scheme expansion can be hindered by low mentee recruitment. In all 3 institutions mentoring programmes are University-wide and are managed by the careers department. Whilst the first two are still running and attract around 50-110 students

per year, the latter scheme has been recently suspended. Competing demands on career services may threaten the survival of mentoring schemes, especially if they are seen as benefiting only a small number of students. There may be potential, however, for incorporating such mentoring schemes within a broader framework of alumni engagement, including programmes of visiting speakers, alumni input to programme design and review and internships and work placement opportunities.

The SEEM project illustrates that a departmentally-based subject-specific scheme can deliver high participation rates. However, the future of such schemes will depend on continued support through departmental resource commitment and/or linkage to strategic institutional developments to lever appropriate resource, maximising opportunities and returns-on-investment from alumni engagements.

Experience from SEEM (and other mentoring schemes) suggests that automation of many of the more routine aspects of the scheme can free up staff time for promotion, mentor-mentee matching and relationship management. The necessary investment in terms of software development is only likely to be viable at institutional level (and may, therefore, link to more holistic approaches that incorporate other disciplines within similar frameworks). However, from the perspective of SEEM there are distinct advantages to be gained from strong academic involvement at departmental level. These relate to a) direct promotion of mentoring to students by teachers, b) providing students with subject-specific advice on mentor choice and c) personal contacts between academic staff, mentees and graduates.

Mentoring should not be seen as an individual tool guaranteed to improve career awareness and career planning skills but as a valuable component of an employability strategy which can inject a sense of realism into students' views that cannot be delivered through the curriculum. No one single measure is likely to enhance employability noticeably, since a range of approaches are needed to cater for the needs and interests of a diverse student body.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Jill Freeman and the MentorVista team at Staffordshire University, Rhona Davies at the University of Central Lancashire, and Isabelle Pottinger and Nick Thow at Heriot-Watt University for their input to the project. Thanks also go to the GEES Subject Centre for the Small Scale Project funding.

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**Carol Salt and Ginny Saich**

[c.a.salt@stir.ac.uk](mailto:c.a.salt@stir.ac.uk)