

CONFERENCE REPORTS

Widening Participation and Employability: new opportunities for Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences.

GEES Subject Centre Residential Conference, 5/6 July 2004, Warwick

We are right to be proud of our universities and colleges. They produce some of the finest research in the world. They provide much excellent teaching, graduation rates are high, and students enjoy a good employability record. The sector is increasingly responsive to the needs of the wider community. But this is no time to rest on our laurels, because the challenges facing higher education are more wide-ranging and profound than ever before". David Young, Foreword, HEFCE Strategic Plan 2003-2008.

In July of this year, a select group of 30 participants meet at the Royal Court Hotel, Warwickshire, for the GEES Subject Centre two day residential conference 2004. The theme for this year's Residential Conference covered two key agendas in higher education in the UK, namely Widening Participation (WP) and Employability. The GEES Subject Centre and the GEES community have been involved in exemplary work in the area of employability for a number of years, but political changes have now brought both of these agendas to the forefront of institutional development and by default, to the attention of academics across the sector.

The two days consisted of keynote speakers, workshops and paper presentations from participants highlighting the challenges and opportunities facing staff, the growing expectations of all stakeholders in higher education in the UK and the new demands that this places on the GEES community. As the first keynote speaker of the conference, Sue Hatt (South West Regional Manager for Aimhigher¹) talked to the audience about the reality of the government WP agenda and what the implications are for the sector and for specific subjects. After describing the remit of the Aimhigher programme, Sue pointed participants in the direction of available funding for WP projects and programmes, leaving the audience to consider the practicalities of dealing with WP students.

Bill Chambers, Dean of Widening Participation at Liverpool Hope University College, provided an energetic and lively discussion on recruiting and retaining WP students in the GEES subject areas. He started by encouraging the audience to consider the benefits and opportunities of the WP agenda: the ethical issues; competitiveness within the international arena; and the social and cultural benefits afforded by such a pathway. The audience's attention was then drawn to the issues surrounding retention: the benefits of a sound retention policy; retention of WP students; and the constraints and opportunities facing the disciplines in this arena.

"The way into Higher Education should be an open, not a rotating door". Bill Chambers, LTSN-GEES Residential Conference 2004.

Bill, coming from a Geography background, then challenged the audience to consider the state of Geography in higher education with these two questions: what is Geography?; what can Geography as a subject actually offer students? Finally, Bill encouraged the audience to see the WP agenda as an opportunity, not a threat. Working towards this agenda is good practice for all.

"We want everyone to benefit from Higher Education who has the potential to do so". John Rushforth, HEFCE, LTSN GEES Residential Conference, 2004.

As the final keynote speaker of Day One, John Rushforth, Director of Widening Participation at HEFCE, provided the strong message that participation in higher education in the UK is relatively low in comparison to other countries. However, on a

positive note, UK institutions are particularly good at retention of students, which is a key element of WP. John's final message for the GEES community was again one of opportunity. The White Paper calls for all new academic staff to gain a teaching qualification by 2006.² There is an opportunity here for staff in the HE sector to define the nature of this professional development: engaging with the Higher Education Academy will enable the sector to work together to ensure continuity and development in learning and teaching.

The second day saw a change of direction, moving towards the Employability agenda. The keynote speaker for this day was Paul Redmond, Head of Careers at Liverpool Hope University College, providing a colourful, thought-provoking presentation on the current landscape of graduate careers and the need for academics working on the Employability issue to understand the drivers for change in this area. The audience found his words of advice challenging on more than one level: that is, not just with respect to the future careers of their undergraduates, but also to their own. After Paul's presentation, one member of the audience summed up the feelings of many in the audience: 'I underestimated the difficulty of getting a job!'

One of the major aims of this two day conference was to provide an opportunity for delegates to share good practice on these topics. This was achieved through a balance of paper presentations and practical sessions presenting tips and tools for enhancing employability. The practical sessions covered a range of methodologies for use with students including: 'Card Sort',³ a hands-on technique for engaging students with a topic such as employability or preparation for work-based learning; and the soon-to-be launched GEES Employability Profiles (watch this space).

Subjects covered by participants' paper presentations ranged from the experiences of disabled GEES students, the development and use of resources for dealing with WP and Employability in the curriculum, to student recruitment and GIS and GI-related field employability rates. Sharon Gedy, Project Officer with the GEES Subject Centre, finished the second day of the conference by presenting preliminary findings from a country-wide survey of GEES graduate experience of employment. The majority of these presentations and those of the Keynote speakers are available for download as Powerpoint slides from the GEES Subject Centre website³.

This two day conference provided an opportunity for delegates to discuss, consider and problem-solve on the issues of WP and employability. The over-all mood of the conference was, I think, summed up by a delegate who, when asked to note down one key point that he would like to remember, wrote "Conferences broaden the mind and inform knowledge". The GEES Subject Centre would like to thank all those who attended for their creative and enthusiastic input: we hope to see you again next year!

1. The Aimhigher Project website <http://www.aimhigher.ac.uk/>

2. DfES (2003), The Future of Higher Education, Government White Paper. <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/hegateway/strategy/hstrategy/foreword.shtml>

3. GEES Subject Centre Residential Conference webpage. Links to keynotes, participant presentations and information on 'card sort'. <http://www.gees.ac.uk/ac04/ac04.htm>

Yolande Knight, GEES Subject Centre, University of Plymouth
Email: y.knight@plymouth.ac.uk

CONFERENCE REPORTS

Supporting the Supporters: encouraging continuing professional development for support staff

GEES Subject Centre conference in association with the University of Gloucestershire, 8th June 2004, Cheltenham

It was perhaps appropriate that the first of the conferences following the absorption of LTSN-GEES into the HE Academy should have attracted the largest number of conference participants since the launch of the Centre, four years ago. Less obviously, the delegates who travelled to the University of Gloucestershire were mainly departmental 'support' or 'professional' staff, some of whom had never had an opportunity to attend an academic conference before. The origins of this conference lay in work being undertaken as part of a HEFCE project on 'The Inclusive Curriculum', where a section of the project involved production of materials to assist support staff in guiding disabled students. The subsequent realisation that only limited generic information was held about support staff numbers and roles led to discussions at a meeting of the Higher Education Study Group of the RGS-IBG, and involvement of the (then) LTSN-GEES Subject Centre. The event provided a unique opportunity for Departmental Administrators, Cartographers, Laboratory and Field Technicians, Librarians, Resource Centre Managers and ICT Technicians to share views and good practice. But most of all, there were opportunities to meet colleagues from other Universities and Colleges, and to explore the fulfilment and frustrations of working in the UK's HE sector in 2004.

The event was structured around keynote presentations, and workshops led by practitioners, but started with Carolyn Roberts (University of Gloucestershire) capturing the range of tasks and the crucial roles performed by these colleagues in GEES Departments. Her paper, entitled 'Someone in the lab can help you: student learning and the invisible army,' was based on a sample survey of UK Departments, and contained information about the numbers of staff employed in these various roles, their organisational structures, and their frequently 'unnoticed' status. Although the total number of support staff is substantial (perhaps 660 technicians and 540 administrators supporting GEES disciplines across the UK), many work as 'sole traders' within their Department. Moreover, some are not invited to participate in Departmental initiatives for enhancing support to students, surely a lost opportunity. Support staff were encouraged to be more vocal about their role in supporting students, and more assertive about their own professional development needs.

Jude Carroll (Oxford Brookes) developed the theme 'Reaching the parts: encouraging support staff development in HE' by inviting participants to reflect on their needs and aspirations, and the reasons why staff development would be personally valuable. She encouraged colleagues to identify and share perceptions on overcoming the barriers to participation (such as lack of time, mindsets, absence of appropriate opportunities), and provided information about sources of training and persuasive rationales for reluctant Heads of Department to consider.

A (net)working hothouse lunch was followed by Professor Sally Brown on 'Self Development, Professional Development: the balancing act'. After an entertaining quiz on impossible HE acronyms, Sally returned to the questions of encouragement and persuasion, and outlined the many national initiatives designed to improve student learning. She emphasised the increased focus on

'excellence' exemplified by the current HEFCE initiative on Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, and stressed the key role of support staff in delivering excellence.

The afternoon continued with role-specific workshops for Departmental Administrators and Managers (led by Kathy Haig, University of Gloucestershire), Cartography, Mapping & Graphic staff (Steve Chilton, Middlesex University), Laboratory, Fieldwork & Equipment Technicians (Paul Kimber, University of Gloucestershire), Librarians, Map Curators & Resource Centre staff (David Sherren, University of Portsmouth) and ICT Technicians & Administrators (Pauline Framingham, University of Plymouth). Most workshops included short specialist presentations from other practitioners, and all proved very popular. Shortage of time probably precluded sufficient discussion.

Feedback from the workshops to a Plenary session led by Professor Brian Chalkley (Director, GEES Subject Centre) also raised a number of 'burning issues' which the Academy will try to address over the next few months. These include

- The key role of these staff in supporting student learning, and some current feelings of being undervalued and marginalised
- The urgent need for networking and more staff development opportunities (technical and generic), particularly for those colleagues who work in smaller departments
- The need for support staff to be not only fully informed about new pedagogic initiatives, but to have opportunities to input to both policy and practice.

For academic staff who (funds permitting) normally have opportunities to travel to conferences and discuss teaching and research in their disciplines with colleagues from other universities, some of the evaluative comments made by delegates to this meeting may be quite salutary. Comments ranged across feelings of frustration, powerlessness and exclusion in their roles. One person commented on their 'feelings of depression and hopelessness with the lack of career structure'. Many support staff also expressed their appreciation for this meeting, and their keenness to participate in another of similar form. One delegate commented 'the best thing about this conference is realising that all technicians suffer the same pressures and frustrations. The worst thing about this conference is knowing that all technicians suffer the same pressures and frustrations.' There was nevertheless a great deal of positive feedback about the potential of support staff to assist institutional missions, if given an opportunity. One said '(I will) look out for opportunities to stretch my abilities...apply to go on relevant courses...and look at our School's aims and objectives'. Another wrote 'I will value my position and know that I do make a difference. I feel so much more confident in my views, as sharing them has shown that I am not alone.' Heads of Department perhaps need to take more care in future that their support staff are properly valued, supported and encouraged to make a full contribution to enhancing students' learning.

Carolyn Roberts, Head of School of Environment, University of Gloucestershire
Email: crroberts@glos.ac.uk

Comments ranged across feelings of frustration, powerlessness and exclusion in their roles

View from an ICT professional

This one day conference organised by the GEES Subject Centre was the first such event for support staff and attracted about 100 participants. This level of interest was reported to have come as something of a shock to the organisers who would normally expect about 30-50 people at their academic staff events.

The message of the first speaker, Carolyn Roberts, was not lost on the audience - that the role of support staff in supporting and enhancing student learning was largely undervalued in UK Universities. She noted that there were no official statistics on support staff levels and that they had undertaken their own pilot survey of 12 GEES Departments to get some idea of the range of support levels. Through this survey it was noted that there was an average student to technician ratio of 64:1 and that resource centre managers and ICT support staff were rapidly becoming more important. She suggested that a more appropriate term for many support staff might be 'Professional Service Staff' and predicted the merging of professional and academic services over the next few years. Carolyn ended her talk by looking at ways of identifying staff development and technical training needs and the organisations that might provide this.

After further presentations and lunch we broke up into separate sessions. In the ICT group Dave Harden gave a presentation on the work of supporting on-line teaching and learning in the Learning Technology Centre at the University of Gloucestershire which I would like to cover in more detail. We should not be put off by their use of WebCT, as I think the problems and opportunities are similar whatever virtual learning environment (VLE) is chosen.

Supporting on-line learning at the University of Gloucestershire Learning Technology Unit

The University of Gloucestershire Learning Technology Unit have been using the VLE, WebCT since 2000. Licences have been purchased only for students and courses in which WebCT is being used - currently 200 courses covering 50 tutors and designers and 900 students. This is not by any means all students at the university. The unit has written guides and support web pages including self-paced on-line tutorials and hand-outs in PDF format. They have also produced 'Viewlets' which are Flash animations produced to demonstrate the use of various software packages. To help do this they use a software package called 'Qarbon'. Despite all this support activity, Dave reported that the most effective use of their time is in one-to-one sessions with students when they need it.

For modules which make use of the WebCT facilities, a member of the Learning Technology Unit (LTU) will generally go to the first lecture and introduce him/herself and explain something about WebCT and the on-line learning which will be expected throughout the module.

The LTU has an email address, telephone helpdesk and FAQs available to both staff and students. For designers and developers, i.e. those tutors and other staff who want to customise their use of WebCT, the unit produces a WebCT Development Guide and

staff also have one-to-one training sessions. PlanetWebCT is a package of educational materials for WebCT which has been bought by Gloucestershire. Materials in it may be adapted and rebranded. WebCT is also used for on-line assessment. There is a need to convince academics that it will work and will save them time. Gloucestershire uses a software package called 'Questionmark' to design on-line assessments.

The LTU is also involved in video production and has a room where lecturers may sit in front of the camera, press record and start to speak. The video can be edited 'on the go' and has proved to be simple to operate with very little training needed. The result is often combined into a powerpoint presentation so that students can view a presentation which includes a video of the tutor talking about the topic in the corner of each slide. The unit runs a separate streaming media server to make it easy to deal with the large data volumes often associated with digital video.

On-line communications are also dealt with, including web conferencing over IP and Video conferencing over ISDN - this is done particularly to communicate with the London Urban Learning Foundation located in the London docklands. On top of this, the unit deals with general ICT skills development for both staff and students, including training for the ECDL.

a more appropriate term for many support staff might be "Professional Service Staff"

Overall, Dave gave the impression of an effective one-stop shop which had brought together staff in sufficient numbers and with a sufficiently wide range of skills and with a single focussed objective to form a 'critical mass' to be effective in not only supporting on-line learning and teaching but also in developing and disseminating new techniques. To understand more about the results which the centre has helped to achieve you might like to read

Elisabeth Skinner's article in *Planet* issue 12 entitled 'Using a Virtual Learning Environment to create a community of learners studying people and place'.¹

The final part of the day was a report-back session from the groups. A lot of information was presented here in a short time and I believe this is to be written up by each group's 'reporter' and disseminated at a later date. It was interesting that the administrators group was the only one to use the provided flipchart in their session!

I think the level of interest generated by this conference demonstrated a need for support staff to meet and discuss topics of mutual interest which is not at present being met in UK Universities. It is interesting to note that one of the groups represented at this conference, the cartographers, do get the chance to meet every year through the Society of Cartographers annual summer school. This event has been going for many years and I have attended it myself in the past. It is, in all except name, an academic conference but is called a 'summer school' because universities generally resist sending support staff to a 'conference'. That was certainly true 15 years ago, but how much has changed since then? Are universities beginning to recognise their professional support staff as professionals?

(1) Available from the GEES website at: <http://www.gees.ac.uk/planet/p7front.pdf> (pp10-12)

Tony Atkin, The College of St Mark & St John, Plymouth
Email: tatkin@marjon.ac.uk

CONFERENCE REPORTS

Enhancing the Campus through Student Project Work

A HEEPI conference in association with the GEES, Engineering and CEBS Subject Centres, Bristol, 14 September

The event on 14 September, organised by the Higher Education Environmental Performance Improvement (HEEPI) initiative, with support from the GEES, Engineering and Built Environment Subject Centres, was well attended by a 50/50 mix of academics and University Estates officers. The morning plenary session consisted of 3 presentations - from an academic, an estates manager, and a student campaigner. It is clear that participation from all three groups of people at universities is needed for successful change towards 'greener campuses'.

Peter Hopkinson introduced the work of HEEPI, which is based on the premise that 'if you can measure it, you can manage it'. The aim of HEEPI is to identify what help and guidance would be most useful, give examples of good practice, and provide ways for rushed academics and students to work together constructively on these issues. In his own work with students over the years at Bradford, it had taken 7 years of gathering evidence and putting the business case to convince the management of the need for a full time environmental manager.

Brian Chalkley introduced the work of the GEES Subject Centre. He also recounted how, over the years of supervising more than 300 geography student projects at Plymouth University, only 2 or 3 of these had been on the university campus - more exotic locations were a far more usual topic, perhaps due to the global perspective of geographers. It is not clear how much has been achieved since the Toyne Report in the 90s, but HEFCE are currently working on a strategy for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), and this will require estates managers to give a higher profile to sustainability issues. The outcome will be that more students will be doing work around sustainability.

Martin Haigh in his presentation referred to the concept of 'constructive alignment', or joined-up thinking. Students are generally taught according to the scientific ethic of objectivity, yet education for sustainability is something that needs to be taken personally. Oxford Brookes University (OBU) Environmental Forum has a combined staff and student membership of around 200, and has managed to achieve the status of fair-trade for the University - in other words, their project has had a real impact. On the Gaia module that Haigh teaches, each student plants trees, paid for by the Council.¹ The exercise is undertaken within the concepts of deep ecology, which Haigh believes should be the goal of all environmental education: we are each a member of the ecosystem, and what we do does matter. The intellectual value of the project is that it promotes reflective practice.

Lucy Pearce from People and Planet outlined how the organisation, which started as Third World First (the originators of the *Internationalist* magazine, later the *New Internationalist*), occupied a unique space between development (Oxfam etc.) and environment (Greenpeace etc.) Their campaigns are set by an annual meeting with their student networks, so achieving a sense of ownership by the students and helping their dual aim of achieving both impact and empowerment. The current campaigns are on climate change (of which the greening the campus is part), fair-trade and HIV/AIDS.

When People and Planet started their climate change campaign, only three universities were sourcing any green electricity. Now, ten years on, over 60 universities are buying green electricity, and the biggest switches have happened where there have been active People and Planet campaigns. They are making the links between a

huge global issue and individual action. Even so, their 'eco-footprints' work was not particularly successful - implying that it is easier for individuals to campaign to get others to change their actions, rather than to make changes in their own personal lifestyles. Similarly, recycling projects may not be the most important issue, but they have visible results, and this makes students feel that they can achieve something.

Albert Young from Glasgow University (GU) gave an outline of the EU Carbon Trading Scheme. This will apply to all universities that have boilers over 20MW in size, and means that they have to meet certain carbon emission limits. At Glasgow, 50% of electricity used is 'green', at no extra premium. This has been achieved by a good relationship with, and 'gentle persuasion' of, their electricity supplier, Scottish Power - the company has also paid for the design and printing of 3,000 bookmarks advertising the University's energy conservation campaign for Freshers Week. Glasgow University's energy efficiency campaign began in the 90s with posters, evolving into a campaign day and then a campaign week. The greatest savings have come from scientific research departments. To help get the message across, he uses the illustration that one tonne of CO₂ takes up the space of a 10 metre diameter balloon. He had gone to the Marketing and Psychology Department for help in how to get the message across and many different posters had been produced. There is always something practical for student work to address related to energy and the environment.

GU have appointed monitors to parade buildings to check that everything is turned off. They were lucky to have the actor Richard Wilson (grumpy 'Victor Mildrew') as Rector, who produced an energy saving video which is shown to all new staff and students. This describes how the lighting bill alone at GU is £3,000 a day. There are many different grants available for energy efficiency, for example, GU have obtained one of £50k for heat pump technology, and another grant for a daylight light dimming system.

The plenary in the afternoon, led by Brian Chalkley, aimed to discover how the work covered during the meeting could be taken forward. Potential opportunities included supporting establishment of a dialogue between academics and estates officers, and then embedding mechanisms to take the ideas forward. Other priorities for HEIs were seen to be: reporting to VCs on the issues involved; incorporating the concepts into learning and teaching strategies; and to highlight employability benefits of this work for students. The forthcoming UN decade of Education for Sustainable Development is another opportunity to highlight the issues involved.

Amongst the perceived obstacles were: lack of commitment from VCs; the fact that there are no related targets, requirements or incentives; and the nature of capital/refurbishment accounting and funding structures. Estates officers will need academic support, and there is a need to move beyond the GEES disciplines. Further action that delegates wanted to see taken by HEEPI and the Subject Centres included more workshops, summarised guidelines, and student project ideas on websites.

¹ See the article by Martin Haigh, page 22 this issue

Wendy Miller, GEES Subject Centre, University of Plymouth
Email: wmmiller@plymouth.ac.uk

UK organisations working for 'greener' campuses

Higher Education Environmental Performance Improvement (HEEPI)

This project, financed by HEFCE, is managed by the University of Bradford, in collaboration with the Association of University Directors of Estates (AUDE), the Building Research Establishment, the Environmental Association for Universities and Colleges (EAUC), and the Standing Conference of Principals (SCoP). HEEPI aims to improve the environmental performance of universities and colleges by developing environmental benchmarking. It runs events to showcase best practice, and its website offers case studies and guidance documents on themes including environmental management systems, energy use, sustainable construction, water use and waste minimisation and management. The case studies cover the reduction in water consumption by 75%, and costs by 30%, achieved at Liverpool John Moores University. <http://www.heepi.org.uk>

Environmental Association for Universities and Colleges (EAUC)

The EAUC has working groups on a number of key areas related to Environmental Management and Sustainability, designed to progress and share good practice in the FHE sector. Their Transport and Procurement groups are currently involved in projects funded by the Learning and Skills Council under the Good Practice in Sustainable Development Education fund. The Waste Management group have developed and published a 'Practical Guide to Waste Management'. Working in partnership with Nottingham Trent University, the EAUC is also developing a fully integrated environmental management system for the FHE sector; EcoCampus, aligned with the standards of ISO 14001 and EMAS. <http://www.eauc.org.uk/>

People and Planet

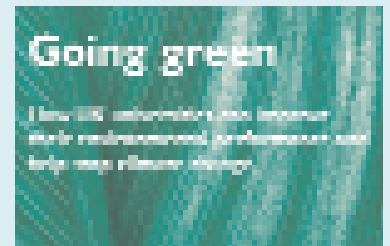
People & Planet's 'Go Green' campaign is calling on all universities to adopt four factors:

1. The active, public support of senior university management for a programme of environmental performance improvement. The support of the Vice-Chancellor or Principal is particularly important.
2. Full-time staff dedicated to environmental management - developing objectives, setting priorities and timebound targets to fulfil them.
3. A comprehensive review to investigate all the environmental impacts of the institution, so that potential improvements are identified and performance is monitored.
4. A written, publicly available environmental policy of intent regarding environmental performance improvement, and against which to compare practice.

People and Planet state: "... we will sustain this effort until high environmental performance is the norm, not the exception, in the sector." <http://www.peopleandplanet.org.uk>

Higher Education Partnership for Sustainability (HEPS)

The HEPS project, managed by Forum for the Future, involved collaboration between 18 universities and colleges across the UK to embed sustainability into their teaching, research, management and community relations. The final report is now available for download, and outlines policies and actions for implementing sustainability in higher education. http://www.forumforthefuture.org.uk/aboutus/heps_page1509.aspx



Case studies presented at the HEEPI Conference

Glasgow University. *Albert Young*

A principal focus has been on energy procurement/management :

- Energy efficiency investment; cost reduction of £3.2m achieved to date from energy purchasing savings and reinvestment in energy efficiency
- Monitoring of bills and consumption: around £64k pa reclaimed from utility suppliers
- Raising energy awareness using various methods including inductions, fresher publicity, campaigns and videos
- Student representative on Energy Management Committee

Oxford Brookes University. *Dr Anne Miller*

Annual environment audits have been carried out by students on one MSc programme for the past 10 years. Students review different parts of the campus or halls of resident, focussing on either energy, water use, waste management or procurement. Their subsequent report and SWOT analysis is then fed back to the university to be taken up into management. One major benefit cited is a huge increase in student motivation for their project work by knowing their work will be of use.

University of Bristol. *Joanna Simpson*

A pilot in-room recycling scheme has been set up in one hall of residence. Each bedroom was provided with a recycling bin which the students were then encouraged to empty into a mini recycling centre (MRC) on site on their way out to lectures, dinner or a night out.

The scheme cost £2730 for provision of the bins and MRC, and was funded by the University's Energy and Environmental Management Unit. The scheme achieved an overall increase in recycling of 132% by weight over one year.

University of Leeds. *Dr Keith Pitcher*

A transport survey was carried out amongst all University staff and students, using the HEEPI online travel survey software, to analyse travel patterns. This involved one student on an MA in Transport Studies plus 50 more students monitoring University entrances on the survey data. The project resulted in data on 2004 travel patterns and allowed a comparison with the 1999 data. The aim is to run the survey annually to get data year on year to aid in planning and transport provision.