

NEWS FROM THE GEES SUBJECT CENTRE

GEES Subject Centre-funded small-scale learning and teaching research and development projects 2004-2005

For 2004-05 the GEES Subject Centre is providing support and funding for ten small-scale learning & teaching projects, for one year, providing opportunities for staff to develop resources and undertake research in various aspects of learning and teaching. Summaries of the 10 projects can be found below. The overall aims of this funding programme are:

- To support curriculum developments, learning & teaching research, and other innovations which will enhance the quality of students' learning experience and/or enrich the learning and teaching research literature.
- To harness existing staff expertise, and identify and encourage fresh talent.
- To offer opportunities for continuing professional development of staff in the three disciplines.
- To disseminate good practice to the wider communities.
- To encourage collaboration and sharing of good practice between the three disciplines and/or between departments in different institutions.
- To encourage collaboration and sharing of good practice between departments and support services, e.g. educational development units, learning technology officers, within institutions.
- To widen participation in the GEES Subject Centres' work.

Reports from the three projects funded in 2003-2004 on the theme of taught postgraduate level learning and teaching will be published in a special edition of *Planet* due out in the Spring 2005.

The contribution of support staff to student learning in GEES disciplines

Carolyn Roberts, School of Environment, University of Gloucestershire

The role of support staff such as administrators, laboratory and field technicians, cartographers, subject librarians and ICT specialists in contributing to the quality of students' experiences of GEES disciplines is frequently unrecognised. Main difficulties which have been cited include weak understanding of the changing HE context, poor communications within Departments, lack of involvement with institutional policy agendas and teaching & learning initiatives, and limited staff development opportunities. This project develops previous work and, through structured telephone interviews and focus groups, is designed to clarify the issues further, to collect examples of good practice in supporting student learning from selected groups of support staff, and to publish these in a structured and accessible way.

Using real-world forms to focus undergraduate learning

Duncan Reavey, University College Chichester

Sometimes students find it difficult to focus on precisely what is required of them. One way to help achieve a precise focus and to increase students' motivation is to require them to complete forms that are in professional use. For example, Environmental Science undergraduates have completed NERC's Application for a Small Project Grant to propose their own innovative field projects by answering the questions that real-life applicants must address and having their proposals judged by the same criteria. Using such forms helps students focus their energies on providing only relevant information, addressing important aspects that might otherwise be forgotten, and occasionally processing information in a way that gives

it new significance. This project will source, modify and trial forms through which students undertake risk assessment of field work, environmental impact assessment for specific activities in the environment, and risk assessment for those leading groups in environmental education activities. The forms will be made available for downloading by the wider GEES community.

Combining student independent learning and peer advice to improve the quality of undergraduate dissertations

Margaret Harrison, School of the Environment, University of Gloucestershire

The aim is to develop a student-centred learning website facility to assist students undertaking a dissertation in the GEES disciplines. There are guides about 'how to undertake / survive your dissertation', but many students are daunted by independent work. Consequently, they may not perform as well as they should. Yet students often prove good advisers of their peers and may be better suited to this than their tutors. Thus, we shall use students who have produced dissertations to provide advice for those about to undertake the task. We shall obtain information from former students about how they went about their dissertation. We hope they will give their advice on time allocation and scheduling etc. The overriding theme will be 'what worked well for you?', 'what advice would you give to students preparing a dissertation?' etc. Graduates will also be asked to give examples of how dissertation experience has helped them obtain employment or move on to the next phase of their studies/careers.

Enterprising Geography and Earth and Environmental Sciences students: turning skills into profitable businesses

Inge Struder, School of Earth Science and Geography, Kingston University

This project aims to develop an accredited module in workshop format for undergraduate GEES students that prepares them for setting up in business. The main objectives are to bring self-employment as a career option to students' attention and enhance students' business skills and thus their employability. The objectives of the course are to give students an understanding of the entrepreneurial process, to provide a framework in which they can practise some of the skills involved in creating new ventures and to promote self-employment as a career option. All material will be available for download from a webpage and will include audio/video material and interactive learning activities for lecturers in GEES subjects, including role plays and simulations.

Getting ahead with the hat – the Mexican Hat Approach in the GEES disciplines

Paul Wright, School of Maritime and Coastal Studies, Southampton Institute

The Mexican Hat approach, or MHA, is a systematic learning intervention that has been successfully developed within the Engineering and Computing disciplines. However, whilst the approach is claimed to be transportable into any classroom situation, its use has not been more widely investigated nor evaluated. This project aims to adopt the MHA in a number of environmental science and geography units, and evaluate the learning experience by a series of focus groups run for both students and teachers. The MHA intervention creates a learning experience where students prepare before class, complete an activity, and then reflect back on their

work. A 'learning conversation' is then struck up between teacher and student to address any mismatches in perception between the students and the tutor. Evaluation of these experiences will allow conclusions to be drawn about transportability of technique, and facilitate a wide discussion about the development of teachers as guides through the learning process rather than keepers of knowledge.

Developing undergraduate career management skills using employer job descriptions and person specifications

Nigel Richardson, Department of Natural, Geographical & Applied Sciences, Edge Hill College of Higher Education

Academic departments in HE institutions are having to consider the integration of careers education within the curriculum of degree programmes following the recommendations of the Dearing Report and the publication of the QAA Code of Practice on Careers Education, Information and Guidance. GEES graduates have a wide range of skills and attributes that graduate employers are generally looking for. However, students are often weak at articulating the skills and qualities they have to offer, especially through the graduate recruitment process. This project focuses on the development of a resource of job descriptions and person specifications from employers of Geography graduates, and associated learning activities for use with Geography students to enhance their career preparation skills.

Field safety training for staff in Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences in HE: establishing a framework

Pauline Couper, College of St Mark & St John, Plymouth

Fieldwork is an integral part of GEES subjects in HE, often using potentially hazardous locations, but at present there is no available staff training in fieldwork safety tailored to the requirements of HE. Outdoor Adventure staff members undergo considerable training in leading students in comparable outdoor environments, through nationally recognised qualifications, and have experience of delivering such training. The long-term aim of the project is thus to combine the experience of the latter with the requirements of the former, to provide opportunities for continuing professional development in field safety & leadership tailored specifically to GEES subjects. A steering group will be set up to: identify the requirements of such staff development provision; agree essential curriculum elements necessary to meet these requirements; identify whether or not accreditation is necessary; and make recommendations regarding the practicalities of provision.

Skills at Master's level In Geography higher education: teaching, learning & applying

Jay Mistry, Royal Holloway University of London

The taught Masters programmes in Environment and Development within the Department of Geography, Royal Holloway and in the Systems Department, Open University, are in the process of

restructuring, and skills development has been identified as a key element for improvement. This project will review 'skills' at the taught Masters level in the literature and through interviews with Masters programme coordinators within the Environment and Development domains across the UK. We will then compare perceptions of 'real world' skills between students, teachers, alumni and employers through interviews and focus groups. A detailed database of examples showing how particular skills have been taught, learnt and then applied, will be produced and made available on CD. Skills acquisition will be evaluated in the subsequent cohort of students to see whether there is an improvement in our skills teaching.

Student recruitment for GEES degrees in the 21st century: mobility, socioeconomic and geodemographic background of GEES undergraduates

Seraphim Alvanides, University of Newcastle, with **David Croot**, University of Plymouth

The new challenge for institutions delivering geography related courses is to meet the widening participation agenda. Personal experience confirms that BSc applicants come from different social backgrounds compared to BA applicants. In addition, although geography students are highly mobile, geography departments tend to recruit from their local region. The synergistic effect of these factors is a geographical and socioeconomic mismatch between applications and acceptances shaping the inequitable distribution of GEES degree provision. This project will expand on earlier research by looking at recent UCAS data for GEES courses and will conduct initial analysis on mobility of undergraduate applicants by type of degree and socioeconomic background at regional and sub-regional level. It will also develop a proposal for an ESRC small grant looking into mobility, socioeconomic background and geodemographic composition for all undergraduate applicants for all degrees in the UK.

Embedding 'disability and access' into the environmental sciences curriculum

Emma Treby, School of Conservation Sciences, University of Bournemouth

The emergence of inclusivity as a societal goal has led to many changes in the way we manage our environment and in turn, this has implications for HE environmental science curricula design and implementation. In responding to SENDA, Universities have made significant efforts to address inclusivity in terms of the way students are able to study. However, little attention has been given to ensure staff are well informed to incorporate issues of disability and access into the curriculum, which would in turn, raise students' awareness. The aim of this project is to provide staff training in order to disseminate good practice and appropriate advice to GEES staff on how they may effectively embed issues of disability and access into the curriculum. Whilst the primary focus of the project is environmental sciences, it is intended to be transferable to wider communities within and beyond GEES disciplines.

The call for proposals for the next round of GEES small project funding will be issued after Easter