

# Enterprising geography, earth and environmental sciences students

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## Abstract

Enterprise modules can provide a useful opportunity for students to gain an overview of skills needed for both self-employment and working in small or large organisations. Furthermore, the skills and insights gained through such a module can enhance their employability. Conclusions from a pilot of such a module at Kingston University include that it is important to bring business people into the classroom and to reduce the use of concepts and models to the minimum necessary. There is a great need for sharing material and experiences across disciplines, as well as for research on the long-term effect of different approaches on students' careers.

## 'Enterprise is for you'

Introducing geography students to enterprise skills is a great opportunity for staff and students; the module suggested here, 'Enterprise is for you' can give an overview of the skills needed and enable students to acquire some of those that are relevant for self-employment and working in a small or large organisation. Learning in context with a focus on skills acquisition is the optimal way forward to increase students' employability and enhance their self-knowledge. Lessons learnt in Kingston include the significance of asking students to interview a successful business person early in the course, and of simulating business situations in class. Lecturers do not need to have studied business in order to deliver this kind of insight into enterprise when they collaborate with business advice practitioners and business people. An audit of undergraduate students in GEES degrees in Kingston University shows that 27 % would take such a module as part of their degree if it were to be offered as an option.

## Background

Globalisation, the restructuring of labour markets and the increasing need for new services in society and industry have created niches for new businesses. Governments in western industrialised countries have realised the need for encouraging more people to set up in business to provide the jobs of the future, as employment in sectors like steel industry, mining and traditional manufacturing has declined. Most European governments regard small businesses as a major driving force for change as well as a means of ensuring the nation's competitiveness in a global knowledge society. The political and economic gains expected from an increasing number of start-ups and viable businesses include innovation and more jobs (SBS 2004). The last UK Budget Report (HM Treasury, 2005) has again highlighted the need to create an entrepreneurial society in order to manage these changes.

## Why enterprise education?

'Enterprise' is regarded in this article as consisting of the skills and mindset that enable an individual to pursue income generation activities in self-employment, small business and within large organisations (Bridge *et al*, 2003). Enterprise education has gained increasing importance, as it is regarded as the main tool for achieving these outcomes. Mason (2001) shows that knowledge and skills acquired in a course in entrepreneurship can be applied in large organisations, business support organisations (banks, government agencies) and charities. While there is some support from governmental and non-governmental agencies and numerous professional bodies on business start-up for professionals, higher education institutions have only just started to contribute to encouraging entrepreneurial activities - the provision of skills training in enterprise in universities is a comparatively quite recent development (Gibbs 2005).

Parallel to these developments, research has highlighted that there are students who show an interest in pursuing an entrepreneurial career (The Institute of Small Business Affairs Consortium, 2004) but do not often have not the opportunity to acquire the necessary skills whilst at university (Hartshorne 2001, Mason 2001). The author's research in Kingston shows that 27 % of students in Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences (N = 165) answered 'yes' to the question "Would you select a module on business creation as an option for your degree course?"

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## Aims, objectives and learning outcomes

The main aims of the suggested entrepreneurship module described here are to bring self-employment as a career option to students' attention and to enhance their employability. Learning skills relevant for thinking in terms of cost and working in a commercial environment driven by budgets and their limitations can enhance students' business skills and commercial awareness, and thus their employability.

The module objectives are to:

- Identify the most relevant features and skills for the entrepreneurial process
- equip students with the basic necessary skills
- provide a framework in which they can practise these skills for creating new ventures and
- promote self-employment as a career option.

By the end of the module, the students are able to:

- assess their individual entrepreneurial capabilities and interests
- assess selected aspects of the context for appropriate enterprise ideas in their disciplines and beyond, given their particular interests, attributes, creativity and skills

- evaluate enterprise ideas as potential business opportunities based on a sound market analysis
- plan and manage the business formation process from idea generation to presentation of a market opportunity

### Content outline, assessment possibilities and operation

The module content outline in Box 1 shows three substantial parts: the first part focuses on students' own skills and traits and discusses criteria that some successful business people share. The second main part is an introduction to pre-start-up activities and planning. The last part looks at practical operational issues.

Teaching takes the form of seven two-hour interactive workshops, three group tutorials focused on developing the feasibility study, and a one-day simulation entitled 'Launching a pizzeria'. While parts one and two can be dealt with in one workshop each, the remaining five short and one long workshops focus on preparing students for running an enterprise.

Part one needs to be supported by self-study during which students assess themselves with tests and read up on the gaps they have identified. This should ideally be supported by a meeting with a tutor in which a personal development plan is discussed. Part three addresses operational issues and actual company formation, looking at legal forms, dis-/ advantages of partnerships and ways to grow the customer base. This last part can be omitted when there is not enough time to deliver a full module.

For a skills-focused module, assessment through coursework is ideal. The suggested assessment strategy ensures that a variety of skills are covered, including:

- communication and presentation skills
- team-working skills
- producing output to tight deadlines
- time management
- project planning and management skills
- innovative thinking and creativity skills.

It is recommended that students are presented early on with a real-life business situation and that they listen to the story and worldview of a business person (see Box 2). The key is to ask students to design their own questions as a group for an interview with a business person – this gives them a sense of ownership - and to maybe add more when in discussion with them. For the evaluation, it is important to create a table in which all results can be compared and to keep this table in a shared facility, such as Blackboard. Thus, staff and students can refer back to it and use the insights for illustrating learning points.

### Students' responses

At the beginning of the pilot of three interactive workshops and the simulation as part of a level three geography careers module on enterprise, an audit showed that 30 % of the student group were planning to set up in business at a later stage in their life. They wanted first to acquire the necessary skills and eliminate their student debt (confirmed for the UK by Barclays, 2005).

Responses to the pilot were mixed. One student who regularly works in the family business in his leisure time 'learned new skills,' whereas a student who had done a similar simulation before and has no intention of self-employment regarded it as a 'waste of time'. Other reactions include 'fun and entertaining', 'creative', 'finally something practical'. These reactions have to be related to the fact that, in this pilot, students had to attend these sessions.

#### Box 1. Module content overview

##### Part 1 YOU and your skills and traits

- 1.1 Do you know who you are? Self-assessment of strengths and weaknesses
- 1.2 Some skills, behaviours and traits of men and women in business
- 1.3 Being successful in business – talent? Or can it be learned?

##### Part 2 How can I do it? Pre-start activities

- 2.1 Do I have to invent another wheel? Ideas and business opportunities
- 2.2 Screening your idea – is it a business opportunity ?
- 2.3 Do I need help? Business support in the UK, why governments spend money on it
- 2.4 Getting networked - the ABC of networking
- 2.5 Planning – are business plans any good? – research, research, research
- 2.6 Important practical things to know and think about before you start (finance, marketing, running costs, operations, and legal status)

##### Part 3 Up and running: managing business activities

- 3.1 Registering the business
- 3.2 Employees and partners in business
- 3.3 Getting more customers and growing your business

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#### Box 2. Assessment (100 % coursework, in sequence)

1	Summary of interview with a successful business person, with longer parts of interview transcribed	10 %
2	Submission of enterprise idea (group work): formative, not graded	
3	One-day-workshop (group work)	30 %
4	Feasibility study (group work) 3000 words	35 %
5	Reflective essay on experiences and insights, diaries	25 %

### Box 3. Ten do's and don'ts' when introducing enterprise teaching to GEES students

#### Don't ...

- Use the word entrepreneurship – use enterprise skills for self-employment and/or small business
- Ask them to write a complete business plan
- Use a traditional textbook on entrepreneurship – use online material, few academic articles, newspaper articles and real-life material (interviews, biographies, diaries)
- Lecture to them about the good things about being in business – let them learn about it through interviewing business people
- Forget to talk about the disadvantages of being self-employed, together with business people
- Forget to focus on relevant aspects for the subject studied and their application in business
- Devalue part-time and side-businesses
- Focus on knowledge acquisition, this comes while acquiring the necessary skills in context
- Assume that a GEES student has to set up a business related to the degree course or subject and has to do it for a life-time
- Forget to have fun

#### Do ...

- Focus on skills acquisition in first, second and third place
- Ask students to interview a successful business person of their choice in week 1 or 2
- Point out the significance of the skills for employment and self-employment
- Bring business people into the classroom to talk about running a business
- Simulate pre-start-up and start-up situations in class
- Minimize the use of concepts and models to what is absolutely necessary
- Focus on situational learning in contrast to abstract learning of skills – case studies
- Invite practice experts to talk about the relevance of the skills to be learned (accountants, business advisors, bank small business advisors etc.) to show relevance of necessary skills
- Interview students in class who already run their own business / freelance – peer learning
- Give personal development appropriate space (25-30 %)

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### Lessons - do's and don'ts when introducing enterprise skills to GEES students

Box three lists a selection of insights presented as practical tips which are self-explanatory. The focus is on teaching methods and materials and the skills approach. Due to lack of space, the introduction of enterprise skills into the curriculum has not been covered here (see Maguire and Gayer, 2004, for a discussion).

There is an ongoing discussion about if and when a full module is adequate and at what level it should be taught. This pilot was carried out as part of a level three careers module, and the time available was too short to cover all the basic areas relevant for pre-start-up business activities. Since the pilot, the author has also been teaching full modules across other disciplines and has experienced the possibilities

of more workshops and tutorial sessions with student enterprise groups. Often, however, degree courses do not allow another full option for a 15 credit module. In these cases, modules entitled 'Careers', 'Professional Practice', 'Commercial Issues' or '(X subject) and Business' theoretically offer scope for training students in enterprise skills. In practice, this depends very much of the attitude of the course director and module leader.

It is crucial to tailor the content and depth of studying to the disciplinary needs and the level of students. Level two students have acquired basic academic skills and seem to be better equipped than level one students. By level three, students are keen to attain the best possible degree and are closer to the world of work, and possibly more open to an accredited module which requires a similar level of input to other modules.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Introducing non-business students to the skills relevant for self-employment and enterprise in a small or large organisation is a fun and necessary contribution to preparing them for the labour market. It does not matter whether they want to set up in business at all or are simply pursuing a life-career as an employee. The skills and insights they can gain through such a module can enhance their employability. Those who are planning to set up their own business within 10-15 years are grateful for the first introduction to the necessary skills and the available business support.

The module described above is one of the many ways to provide a frame for students to learn about enterprise in a workshop format. The focus is on acquiring skills in context through a variety of teaching methods and teaching materials, ranging from doing a case study, participating in a simulation, group work on a feasibility study, and listening to practitioners. Assessment is fully based on course-work, as skills are difficult to assess in written unseen exams.

As a result of the pilot the following recommendations appear useful:

**Staff resources** – It is important to either teach in a team with other colleagues and/or to work with at least one practitioner when delivering such a course. For a staff member who has no similar minded colleagues, the collaboration with practitioners is a good solution. Colleagues in Career Development Units and Enterprise or Commercial Units might be very interested to know about these kinds of modules and might want to contribute.

**Integrating other staff** – It is possible and useful to ask other colleagues without enterprise interests to assist in the assessment of student presentations at the end of the workshop day. Thus, they can see the results and talk to students, and might be inspired to look further into the value of enterprise teaching to students.

**Research needs** – As enterprise education is a very recent area, although there is some teaching material available, there has not yet been much research on the long-term effect of different approaches on students' careers. Efficiency studies in teaching methods and materials for teaching non-business students are very rare.

**Best practice** – there is a great need for sharing material and experiences amongst colleagues across disciplines who engage in teaching enterprise skills. Research could map good practice across the world and differentiate it by student level, degree course and evaluate material by relating it to students and the economic climate in the country.

## References

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Assessment guidelines and the simulation can be obtained free of charge from the author.



**Geography,  
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## GEES Subject Centre

### Enterprise, Skills & Entrepreneurship Resource Pack

### Enhancing the Curriculum in Geography, Earth & Environmental Sciences

This online resource provides a collection of information, ideas, examples of practice and case studies which is intended to provide a starting point for colleagues interested in including elements of enterprise/entrepreneurship within their modules or courses in geography, earth or environmental sciences.

<http://www.gees.ac.uk/projtheme/entrep/entrepres.htm>