
GEES, employability and the credit crunch

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Abstract

In July 2008, delegates at the GEES conference on Employability, Employer Engagement and Enterprise learnt about how good the employment prospects were for our graduates. Two months later, news of the global financial crisis hit the headlines. Economic downturn and global recession have remained top of the news agenda ever since. The employment prospects of our graduates are no longer looking so rosy. So what are the implications of a weakened economy for GEES students and academics and how is the sector in general responding? This article briefly examines how GEES-related graduate employment is being impacted by economic shift. It highlights some of the key advice we need to give to our students and it attempts to identify how these current circumstances might be affecting academics.

What is the reality of the job market for GEES graduates?

It is quite clear that, when talking about the graduate job market, the general situation for our students is rather depressing. According to the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR), *'the party's over for graduate recruitment'* (AGR, 2009). They identify the freezing of graduate salaries and predict that vacancies for graduates will fall for first time since 2003, with a projected decrease of 5.4% in 2009. Many graduates, even those with good CVs, will find getting work much tougher than graduates of the recent past. With unemployment being a lagging indicator of economic slump, the situation is predicted to get worse before it gets better.

*"Here are the new replies, I'm getting:
"Unfortunately the decision has been taken
not to recruit at this current time." [sic]*
Quote from Prospects graduate forum
discussion on 'The Credit Crunch and Graduate
Jobs!!'. [http://tomcat4.prospects.ac.uk:8080/
forum/index.php](http://tomcat4.prospects.ac.uk:8080/forum/index.php)

Whilst a great many GEES graduates will seek general graduate employment, a high proportion will opt specifically for GEES-related work. So what

is happening to GEES-related jobs in the recessionary economy? The picture is, as might be expected, mixed. Sectors that have been badly hit include the housing and construction industries, with new infrastructure developments being cancelled and delayed. This in turn decreases the amount of environmental assessment work being undertaken, for instance, in contaminated land remediation (McCormack, 2009). Speaking anecdotally, I know of three people who work in the geotechnical industry: one has lost his job and one has been put on a four-day week. The third job appears to be safe, but he reports that graduate recruitment at his company has all but ceased; instead, recruitment has shifted to mopping up the cream of those in the job market who have been made redundant – a sobering prospect for fresh graduates with limited experience. The global downturn has also caused the consumption of commodities to falter and this has therefore impacted severely on jobs in the extractive industries, another significant GEES industry. However, for graduates wishing to enter other environment-related employment, the situation is far less bleak. Unlike previous recessions, ("Bye-bye Greens – see you in the next boom!" Editorial in *The Economist*, 1991, cited in Willis and Wilsdon, 2001), the 'green-collar' job sector is looking much stronger this time around. Acre (<http://www.acre-resources.co.uk/>), a leading environment and sustainability recruitment firm, has noted a 58% increase in the energy efficiency, renewable energy, sustainability and corporate social responsibility sectors in Britain over the last 12 months (Szabo, 2009).

Although there are some environmental projects being axed, there are also many others being created due to an increasing commitment from government and large organizations, down to the small business level, in ethical and environmental practices (Haven, 2009). For example, there has been talk of the green 'new deal' on both sides of the Atlantic; the EU and UK government have both recently set targets for increases in renewable energy production to be achieved by 2020; and the NHS has launched a major campaign to reduce its carbon footprint. Clearly there are considerable environmental job opportunities attached to all of these initiatives. There also appears to be a

greater commitment by companies to continue to strengthen their sustainability and corporate and social responsibility credentials in this recession than has previously been the case, as exemplified by Marks & Spencer, Tarmac, Co-op and Samsung (Haven, 2009). Perhaps this is because CEO's are aware that, in this economic and political context, in which corruption and mismanagement have left a nasty taste in the mouth of the public, strong ethical policies will fortify, not harm their 'brand'. Evidently there is reason to acknowledge the expansion in the environmental job market. However, it is necessary to remember that this sector is relatively small, therefore growth in this area should be welcomed by GEES graduates, but not with any sense of complacency or over-optimism. As GEES graduates have always found, walking into environment-related jobs is not easy. Gaining specialist training and qualifications and having experience will continue to be vital. People already in the workplace with non-GEES backgrounds are increasingly competing with GEES graduates due to a new trend of business professionals migrating to green roles in what Cartland and Burke (2009, p24) describe as the 'pale green' market. This development is one that GEES graduates may need to consider when planning their own career path. It is also a consideration for academics, who might see in this movement opportunities to provide professional development courses to non-GEES professionals who will be in need of appropriate up-skilling in their 'green' knowledge.

What advice can we give to our students?

On Careers

Whilst the timing may not be great for GEES graduates entering the job market for the first time, it is important to remember that, just because there are fewer opportunities, this does not mean there are no opportunities. Being well informed about the job situation for careers they are interested in is certainly a helpful start. GEES graduates, like all graduates, will however have to try even harder and be smarter in the ways they seek employment if they want to get a job. Graduating students will need to:

- Sharpen up their applications and their interview technique.
- Be flexible – about where they work, and the type of work they will consider (Babbage, 2009). Carl Gilleard of the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR) is on record as saying "Almost any work is better than not working at all."
- Make sure they have more to offer an employer than a degree (good quality work experience,

voluntary work, other extra-curricular interests).

- Be positive – given the current job market, the pressure is off to find 'the best' graduate job. Students now have permission to explore opportunities and make mistakes. They should focus on gaining experience and developing an understanding of their relationship to work in order to build long-term to an enjoyable career.
- Make use of their institution's careers service, where they can get detailed and professional advice and support.

On Postgraduate Courses

In the current circumstances, a higher percentage than normal of our students will be looking to undertake a postgraduate qualification rather than taking a chance on getting a graduate job. Postgraduate applications are showing great buoyancy, with some institutions reporting rises of over 50% (Lipsett, 2008). Much of this increase is due to overseas students – the UK being seen as an attractive place to study because of the weak pound; but the proportion of UK students taking this option is also rising.

Whilst the former Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) has urged graduates to consider further study (Babbage, 2009), according to the AGR, only 30% of employers surveyed thought that further study would give graduates an edge in the job hunt. The AGR states that, "With applications to postgraduate courses up sharply in recent months, this last statistic may well give this year's graduates pause for thought". Given this cautionary note, it may be helpful to strengthen the advice we provide to our undergraduates on further study. They should be encouraged to consider this option carefully. Rather than choosing a course as a stop-gap (many students stay at the same institution because this is the easiest option), they should be encouraged to think about how postgraduate options relate to their long-term plans and critically evaluate the relative merits of the content and employability outcomes of various courses.

Conclusions

There is nothing we can do to alter the economic circumstances in which our students enter the graduate employment market. However, we can help them by attempting to give them sound, well-informed guidance. This is a good time to review curriculum employability provision in order to make sure that we are doing the best we can for our students, whether they intend to get a job or go on to further study. The GEES Learning and Teaching Guide on Employability within Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences (Gedye and Chalkley,

2006) contains advice on the various ways in which employability can be embedded into the curriculum. This may be of use for any departments wishing to improve employability provision for their students at this challenging time.

We need to be aware of the uncertainty that surrounds the implications of the economic crisis on student and graduate attitudes to employability and the value of their course. One possibility is that some students will have increased expectations of support in order to help them prepare for the workplace. Of course, there will always be students who, for a variety of reasons (the short-term thinkers, the over-confident, the over-pessimistic – “why bother, I won’t get a job anyway”), do not engage with their own employability. However, there are plenty for whom their employability will be a matter of great concern. Informal conversations with GEES academics suggests there may be an increase in interest in career-related activities, with one person reporting a discernable increase in attendance at a faculty career fair. We may also need to be wary of a backlash from unemployed and under-employed graduates who are disillusioned with their university education – an education which, many will feel, promised them so much and one for which they have paid considerable fees (Woods and Grimston, 2009).

“The economic climate makes it more imperative not less that skills levels are raised. As the UK comes out of recession, people will be needed who can pick up the new range of jobs which emerge at that time. An emphasis within skills policy on re-skilling is therefore vital”
DIUS (2009), p89

Circumstances have also changed for academics too. Many staff will be aware of universities repositioning themselves as agents of economic recovery, including the continued commitment to the development of a highly skilled workforce, the fostering of innovative research, and the expanding of knowledge transfer partnerships to create improved business links (Reisz, 2009). Some staff may find themselves in institutions who have been hard hit by the economic down-turn and are therefore experiencing closures, restructuring or down-sizing. On a more positive note, more entrepreneurially minded GEES academics may find they are able to capitalize on new research and teaching opportunities such as those opened up by the growth of the ‘green’ employment sector.

“The role of universities is more important than ever during a recession”.
Pam Tatlow, Million+, in Reisz, 2009, p32.

Given that much is unclear as to how GEES students and academics are being affected by these issues,

the GEES Subject Centre would very much like to hear from any staff who have comments to make about how the changed economic circumstances are impacting on their teaching, learning and research.

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