



Science Education Enhancement and Development

# SEED

Working Paper Series

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## New developments in fieldwork

*Les Ternan, Brian Chalkley and Andrew Elmes, January 1999*

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### **Working Paper Four:**

Long Haul Field Courses: Lessons from the Plymouth Experience

### **Working Paper Five:**

The Large Residential Field Course: Management,  
Educational & Student Perspectives



The SEED Programme, Faculty of Science, University of Plymouth.  
Supported by the Higher Education Funding Council for England,  
through the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning.

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## AN INTRODUCTION TO SEED

The programme for Science Education Enhancement and Development ('SEED') is based in the Faculty of Science at the University of Plymouth. It is resourced principally by the Higher Education Funding Council for England through its Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning. Additional support has been received from many areas of the University and particularly from Academic and Information Services.

SEED builds on the success of the University of Plymouth Science Faculty in the national Teaching Quality Assessment system where Plymouth achieved 'excellence' in Environmental Science, Geography, Geology and Oceanography.

SEED's overall aim is to develop, document and disseminate good practice in Science teaching and learning. The programme consists of a series of projects in areas such as lab-work, field-work, graduate teaching assistants and computer-aided learning, which are itemised inside the back cover. Most are based in the Science Faculty but some have been taken forward by staff in the University's School of Computing and in Educational Development Services (EDS). All the projects are linked to dissemination partners in other institutions who act as external advisors, ensure that SEED's outputs are capable of being used in other institutions and help to disseminate and embed SEED's end-products.

Anyone wanting further details on the SEED programme is welcome to contact Brian Chalkley or Andy Elmes at the address below. Contact details for the individual project leaders are available inside the back cover.

### The SEED Programme

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## Preface and Context

Fieldwork plays an important part in the curriculum of several of the disciplines taught in higher education. This is particularly true in the case of geography, geology and environmental studies but other subjects too, such as archaeology, architecture and biology also make substantial use of field-teaching techniques. Although its precise purposes can vary from discipline to discipline, traditionally the main functions of fieldwork have included encouraging students in the art of observation and introducing them to processes, problems or techniques which cannot be studied or practised as effectively in the lecture theatre or laboratory. Alongside these traditional roles, in recent years more emphasis has been given to fieldwork as an opportunity for students to develop their key (transferable) skills, particularly with respect to team working. The increased priority given today to active and experiential learning has also underlined still more strongly the value of field teaching.

It is one of the paradoxes of higher education, however, that as the educational benefits of fieldwork have become still more prominent, so too have the financial and logistical obstacles which increasingly threaten to prevent or impede this form of teaching and learning. This is particularly true of residential field courses. During the past decade or so there have been major cuts in the government's per capita funding of higher education. Universities and colleges are being asked to do more with less. Under these circumstances some institutions and departments have been driven to regard field courses as simply too expensive. These financial pressures are reinforced by the fact that field course funding normally relies on a sizeable contribution paid directly by the student. With the abolition of maintenance grants and the fact that students now have to pay up to £1000 per year towards their degree programme fees, there are anxieties about whether students will in future be willing or able to pay for field courses. The shadows lengthening over fieldwork are made still gloomier because of the impact of the growth of student numbers. The large increase in class sizes poses logistical problems which can make the organisation of fieldwork more difficult.

Accommodation and transport planning can become more complex, as can the day-to-day operation of the academic programme.

Faced with this pincer movement of less money and more students, it is tempting to believe that the outlook for field courses does not look promising. However, it is the aim of the two papers in this volume to challenge this gloomy orthodoxy and to convey the message that, with imagination and determination, residential fieldwork can continue to flourish; indeed, it can even be enhanced to achieve still more worthwhile educational goals.

Both the papers in this volume use as their examples field courses undertaken by the Department of Geographical Sciences at the University of Plymouth. This is a department which has experienced cuts in funding and increases in student numbers, but which nonetheless offers an extensive, attractive and innovative fieldwork programme. The first paper outlines the department's introduction of long-haul fieldwork and the second deals with the academic management of a field course which has over 200 students. Neither paper is written as an advertisement: both provide balanced accounts of the fieldwork innovations they review, outlining the dangers and pitfalls as well as the benefits and achievements. Both contain helpful general advice for teachers. Moreover, the lessons conveyed are likely to be of interest not only to geographers but also to field scientists from other disciplines. While recognising the distinctive attributes of the different field subjects, many of the ideas presented in these papers have a wider relevance beyond geography and beyond the University of Plymouth.

The preparation of these papers, and the related surveys of student and staff opinion, have been undertaken as part of the 'Science Education Enhancement and Development' programme (SEED) which is financed by HEFCE's Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning. SEED aims to document, develop and disseminate best practice in science education. In documenting and disseminating two key components of the Plymouth fieldwork experience, we hope that this volume will contribute to the achievement of SEED's aims and help to stimulate innovation and

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debate amongst the wider community of field scientists. In particular, we hope that colleagues in other institutions may be encouraged to review their own approach to fieldwork and perhaps to consider using and developing further some of the ideas presented in these papers.

If, having read this volume, you have comments or questions, we would be very pleased to receive them. We would be especially interested to hear from other academics with experience in running long-haul or large field courses or from colleagues elsewhere who may be contemplating initiatives of this kind.

Les Ternan

Brian Chalkley

Andrew Elmes

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# Long haul field courses: lessons from the Plymouth experience

*J.L. Ternan, B.S. Chalkley and A. Elmes, January 1999*

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## Introduction

Geographers have long considered fieldwork as a central part of the discipline and one which has been intrinsic in several traditions which have played an important role in the subject's development (Gold *et al.*, 1991, p22). The roots of geography fieldwork were partly in the tradition of geographical exploration of remote areas of the world, a tradition which continues with the support of expeditionary groups such as those organised by the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers (RGS/IBG). Furthermore, although there have been changes in the nature and content of regional geography courses, the regional approach continues to play a significant part in contemporary geography. Despite these exploration and regional paradigms, fieldwork as part of the curriculum of UK degree courses in geography remains essentially Euro - centric and, with resource constraints, is in danger of becoming increasingly UK-centric. Many geography departments have teaching staff with first-hand experience of non-European regions, but students seldom benefit from this through fieldwork. Courses in, for example, tropical geomorphology, Latin America or the Middle East may be offered with no fieldwork opportunity for students in these areas. Fieldwork in 'exotic' locations is usually confined to voluntary self-funded or sponsored expeditions to remote, physically challenging environments where few people live.

In the 1960s UK geography departments began to take advantage of cheaper charter flights or out-of-season packages to Mediterranean locations and these continue to feature in many field course profiles. By contrast, however, the advent of long-haul destinations, a major area of growth in the tourist industry in the last few years, has not as yet seen a similar level of response in fieldwork development. Indeed, it is a measure of this neglect that in an otherwise excellent and wide-ranging

review of fieldwork teaching, Kent *et al.* 1997) make no reference to the long-haul approach.

This apparent lack of interest in long-haul fieldwork can be explained by the generally somewhat pessimistic climate in which fieldwork teaching currently operates. The expansion in student numbers, the deterioration in staff-student ratios and the decline of per capita funding have all left their mark on the fieldwork curriculum (Jenkins 1994; Gray 1993). Academic staff have also been mindful of the increasingly difficult financial circumstances facing many undergraduates. Over several years there has been a continuing reduction in the value of student maintenance grants which are currently being abolished. To make matters worse, most students will now have to contribute up to £1000 per annum towards their tuition fees. As undergraduates have become more in debt and more dependent on government loans, it has seemed increasingly unreasonable to ask them to pay large sums towards their fieldwork costs. For these reasons, many staff in geography departments, and no doubt in other disciplines too, have concluded that fieldwork programmes would, if anything, have to be contracted rather than enhanced.

It has long been the case that nearly all residential field courses have required students to contribute at least part of their costs. The amounts have varied considerably according to the destination used and the fieldwork and funding policies of individual departments and institutions; but during a three year degree a typical geography undergraduate might be asked to contribute something in the range of £100-300. As student finances have become more difficult, so departments have become more conscious of the burden fieldwork places on student bank balances and less inclined to consider far-off destinations. Although one can find examples of trips to Africa

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and the USA, long-haul fieldwork generally seems to swim against the tide of diminishing departmental and student resources, a tide which is, of course, in part responsible also for the new interest in 'virtual reality' (computer-generated) fieldwork, since the real thing is increasingly seen as too expensive.

The Plymouth geography experience outlined below is therefore unusual, although not quite unique. Liverpool John Moores University, for example operates a somewhat similar scheme and the Plymouth Environmental Science department has also recently introduced a long haul trip which adopts comparable procedures. At Plymouth every year since 1995 geography has run a long-haul field course and the main purpose of this paper is therefore to review this experience and, in the light of it, to assess the benefits and drawbacks of this kind of approach. Particular attention is given to explaining how our long-haul field trips operate and to identifying both the academic and the practical lessons learned which might be of interest to other departments.

For the purposes of this paper, we are defining long haul as trips which go beyond Western and Central Europe and the Mediterranean.

### **The Plymouth Department and its Field Work Programme**

The Plymouth Geographical Sciences department has been offering degrees in geography since the early 1970s. The twenty six academic staff contribute to a range of different degree programmes within and outside the department but our largest commitment is to our 'single honours' and 'major' geography degrees which comprise over eighty modules spanning most areas of physical and human geography. These courses together take in about 170 students per year. Plymouth operates a system of semesters in which students take six modules in semester 'A' (September-January) and six in semester 'B' (February-June).

Our main fieldwork programme begins with a compulsory stage one (first year) module which is scheduled in May, and being entirely based on the local Plymouth region, is non-residential. In stage two (second year) there is a compulsory fieldwork module which comprises a one-week field course

based near Galway in Ireland. (This trip is the subject of the second working paper in this volume and is of interest in that it takes in excess of 200 students.) In the third year we venture further afield again and offer students a range of five different destinations outside the British Isles, each trip normally taking between 25 and 45 students. Our field course programme therefore advances from the local to the increasingly 'distant' in both geographical and cultural terms. Within Europe typical destinations have included areas within France, Germany, mainland Spain, the Balearics, Malta and Latvia. It is as part of this third year module that since 1995 we have offered each year one long-haul destination which has to date included South Africa (1995 and 1998), Hong Kong (1996) and Moscow/Murmansk (1997).

Irrespective of the trip selected (whether in Europe or beyond) stage three students are given the same level of financial support from the department. This is currently £150 per student. This sum represents a standard 'voucher' which students put towards the total cost of their particular trip. The price of each field course is different and students can select their trip on the basis of how much it will cost them, as well as on their level of interest in the various alternative venues.

All the students, irrespective of their destinations, are enrolled for the same module (GGY355). Although the details of the field course programmes and itineraries are obviously different, all the students are working towards the same broadly defined learning outcomes. These include demonstrating the following abilities: to conduct a geographical investigation in an unfamiliar environment, to link human and physical geography, to make an appraisal of the character of the place/region and to work successfully both in groups and as an individual. Assessment is by course work. Again, the precise details vary but generally students are expected to submit a report on their investigative project work and an essay on the character of the place or region.

### **The Distinctive Features of Long-Haul Trips**

Although all students are registered for the same module with the same learning outcomes and similar assessment patterns, inevitably each of the

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individual trips offers a somewhat different experience. This is particularly true of the long-haul trips which tend to have some distinctive features both in terms of their organisation and their academic programme. Profiles of the trips to South Africa, Hong Kong and Moscow/Murmansk are provided in the Appendix at the end of this paper.

The long-haul trips are distinctive firstly in that they operate with a slightly smaller group size, typically between 20 and 25. This is because the department still sees these trips as somewhat experimental. Most of the European destinations have been tried and tested over many years. By contrast, the department was keen to introduce some variety into the long-haul programme in order to give a number of staff the opportunity to lead an event of this kind. With new far-off destination areas often with cultures very different from the UK, it has been deemed advisable to limit the student numbers in the interests of manageability and maintaining staff - student contact. Typically, the courses have been arranged and led by two academic staff sometimes augmented during the working day by a colleague from a local university. It is the intention to revisit each long-haul destination, perhaps every three-to-five years, thereby achieving a good return on the investment in planning and preparation time, without wearing out the welcome given by local academics and other professionals who provide valuable support.

The long-haul trips are obviously distinctive also in that they are much more expensive than their European counterparts. The costs vary but are typically in the order of £500-850 per student, towards which the department contributes only the standard sum of £150. In advance of deciding to launch the concept of long-haul fieldwork, there was a considerable debate within the department about whether "exotic" field trips would discriminate against students whose parents were unable to find the necessary financial support. In practice, our long-haul student questionnaire surveys show that although 61 per cent received some degree of parental funding, only 16 per cent were entirely funded from this source. Students use a variety of financial sources, including money from part-time and vacation work, personal savings, bank overdrafts, and of course, the new government loans. Although in many respects the

government switch from grants to loans has disadvantaged undergraduates, paradoxically, the loan facility has opened up a 'nest-egg' which students can, if they wish, use to pay for fieldwork. It is doubtful whether the funding sources for long-haul fieldwork are radically different from those used for the European trips, although we have no survey data to quantify this comparison. Certainly, discussions with the long-haul students suggest that motivation and a willingness to invest in what they perceive as an exciting and valuable educational experience are key considerations in the decision to apply for a place on a long-haul trip. The attractions of far-off destinations are such that all the long-haul courses have been over-subscribed and have required a process of student selection. The methods used have ranged from 'names in a hat' through to personal interviews with the staff taking the trip. The interviews have been used to assess the students' motivation and their likely capacity to adjust to and learn from unfamiliar environments and cultures.

Unlike their Western European counterparts, the destinations for the long-haul trips have all been chosen because of established staff research interests. The areas selected are new to the students but not to the staff. This gives the long-haul curricula the benefit of being enriched and informed by staff research activities and expertise. Moreover, the Plymouth staff leading the long haul trips have all made use of their academic colleagues and friends in the host region. This has added the valuable dimension of the 'insiders' view and the kinds of insights and information which only locals normally possess. Although the Western European trips have also made some use of staff research and local contacts, these two dimensions have been more prominent in the long-haul courses.

One final distinguishing characteristic of the long-haul programmes has been their duration. Although the other field courses normally last eight days, because of the extra costs involved the long-haul trips have typically spanned between two and three weeks. This increased duration is seen as essential to justify the financial outlay. In order to ensure academic comparability with the other trips, however, part of this extra time has been used for general sightseeing and recreation.

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## The Benefits and "Value Added"

Arguably, the principal advantage of the long haul courses has been the chance to open up a range of learning opportunities not available in Western Europe. The students are able to study new and strikingly different physical and cultural landscapes. The South Africa students, for example, were able to examine the desert geography and geomorphology of the Karoo. They were also able to study at first hand the South African townships and other legacies of apartheid. The long-haul trips also enable students to examine a range of environmental issues not generally available in Western Europe. The Russia students, for example, were able to assess the causes and consequences of massive environmental pollution and the Hong Kong group were introduced to the geo-technical implications of building in an area prone to typhoons.

In addition to opening up fresh academic agendas, the long-haul destinations provide a means of shedding new light on some familiar themes and of developing a comparative approach. The Hong Kong group, for example, studied the area's New Towns programme and in so doing were able to identify points of both similarity and contrast with the New Towns programme in the UK. Similarly, lectures from Hong Kong planners were of interest both in their own right and as a means of recognising more clearly the distinctive features of land-use controls in Britain.

Long-haul field trips are also advantageous in their ability to develop students' global awareness. For the modern geographer, themes related to globalisation and its impact are of central importance. For our Plymouth geographers, developing such a perspective is more readily accomplished in Kowloon than in Calais. Long-haul field work expands students' geographical horizons. It can be argued, of course, that themes such as global economic change or the 'rise and fall' of the South Asian economies can be studied perfectly well from the Plymouth library. However, the experiential nature of fieldwork enhances deep learning of a kind perhaps less readily achieved in the library (Longerman & Andersen, 1988). For the students, the impact of "being there" makes the learning more vivid and memorable. Certainly the challenge of confronting new and unfamiliar environments increases student motivation and

interest. Today many undergraduates have already travelled quite extensively in Western Europe and so field trips in countries such as Spain, France or Germany take students to regions they may have already visited or are quite likely to visit in the future. The particular excitement of the long haul trip comes in part from the sense that this could well be a "once in a lifetime" experience. There is, therefore, a stronger student commitment and a heightened sense of curiosity about the place.

Long-haul fieldwork also benefits from the willingness of local planners, academics and other relevant professionals to meet the students and to contribute to the teaching. This can take the form of guest lectures, guided tours, discussion periods or the provision of specialist reports and supporting information. While other field trips can also be enriched by this kind of contribution, with long-haul courses the fact that you and the students have travelled several thousand miles seems to enhance the willingness of local people to help. In Hong Kong, for example, which was visited a few months before the 'hand over' to China (Chalkley, 1996) we received a guest lecture from one of the former colony's leading politicians and also a tour of the new airport during construction (an opportunity not usually open to visitors). With long-haul trips a field course party from the UK is seen as 'special' and deserving of a particularly warm welcome. This can open up learning experiences not normally available. Over 70% of students rated the contribution made by local experts as important or very important to the success of the long-haul trips. In the case of South Africa, this figure reached 90%, due in part no doubt to the unnerving but exciting experience of being lectured by an elderly white South African professor in the middle of a black township!

Another feature of the long-haul trip is its capacity to promote group identity and staff - student contact. Being far from home and in a very different part of the world serves to develop group cohesion and a sense of sharing a very memorable experience. The students tend to support each other more actively and are more willing to offer mutual advice on everything from local transport arrangements to personal safety. The sense of being part of a group also extends to staff - student relationships. The students are

aware of the extra work involved in planning and preparing a long-haul trip and this engenders a sense of loyalty and even gratitude. Although in most areas of higher education it is unusual for students to thank the staff for their work, by contrast, on a long-haul trip, the students see that the staff have arranged something which is special and beyond the call of duty. The students' enhanced motivation and eagerness to ask questions further strengthens the level of staff - student contact and bonding. The point should not, of course, be over-stated. In part the strengthened contacts may derive from having a smaller than usual group of students and from the extended duration of the long-haul trips. None the less, there is an added value which derives from sharing a very remarkable learning experience in a very different cultural setting.

That students learn to cope with this cultural contrast also assists in their personal development. In the first day or two, some of the less assured members of the group will be cautious and will avoid using public transport or eating 'non-western' foods. Gradually, however, they become more adventurous and increasingly self-confident. They are learning to live in an unfamiliar environment. As an illustration, a visit to a black township on day two of the first Capetown trip resulted in an initial reluctance by many students to get out of the bus due to the perceived threat. Yet within a week small groups of students were arranging meetings with planners and welfare officers in the township with complete confidence.

As students extend their ability to cope, their self-esteem increases. While personal development of this kind can be a feature of all overseas fieldwork, there is no doubt that in this respect, the long-haul trip brings extra benefits. Obviously, some students 'grow' more than others and a small number will return to the UK without perhaps having taken full advantage of the personal development opportunities which were available. It is also true, of course, that some of the students most in need of enhancing their self-confidence and maturity will not enrol for long-haul trips because they appear to be too challenging or risky. These caveats aside, the experience from the Plymouth long-haul courses is that almost all the students who participate in them do benefit from an increased self-confidence and

from an increased belief in their own capacity to travel successfully to far flung corners of the world. Three-quarters of our long-haul students feel that the courses increased their self-confidence and their willingness to undertake further international travel.

Indeed, student feedback on all the long-haul trips has been overwhelmingly positive. It is true, of course, that most kinds of field work tend to be well received by students. The long-haul experience, however, takes student satisfaction scores to new levels. For example, in response to the question "Overall, how satisfied were you with this course?" the answers from our 'conventional' overseas trips (for example to the Mediterranean) receive noticeably lower scores than those for long-haul. Interestingly, despite the extra financial costs, the long-haul trips are overwhelmingly considered good value for money. Students seem to recognise that commercial tour operators would charge higher prices and would be unlikely to offer such an academically interesting programme (and in practice student tour companies have a strongly European focus). Moreover, in the case of both the Moscow and Hong Kong trips (which used University and YMCA accommodation) there were advantages and cost savings in booking together as a student group.

The kinds of reasons students give for their very positive feedback are illustrated in the quotes below:

"visiting the shanty towns was unforgettable"

"an experience like no other"

"a complete culture shock"

"I got a deeper understanding of how less well off people live"

"I will always remember the poverty and the pollution"

"it was wonderful to feel like a tourist and yet learn so much"

"simply fantastic!"

These quotes illustrate that it is generally the cultural and comparative dimensions which students find most rewarding. The fascination lies in experiencing a place so different from home. This fascination has been enhanced by the fact that

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all three of our long-haul destinations (South Africa, Russia and Hong Kong) are places which have been very much in the news. This media coverage may have whetted the students' appetites and increased their curiosity. In this respect it will be interesting to gauge the students' reaction to the forthcoming Philippines trip, an area generally less well covered by the UK media.

One other interesting feature of the student feedback has been the number of students feeling that the long-haul course has increased their employability. Some 54 per cent have felt that the experience was likely to be important or very important in enhancing their employment prospects. One suspects that this may be a somewhat over-optimistic interpretation: job prospects will depend on much more than a single trip abroad, however worthwhile. None the less, students clearly perceived it as giving them a more international perspective (helpful in an increasingly global economy) and providing an interesting embellishment to their CVs.

## The Drawbacks and Limitations

Having identified the main benefits of the long-haul trips, it is important now to set out the main difficulties and dangers. The key problem is obviously cost. The staff costs will need to be met and, more importantly, students need to find perhaps something between £500 and £1,000 each depending on the destination chosen. As explained earlier, the Plymouth experience demonstrates that many students are more than willing to pay those kinds of sums. However, some departments and staff may feel uncomfortable about the equity issues which this raises since, for financial reasons, not all students are able to participate. At Plymouth the staff decided, on balance, in favour of long-haul (after some quite heated arguments) on the grounds that students who wanted to participate should not be denied the opportunity because there were others who could not. In practice, in the light of experience, fears that long-haul might turn into an exclusively upper-middle class preserve have subsided, a trend helped by the fact that there have been no complaints from students taking the cheaper, more 'conventional' alternatives. None the less, there are still colleagues who on "equal opportunities" grounds,

feel that long-haul field courses are of doubtful legitimacy. Moreover, this view derives some support from our surveys which show that about half of all long-haul students have travelled outside Europe before. This probably points to a middle-class bias and suggests that many students have already had the kind of cross-cultural experience which long-haul trips claim to provide.

There are other equity issues in addition to finance. Some staff have argued that female students, perhaps more security conscious, may be less likely to enrol for long-haul trips. In practice, the gender ratio has been 43 per cent female which reflects very closely our overall student intake. However, it is noticeable that the figure fell to 31 per cent for Russia which could indicate heightened security worries amongst female students, particularly in the light of Moscow's crime reputation. The gender issues raised by Maguire (1997) about women's less positive attitude to fieldwork in harsh physical environments may also perhaps be mirrored in their attitudes to fieldwork in other potentially threatening surroundings.

There is also an academic equity issue which surrounds the extent to which students on long-haul trips can undertake similar kinds of work to their counterparts studying closer to the UK. The argument runs that all students are taking the same foreign fieldwork module (GGY355) and that they should therefore be presented with similar challenges and similar programmes of work and assessment. This argument, however, raises questions also about the differences between the well established courses run in different parts of Western Europe and cannot be directed exclusively at long-haul. Every field course is to an extent unique, not least because of the distinctive characteristics of the places being studied. There is, of course, the long-standing issue of the feasibility or desirability of conducting human geography projects in non-English speaking countries, but this question again cannot be targeted exclusively at long-haul. The English language is used in many parts of the world far removed from the UK. Indeed, it may be easier for UK students to conduct human geography projects and social surveys in South Africa than France. None the less, it must be recognised that obviously some long-

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haul destinations can place limits on the kinds of investigative work which can be undertaken.

Another difficulty is, of course, the extra logistical and preparation problems which can arise with long-haul courses. Flights may need to be booked earlier than for other trips, and organising accommodation, local transport, industrial visits, guest speakers and so on can be more difficult at a distance. With telephone, fax and e-mail, however, it would be wrong to imagine that these are insurmountable problems. The new communication technologies have made life a good deal easier for long-haul organisation.

Perhaps more worrying are concerns about health and safety. For UK departments operating trips within Western Europe, medical issues are not normally a key factor in the logistics of field course planning in that public health standards are high as is the quality of the medical infrastructure. With many long-haul destinations, however, these matters cannot be taken for granted. It may well be necessary to seek government advice on health and medical issues. Moreover, making risk assessments about far-off places can be difficult unless you have local colleagues to help. Extra work may be needed to minimise the extra risks which can be associated with long-haul trips.

Another item in this discussion of drawbacks and dangers is the possible impact of "culture shock". Some students may take time to acclimatise both to the social and the physical climate, particularly if they are also coping with jet lag and tiredness. Equally, they may be so stunned by the culture (the temples, the art, the music and the food) that they become preoccupied by the sensual experience and the exoticisation of the unfamiliar (Rose, 1993). In these circumstances, critical analysis may be suspended, thereby allowing tourism to replace geography. In this respect it is noticeable that many of the student comments (like those listed earlier) focus on the personal impact of encountering very different cultures and landscapes. Feedback remarks such as "simply fantastic" are not necessarily evidence of learning in an academic or scholarly sense. Moreover, it is also possible for more timid students to seek the cultural safety of the hotel and their fellow students, and thereby to miss out on the opportunities for personal development and independent exploration. The

Plymouth experience suggests that in practice most students are bold enough to take advantage of the opportunities available, although some are cautious about the local cuisine, preferring where possible to seek out the nearest MacDonald's! It is clearly important to manage the field course programme in ways which sensitively encourage exposure to the local culture while maintaining academic rigor and links to the geography curriculum at both an empirical and a conceptual level. Achieving this balance is not always easy.

Finally, in identifying the problems and limits of the long-haul trip, the Plymouth experience demonstrates that taking students to far-away places does not necessarily improve the standard of their field course reports and essays. The average marks achieved are very similar to those of the Western Europe courses. In one sense this is good news because it means that students' marks are not determined by which course they attend. However, it does raise questions about "academic return" on the extra investment required for long-haul courses.

## The Lessons

To enhance teaching through fieldwork there are many general items of advice which can be gleaned from the existing literature, including papers such as those by Kent *et al.* (1997), Livingstone *et al.* (1998), Bradbeer (1996), Jenkins (1994), McEwen (1996) and Katz (1994). It is, for example, good practice to link the field trip to the students' previous knowledge and to build in opportunities to develop students' observational skills (Gold & Haigh, 1992). Such general points of good practice obviously apply as much to long-haul as to other forms of fieldwork. The list of guidance presented below, however, focuses on suggestions which have particular relevance for long-haul.

- Start by considering whether and where in your degree programme there may be an opportunity to offer a long-haul course.
- Consult with colleagues in order to raise awareness of the long-haul concept. Give preliminary thought to one or two possible destinations but do not over-invest in detailed preparation lest financial or equity considerations prove insurmountable obstacles.

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- If the staff response is generally encouraging, gauge the likely level of student interest. At this stage you will need at least approximate information on costs, so that the students know how much they will have to pay.
  - If the student response is also encouraging, then you can proceed towards more detailed academic and logistical planning. Select the destination carefully and check any serious medical or safety concerns. There can obviously be academic advantages in focusing on an area where you have an established research record or a good level of existing knowledge. This will both facilitate planning and enrich the academic quality of the course. Get in touch with any local University or professional contacts who could prove helpful.
  - Design a curriculum which takes particular advantage of the opportunities opened up by your long-haul course. For example, cross-cultural issues or globalisation themes may be given special prominence. There is no point in travelling thousands of miles to do the kind of work which could be undertaken equally well (or even better) in your own backyard.
  - Research the airline market carefully because prices can vary, and remember that long-haul flights often need booking many months in advance. You will need to make an early decision therefore on the size of the group you intend to take. If there is a strong student demand you may also need a selection procedure. Consider the merits of a finance deposit system to ensure that students do not drop out later for anything other than really compelling reasons.
  - Students will need to be carefully briefed on both academic and logistical matters and to undertake a programme of preliminary reading about the destination area. Given that this destination will almost certainly be a far-off area about which your students have little previous knowledge, special importance attaches to preparatory work. You will not wish to spend precious (and expensive) time in the field introducing students to basic information or ideas which could have been presented back home on campus. Although this is a message true for all field trips, it carries special force for long-haul courses.
  - Exploit your celebrity status. The fact that you have travelled so far may well facilitate access to people and places not normally available to groups of local undergraduates. Meeting top academics, politicians, planners and other professionals can greatly enhance the academic quality of the course and enrich the students' learning.
  - Allow time for jet lag, tiredness and culture shock. Particularly if the climate is hot and humid, you may need to build in periods for rest and relaxation. Remember too that students will want the opportunity to go sight-seeing and exploring by themselves.
  - Remember that long-haul can raise particular issues about visas, insurance and medical provision. Ascertain whether your intended student group includes anyone whose nationality or medical circumstances could require particular attention.
  - Remember also that students will have particularly high expectations of long-haul trips. This derives partly from the exciting prospect of visiting 'exotic' destinations but also because students are paying a lot of money. Given the financial sums involved, the group could be particularly critical if the programme seriously failed to live up to expectations. Similarly, staff may feel especially obligated to ensure that the course runs well and offers an especially high-quality learning experience.
  - All field courses require evaluation and this is especially true of long-haul trips because of their cost. The form of evaluation and the questions asked may need to be somewhat different from usual. You may, for example, wish to ask about the sources of funding the students have used and whether the trip was perceived as being worth the additional costs, and if so why?
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## Synopsis

The expansion of the long-haul air network and the gradual decrease in airline charges have together opened up the prospect of long-haul fieldwork. However, to date relatively few UK departments have extended their fieldwork programmes outside Europe. Financial constraints and the general climate of fieldwork contraction have militated against the introduction of long-haul trips. Amongst UK geography departments perhaps the most extensive and varied programme of long-haul fieldwork is that organised by the University of Plymouth and summarised in this paper.

Not surprisingly, the student response to this programme has been overwhelmingly positive, with feedback and evaluation ratings far exceeding those for the equivalent European trips. Long-haul courses can provide an exceptionally valuable educational experience in both academic and personal terms. Although they do raise significant equity issues (not all students can afford to go), the Plymouth experience indicates that many students are prepared to use their government loan or vacation work income for this purpose. Long-haul trips do demand a substantial staff commitment in terms of organisation and time, but they can bring real advantages. Although most of these relate to the quality of the students' learning experience, it is worth underlining also the departmental marketing benefits of long-haul. Geography remains one of the most popular higher education disciplines but we are in an increasingly competitive marketplace and some departments are facing genuine recruitment difficulties which may well get worse (Rawling, 1996). Prospectuses or brochures with pictures of students on field work in places like South Africa and Hong Kong may be a valuable marketing tool. Adding to the glamour of your departmental brochure (whether for geography or any other discipline) is obviously not by itself a sufficient reason for introducing long-haul courses: none the less it just might be the decisive factor which persuades your Head of Department to give it a try, and to 'go global'. Judging by the Plymouth experience, this is a decision which neither you nor your students will have cause to regret. It is hoped therefore that this paper will help to provide some ideas and guidance which will encourage more departments to consider long-haul provision and thereby allow more students to extend their geographical horizons.

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## APPENDIX: FIELD COURSE SUMMARY

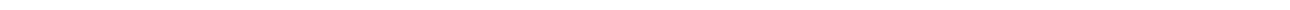
<b>GENERAL LOCATION</b>		<b>CAPETOWN, SOUTH AFRICA</b>	
<b>DATES:</b> 7.9.95 - 25.9.95	<b>STAFF:</b> Dr. R. Gibb (Module Leader) Dr. J. L. Ternan	<b>STUDENT NUMBERS:</b> 26	
<b>ACCOMMODATION:</b>		Flower Street Villas, The Gardens, Capetown, 7700, South Africa	
<b>TOTAL COST:</b> £23,530	<b>STUDENT CONTRIBUTION:</b> £17,810 (£685 per head)	<b>DEPARTMENTAL SUPPORT:</b> £ 5720	
<b>COURSES/MODULE:</b>		BSc. Hons. Geography Stage III BSc. Combined Hons. Geography Stage III	
<b>SUMMARY OF ACTIVITIES:</b>			
<p>Physical geography of the Cape region.</p> <p>The Cape flora: <i>Fynbos</i> vegetation communities, fire impacts. Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden; impacts and management of non-indigenous (eg <i>Acacia</i>) species.</p> <p>Karoo-poor - semi arid erosional systems; vegetation - erosion interactions.</p> <p>Urban geography of Capetown including Gugulitu and Khayelitsha townships.</p> <p>The geography of apartheid: the apartheid city. The Victoria and Alfred Waterfront Development.</p> <p>The geography of wine - wine industry of South Africa.</p> <p>Sand dune stabilisation and urbanisation at Hout Bay - Sandy Bay (problems of management/natural hazards).</p> <p>Political geography of South Africa, including visit to Parliament in session.</p> <p>Table Mountain walk.</p>			
<b>ASSESSMENT:</b> Student project report 60%, Essay 40%			
<b>LOCAL CONTRIBUTIONS:</b>			
<p>Dr M Meadows, University of Capetown          Professor R Davies, University of Capetown          Dr B Dodson, University of Capetown</p>			

## APPENDIX: FIELD COURSE SUMMARY

<b>GENERAL LOCATION</b>		<b>HONG KONG AND GUANGZHOU (Canton)</b>	
<b>DATES:</b> 19.9.96 - 4.10.96	<b>STAFF:</b> Dr. J. L. Ternan (Module Leader) Professor B. Chalkley	<b>STUDENT NUMBERS:</b> 26	
<b>ACCOMMODATION:</b>		YMCA of Hong Kong, 41 Salsbury Road, Tsimshatsui, Kowloon Hong Kong. (Students in dormitory rooms - 4 per room)	
<b>TOTAL COST:</b> £25,995	<b>STUDENT CONTRIBUTION:</b> £21,561 (ca. £843 per head)	<b>DEPARTMENTAL SUPPORT:</b> £4,433	
<b>COURSES/MODULE:</b>		BSc. Hons. Geography Stage III BSc. Combined Hons. Geography Stage III	
<p><b>SUMMARY OF ACTIVITIES:</b></p> <p>Introduction to the physical and human geography of Hong Kong from the Peak Walk.</p> <p>The New Territories. Rural land use, walled villages and new town developments (Shatin).</p> <p>Housing in Hong Kong.</p> <p>The new airport development at Chek Lap Kok: environmental impacts.</p> <p>The tourism industry of Hong Kong.</p> <p>The work of the GEO (Geotechnical Central Office) - environmental hazards and urban planning.</p> <p>The Po Shan Landslide - site visit.</p> <p>Urban hydrology and water quality.</p> <p>Chinese junk trip - marine sediments, dredging and land reclamation impacts.</p> <p>Political dimensions of environmental issues in Hong Kong.</p> <p>Guangzhou: social and urban geography.</p>			
<p><b>ASSESSMENT:</b> Student project report 60%, Essay 40%; field notebook must be satisfactory</p>			
<p><b>LOCAL CONTRIBUTIONS</b></p> <p>Dr. R. Chui, Hong Kong University M. Putman, Honk Kong Airport Authority S. Wong, Hong Kong Tourist Association Dr. R. W. Neller, Chinese University Dr. B. Owen, Baptist University Rt. Hon. Christine Loh, LEGCO</p>			

## APPENDIX: FIELD COURSE SUMMARY

<b>GENERAL LOCATION</b> MOSCOW (5 Nights <i>plus</i> 1 night on train KIROVSK (Moscow State university Field Station-8 nights)		
<b>DATES:</b> 23.8.97 - 7.9.97	<b>STAFF:</b> Dr. T. Saiko (Module Leader) Mr. J. Sallnow (Module Leader), Mr. J. Stainfield	<b>STUDENT NUMBERS:</b> 26
<b>ACCOMMODATION:</b> See above		
<b>TOTAL COST:</b> £23,220	<b>STUDENT CONTRIBUTION:</b> £19,170 (£710 per head)	<b>DEPARTMENTAL SUPPORT:</b> £4,050
<b>COURSES/MODULE:</b> BSc. Hons. Geography Stage III BSc. Combined Hons. Geography Stage III		
<p><b>SUMMARY OF ACTIVITIES:</b></p> <p>MOSCOW</p> <p>Physical geography of Moscow region including guest lectures and visit to Moscow State University Earth Science Museum.</p> <p>Urban planning.</p> <p>Nature conservation in Moscow urban area.</p> <p>Tourist sites (Red Square, Lenin's Tomb etc).</p> <p>Kirovsk (33 hour train journey across major climatic/natural vegetation zones).</p> <p>Urban problems in the Arctic North.</p> <p>Avalanche control.</p> <p>Khibin Mountains - vegetation and latitudinal zonation.</p> <p>Apatite processing plant (Kola Peninsula) and open cast extraction, guided by chief engineer.</p> <p>Murmansk, regional development and wage coefficients.</p>		
<b>ASSESSMENT:</b> Student project report 60%, Essay 40%		
<p><b>LOCAL CONTRIBUTIONS</b></p> <p>Dr. Tatyana Krasovskaya, Geography Faculty, Moscow State University</p> <p>Dr. V. Sapunov, Field Station Director, Avalanche Control, Moscow State University</p>		



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# The large residential field course: management, educational and student perspectives

*J.L. Ternan, B.S. Chalkley and A. Elmes, January 1999*

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## Introduction

In a survey of the experience of British geography departments 1986-1991, almost 50 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that operating at higher staff-student ratios and larger classes had adversely affected the quality of fieldwork (Jenkins & Smith, 1993). Since then, student numbers have increased substantially. In 1994 first year intakes of over 60 were often the norm (Jenkins, 1994) and as a consequence many geography departments were finding previous fieldwork patterns and practices to be unsustainable due to logistical, staffing and funding constraints, as well as health and safety concerns (Higgitt, 1996). An HMI report on Geography fieldwork in degree courses (HMI, 1993) recorded that few departments had adequately addressed the difficulties created for fieldwork by an increased cohort of students, and that examples of alternative modes of fieldwork being devised for increased numbers were rare. Various strategies have been described for doing fieldwork with large groups (Jenkins, 1994) and survey results reported by Higgitt (1996) list some changes in fieldwork practices, including residential field courses often being replaced by local fieldwork.

Following a major review of fieldwork provision, the Department of Geographical Sciences at the University of Plymouth has been running a field course of one-week's duration to the Burren area of Western Ireland since 1992. This field course was attended by over 200 students in 1997 and 1998 and may possibly qualify as the largest overseas residential field course run by a geography department anywhere. Although clearly there are difficulties associated with the operation of a field course of this scale, the response of both students and staff at Plymouth has been overwhelmingly positive from organisational, learning and social perspectives.

The aims of this paper are twofold. Firstly, it

outlines the organisational issues in running a field course with large numbers and illustrates the nature and level of departmental commitment necessary. Secondly, it assesses the educational benefits and limitations of a large residential field course. This review is based in part on student perceptions of the experience including the responses to a questionnaire.

## Background

This paper focuses on the year 2 (stage II) Ireland field course which commenced in 1992 and initially catered for single honours geography (compulsory) and combined degree (optional) students. It was expanded in 1993 to include stage II students on a newly validated degree course in earth sciences. The field course now formally constitutes two modules, one in geography and the other in earth sciences, although for half of the week they share a common programme. In 1998 the field course 'road show' involved 5 X 50 seater coaches, 5 minibuses, 215 students, 15 academic and 3 technical staff together with coach drivers. Prior to the first Ireland field course, a full reconnaissance was carried out to establish contacts and to assess the feasibility of various projects. Since then, new staff have attended the field course primarily for reconnaissance in their first year followed by three years in which they offer a full contribution. No staff have had to be "press-ganged" and staff turnover and rest years have ensured continued enthusiasm.

## Course Aims

Fieldwork usually has multiple aims (Gold *et al.*, 1991; Clark; 1996, Kent *et al.*, 1997) and clearly with the number and diversity of staff involved, the detailed curriculum of a large field course will reflect the diversity of staff expertise. Despite this, a number of core aims for the Ireland field course can be defined:

- the development of key (transferable) skills: McEwen (1996) has argued that it is no longer sufficient for students to complete a degree with a good geographical knowledge and understanding of the conceptual frameworks of geography. The development of key skills must also be an important element in degree programmes and fieldwork provides an extremely effective means of developing a wide range of such skills.
- the development of technical skills through 'learning by doing' (Loneragan & Andersen, 1988): these may range from questionnaire design to field survey methods such as stream gauging and water analyses. These skills acquisitions are considered an important preparation for future independent work including the stage 3 dissertation.
- to provide the opportunities for experiential learning. The overall ethos of the Ireland large field course closely follows Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning. In the fieldwork context each of the four stages - thinking, planning, doing and reflecting - should be present for the experience to have its maximum impact on the learner (Higgitt, 1996). The student-led group work element of the field course, with its requirement for pre-field course preparation, is possibly the most successful from this perspective.
- subject knowledge acquisition: this includes what Loneragan & Anderson (1998) refer to as 'demystification', where lecture or textbook information is made real. It also includes the possibility of support for work carried out in other optional modules.

In a recent review paper Kent *et al.*, (1997) have also argued the importance of progression in modes of fieldwork teaching. The Ireland field course builds on predominantly staff-directed work in the first year, whilst at the same time providing an introduction to the largely student-led, problem-orientated fieldwork of the third year. This idea of progression in modes of teaching is also explicit in the various approaches adopted within the Ireland field course. These progress from the predominantly "look-see", fairly traditional introductory tours in the first two days (Clarke, 1996), to staff-directed project work on the third and fourth days, and to student-led project work on the final two days. This provides increasing autonomy and an increasing proportion of student-centred learning through the week (Kent *et al.*, 1997).

## The Field Work Programme

The Ireland field course represents two separately validated field course modules, one for students specialising in geography and the other for earth science students. For geography students the first two days are coach trips designed to provide a broad introduction to the physical and human geography of the area. These coach tours have, however, tended to develop particular themes (e.g. early settlement and landscape, the local economy, soil, vegetation and land form change) reflecting the interests of leading staff. As a successful variation on the traditional coach trip, one of the introductory tours consists of an 8 km guided country walk using a coach for drop off and pick up. Students rank their preferences from a range of four tours and as each is repeated on the second day no student has yet had to take their fourth choice. Time is built into these tours to allow students to carry out personal observations as well as introducing short elements of observation and discovery. Students are required to keep a field notebook which is submitted and assessed at the end of the second day and contributes 10% of the marks for the module overall. Although not entirely successful, this field notebook requirement has the benefit of encouraging students to take an active interest in the geography of the area and it reduces the risk of the less motivated students neglecting their studies.

In the staff-directed exercises of the third and fourth days each staff member either offers one project, repeated on the fourth day, or separate projects for each of these days. These projects again tend to reflect the specialist interests and skills of the staff and consequently often relate to other option modules. Despite this, they are designed to be accessible and intelligible to all students. On the project selection form completed three months prior to the field course, students are requested to list these projects in order of preference. A major component of the field course assessment (40 per cent) is derived from individual reports based on one of these staff-directed exercises often drawing on communally generated observations.

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The final two days focus on student-led group work. The field course handbook presents the students with a list of over thirty possible projects which staff have ensured are intellectually challenging as well as feasible within the limitations of field course time and available equipment. The information provided on each project is sufficient for the student to gain a general idea of the project, and is usually only a title e.g. the hydrology of an Irish peat bog or perceptions of peripherality in Ireland. The brevity of this statement allows the students plenty of scope to debate and determine their own precise goals, methods and programme of work.

Each member of staff lists up to three feasible projects which are set out in the handbook. Students are required to form groups normally of 4 to 8 persons, to elect a spokesperson and to rank 6 projects in order of preference. Following processing of the project selection forms, student groups arrange meetings with the staff advisors for their allocated project to discuss appropriate pre-field course preparation. This preparation element is assessed, with students required to formulate a research design and prepare a suitable methodology (Darby & Burkle, 1975). The staff advisor's role is therefore in the first instance as an initiator, then subsequently as a refiner of methods (Bradbeer, 1996) in order to ensure a satisfactory experimental design and appropriate equipment provision. After the field course, the staff mark the reports on the individual projects they have overseen and in this way the overall burden of assessment is shared, a key consideration with over 200 students. The students' two field days are concerned with data gathering, sample analyses, data processing and the preparation of ideas and materials for group project presentations on the early evening of the final day. These take place in four parallel sessions each with approximately eight 10-minute presentations. This part of the field trip is therefore organised rather like a large conference with parallel sessions enabling all the students to help prepare and give a presentation and to experience the challenge of 'questions from the floor'. Logistically, this proves a very efficient mode of organising such large student numbers. These sessions are currently arranged to provide a variety of project presentations so that students may gain a more

integrated perspective and appreciate the range of work carried out and methodologies adopted. Clearly these parallel sessions could alternatively be organised on a theme basis. The student-led project is finally presented in individual reports thus avoiding some of the assessment problems of group work discussed by Haigh & Gold (1993). Together with the pre-field course preparation, this student-led element accounts for 50 per cent of the module assessment.

For students taking the earth science module the first three days of the field course are concerned with providing training in specific geological techniques including sedimentary logging and facies analysis. For the final three days these students may choose from the range of staff-led (day 4) and student-led group projects (days 5 & 6) offered by physical geographers and geologists.

As with all field courses, irrespective of size, safety is a paramount consideration. With very large student numbers, student groups are likely to be working for large parts of the day without the presence of a member of staff. This underlines the need to use really safe locations and to ensure good working practices backed up by clear verbal and written instructions. Following safety concerns, some institutions have taken the view that students cannot be allowed to work unsupervised at all (Gardiner, 1996). Students on the Ireland field course do operate without continuous supervision but are not allowed to work in groups of less than three, thus preserving some element of independent learning and initiative whilst at the same time benefiting the development of group skills and ensuring mutual support in the event of a safety incident. Risk factors associated with each project are assessed, and staff ensure that students are appropriately equipped for fieldwork and have contact information for hotel and emergency services. Groups working in more difficult locations are visited more frequently and for all students a group check-in routine is established in order to ensure that all students are accounted for at the end of their day in the field. By these kinds of measures, it is possible to arrange a safe programme of working despite the large numbers of students on the trip.

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## Handbook, Project Selection Course Management

### Module Handbook

With large field courses, good documentation is particularly important as a means of ensuring that students are clear about the programme of work and the logistical details. Certainly, this is an essential component of the organisation and learning dimension of the Irish field course. The student handbook outlines the practical aspects including travel arrangements, health and safety issues and requirements and ethical considerations in fieldwork. It also offers brief summaries of each of the coach trips offered (days 1 and 2), the staff-directed projects (days 3 and 4) with codes based on staff initials, as well as a listing of over thirty feasible student-led projects (days 5 and 6) again with names of staff advisors. The major part of the handbook comprises a series of review chapters written by staff reflecting their particular interests and specialities. These chapters range from the glacial geomorphology to the political geography of Ireland.

The distribution of the handbook to students is an important part of the annual planning schedule (see Table 1.) and is the first of two briefing sessions with the group as a whole. It outlines the objectives of the field course and the work programme. Students are required to complete and return a form giving ranked preferences for the various coach trips and projects, as well as providing information related to dietary requirements and health and safety. Students sign stating that they have read and will abide by the fieldwork safety regulations. Experience has shown that with appropriate threats of being allocated to the less popular projects, more than 95 per cent of the students return the form within the required ten days.

As well as tracking down recalcitrant students, the major work load on the field course organiser (module leader) is the processing of the project selection forms. This is essentially a juggling exercise trying to ensure some equity of loading on staff whilst at the same time endeavouring to allocate students a high ranking choice. Almost all students obtain their first, second or third preference projects although this at times is at the

expense of higher loading on some staff.

Tasks such as the organisation of student group presentations, and the co-ordination of risk are given to less pressured staff. Allocated coach tours and projects are entered by secretarial staff on an Excel spreadsheet. This is posted on the student notice board along with lists of student-led project groups, and students are expected to arrange a discussion meeting with their staff advisor. The Excel spreadsheet also enables daily lists to be produced. These are posted on a field course notice board in the hotel to ensure that students are aware of precisely what they are doing on a particular day and with which member of staff.

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## Table 1 Annual planning timetable.

April (12 months previous)	- Provisional hotel booking
October (6 months previous)	- Preparation/update of field course handbook - Final module numbers known - Booking of coaches and ferries
December (4 months previous)	- First briefing session with all students (academic content, aims and objectives) - Distribution of field course handbook and projects selection forms
December	- Return of project selection forms
January (3 months previous)	- Processing of project selection forms - Establishment of Excel data base - Notices posted of allocated coach trips and projects
February (Intermediate week)	- Meeting of student groups with staff advisors re. small group projects to discuss required preparation. - Submission of preparation work - Students and staff submit required equipment lists to technical staff - Students sign coach lists for outward/return journeys (safety requirement). - Risk assessments (co-ordinated by delegated staff in conjunction with students)
March - May	- Second briefing session with all students to review travel, safety and other arrangements - Field course (8 days) - Project reports submitted and distributed to staff for assessment

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## Technical Input

With very large numbers of students being present, it is possible to justify taking on the trip a number of technical staff who on the Irish field course play an invaluable role in supporting students' work particularly in the areas of IT and physical geography. Prior to the field course, technical staff complete listings of required equipment including the needs of each staff member for each day. Student groups meet with technicians and discuss their equipment requirements for the student-led projects. This is viewed as an important part of the students' learning experience as they benefit from technical expertise and begin to appreciate the need for detailed project planning. Technical staff have established an equipment data base allowing cross-checking and tabulation of staff and student requirements, prior to the packing of equipment. Two specialist physical geography and one IT technician attend the field course. Their responsibilities include setting up and running a computer laboratory as well as a physical geography laboratory for analyses of soil and water. These field laboratories are an essential part of technical skills training. The provision of an IT facility enables students to complete any necessary data processing during the field course, with specialist advice on hand. Requirements for post-field course sample and data analyses prior to assessment submissions are therefore minimised. Technical staff also assist with some elements of field supervision. Technical involvement is central to the success of the field course and this participation of technical staff markedly increases their job satisfaction.

## Transport and Accommodation

Very large field trips can, of course, be complex logistically and therefore require particularly careful planning. Transport to and from the Irish field course location is by coaches, minibuses (staff driven) and ferries. The same coach company has been used for five years and the drivers are now part of the team and familiar with project routes. As a safety requirement, students sign coach travel lists for the outward and return journeys in advance of the field course and, with each coach displaying its own number, loading and checking is

rapid despite the large numbers. During the field course the combination of coaches and minibuses provides maximum flexibility for project work.

A very large hotel with tolerant management and a willingness to provide good out-of-season accommodation at reasonable cost is essential. Despite a group size of over 200 students, there have been no serious disciplinary problems. Students are made aware that they may be sent home and thus fail the module. Clearly, however, such a field course cannot be entirely staffed by timid academics who wish to retire by 10.00 p.m.!

The tasks involved in managing the academic, technical, transport and accommodation arrangements for over 200 people (as outlined above and in Table 1) are, of course, substantial. Certainly the course (module) leader has a major administrative role. However, a course of this size does bring significant administrative economies. The alternative of organising four separate trips each with fifty students would create many more problems and involve much more work. In organisational terms, the Irish experience demonstrates that "big can be beautiful".

## Student Feedback and Response

As part of the Science Education Enhancement and Development programme (SEED) a questionnaire survey was undertaken to determine student perceptions and reactions specifically to the experience of a very large field class. There was a 92 per cent response rate with 190 completed questionnaires. The principal findings are summarised in Table 2 and provide feedback on the academic, organisational and social aspects of the course, as well as on students' general perceptions of the course as a whole.

**Table 2 Summary of student perceptions from feedback**

QUESTION	POSITIVE RESPONSE	NEGATIVE RESPONSE
When asked on how far the field course had enabled them to develop their transferable skills	51% considered that the field course had substantially or very substantial helped them in this respect	8% felt that the field course had either no effect or only a marginal effect on the development of their transferable skills
When asked how far the field course had enabled them to develop their research skills	62% considered that the field course had substantially or very substantial helped them to develop these skills	8% felt that the course had either no effect or only a marginal effect on the development of their research skills
When asked how far the field course had enabled them to develop their knowledge of Ireland	92% considered that the field course had substantially or very substantial helped them to develop their knowledge of Ireland	Zero negative respons
When asked how strongly the field course related to their other modules or parts of their studies	75% felt that there was a strong or very strong relationship	2% felt that the relationship was marginal or non-existent
When asked how valuable the pre-field course preparation was to them	27% considered that it was important or essential	32% considered it was marginally important or irrelevant
When asked how many of the academic sections of the field course handbook were read prior to the start of the field course	47% claimed that they had read at least half of the sections	61% claimed to have read at least one quarter of the sections
When asked to rate the organisation and management of the field course	90% rated the field course management and organisation to be good or excellent	2% rated it as poor
When asked if technical advice on their projects was sought for their field course projects	52% reported seeking technical advice concerning their project prior to the field course and 75% during the field course	NA
When asked how far the field course had enabled them to get to know some of the department's staff	69% felt that the field course had substantially or very substantially helped them get to know some of the department's staff	6% felt that the field course had only a marginal effect on getting to know some of the department's staff
When asked how far the field course had enabled them to get to make new friends or strengthen existing relationships	81% felt that the field course had substantially or very substantially helped them to make new friends or strengthen existing relationships	Zero negative response
When asked to consider the balance of advantages and disadvantages of a very large residential field course (over 200 students)	65% felt that very large field courses were advantageous or very advantageous	5% felt that they were disadvantageous
When asked to rate the field course in terms of value for money	47 % felt that the field course was excellent value for money	3% thought it was poor value for money
The students were asked about their level of awareness concerning the various field courses available at Plymouth when they made their choice of University	56% reported that they were aware of the range of field courses available at Plymouth when they made their choice of University	44% not aware of the field course available at Plymouth
When asked if their awareness of the range of field courses offered by the department influenced their decision to choose Plymouth	50% reported that this information made a substantial or very substantial influence on their decision to choose Plymouth	7% reported that this information had made no influence at all

It seems clear from the questionnaire findings that despite the doubts expressed by some academics (Jenkins & Smith, 1993), students generally viewed the large field course experience in a very positive light from educational, social and value for money perspectives. They considered their knowledge of the geography of Ireland was substantially or very substantially increased and the value of fieldwork in developing key (transferable) and other skills highlighted by various papers (e.g. McEwen, 1996) is supported by student perceptions. A majority considered that the field course had substantially developed their skills in research methods as well as in group work and presentational skills. Particular comments included the "effectiveness of practical and visual learning to support theory", "working as a team", "learning from other people", "greater choice and variety of fieldwork experience", "varied input from different backgrounds", and "mixture of physical and human geography".

Clearly, such a field course is a major social event with some 240 persons transported to a remote area of Ireland. Numerous students commented on questionnaire returns on the value of having the year group as a whole together. Given the multiplicity of modules in contemporary degree courses, a large field course may therefore play a very important function in providing coherence and integration to the degree. Many students benefited from making new friends, improving existing friendships and relationships with staff (Table 2). Female students seem to be more aware of these dimensions of a large field group, with 81 per cent considering they had got to know staff better (63 per cent for males) and that the trip had enabled them to make new friends/strengthen friendships (88 per cent as compared with 77 per cent). It is also evident that these social interactions have clear positive benefits for enthusiastic learning with conversation about the students' varying field work experiences carried on vigorously over dinner and in the bar.

The operation of a very large field course requires very tight management to avoid potential chaos. Students and staff must all know precisely what they are doing on a particular day, who they are working with, where they are going, the times of departure and the means of transport. There was a high level of awareness of this by students and

organisationally few problems were perceived. No less than 90% of students considered the management of the trip to be excellent or good.

Increasing concern has been expressed regarding the cost burden of field courses on students (Gray, 1993) and such concerns are likely to grow with changes in Higher Education funding. It is therefore vital that students consider a field course value for money both academically and in terms of having an enjoyable experience. Student responses have demonstrated that a very large field course can meet these criteria with 47 per cent rating the Ireland field course excellent value for money and only 5 respondents considering it poor. Sixty five per cent felt that being part of a large field course was advantageous or very advantageous, with only 5 per cent considering it disadvantageous. Twice as many students listed advantages as disadvantages, the benefits mainly relating to social interaction and the variety of fieldwork available. Fieldwork is often seen as important in marketing courses (HMI, 1993) and, in an era of increasing competition for students, geography departments may also need to consider such indirect benefits of field courses. Some 56 per cent of questionnaire respondents had been aware of the range of field courses offered in Plymouth and half of these considered that this had substantially or very substantially influenced their decision to study at Plymouth.

## Discussion

As a result of rising costs to departments and students, increasing strains on staff and the greater size and diversity of student cohorts, the pattern of the whole year residential field courses has been viewed as unsustainable (Jenkins, 1994). Consequently, year groups have been split into separate field courses, with less social cohesion, or residential field work has been replaced by locally based work. The experience of the Department of Geography at Plymouth for the last seven years has shown that it is possible to overcome many of these problems by operating a very large field course with real benefits for staff and students. A large residential field course need not be viewed as simply presenting a range of problems but instead as an opportunity to expand and develop the diversity of experience available to students.

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## Benefits

- The involvement of a large number of staff on a single field course has very considerable benefits from both staff and student perspectives. Staff contributions to coach tours and project work can reflect their specialist skills and interests, allowing the possibility of developing themes related to option modules and creating greater job satisfaction. Students are offered a much greater diversity of educational experience than would be possible with a smaller field course, enabling more diverse student cohorts to be more effectively taught. The very nature of geographical enquiry is interdisciplinary and students are able to call on a wide range of expert academic and technical assistance with their work. Quaternary geomorphologists no longer have to struggle to identify plants, nor does the urban geographer have to appear expert on some obscure pile of stones relating to the region's prehistory. Students may choose to develop a breadth of geographical experience through their choice of projects or to expand on work related to their other modules. This diversity of educational experience offered by the large field course was a strong positive feature in the student perceptions.
- Diversity of transferable skills development. The field course clearly offers the opportunity for all students to develop a range of skills such as group work, oral communication and the synthesis of ideas. Additionally, however, students are able to develop more specific skills related to module work or future possible careers. These range from technical skills such as soil and water analyses, analyses of peat bog cores and data processing, through to other approaches to geographical enquiry including questionnaire design, archival investigations, use of public records, oral history and video production. Given the breadth of project work available, the students can select the projects according to their interests, their skills, needs and aptitudes and their possible career plans.
- Reduced strain on staff. The participation of a large team of academic and technical staff avoids the stress of having to repeat field courses and also provides the mutual support of colleagues

in terms of the multiplicity of disciplinary, social, logistical and academic demands placed on staff as part of 'normal' field course duties.

Many smaller departments, especially those lacking in technical support, may be unable to operate a field course of this complexity. For larger departments, however, the benefits are clear. No staff at Plymouth have had to be persuaded to take part in the field course: all are volunteers and greatly enjoy the experience, which also provides a useful opportunity for staff to meet and exchange views with large numbers of colleagues with whom the opportunities for discussion during term-time are often very limited.

- There can be significant economies of scale. The Ireland field course has an overall SSR of ca. 1 : 12 including technical staff (which is not very different from our other field courses). There are major administrative and logistical benefits in having only one trip of about 200 students to organise, as opposed to perhaps four trips of 50 students. Alongside these organisational savings are the academic benefits of having all the students sharing a broadly similar learning experience, thereby reducing the comparability issues which could arise with a multiplicity of different trips and destinations.

## Possible Limitations

Clearly, a field course of this scale has some disadvantages. The most important of these is that it necessitates a major management and logistical commitment by the module leader (although there are economies of scale, as indicated previously). The module leader's role needs to be given departmental recognition as a substantial administrative task. Low staff commitment and weak organisation could be costly, detrimental to the learning process and have potential safety implications (McEwen, 1996). Other arguments regarding the unsustainability of large residential field courses have not been supported by the Plymouth experience. No major disciplinary problems have yet occurred (Jenkins, 1994). This is attributed to the large number of staff present, providing mutual support, and the knowledge of students that they can be sent home and thus fail the module (a threat which so far we have not had to implement). Another potential danger of the very

large course is insufficient personal contact amongst students and between students and staff. However, with much of the programme organised around small group projects, this danger can also be averted.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The Plymouth field trip to Ireland clearly demonstrates that it is possible to run successfully field courses with very large numbers of students. Given the overall benefits of this approach and the massive cohort sizes which are now a feature of many geography departments, there may well be colleagues in other institutions contemplating adopting a similar approach. It may, therefore, be helpful to itemise a small number of points of guidance for staff considering how best to arrange field work with large student numbers:

- In view of the pressures on hotels and transport operators, planning a large field course needs to be initiated early if all the students and staff are to be accommodated.
- Finding a hotel large enough to accommodate all or most of the group (without too much overspill) can require a particularly careful search and the scheduling of the trip well outside the main holiday periods.
- It may be possible to obtain reduced rates with hoteliers and travel companies because of the very large student numbers.
- Good communications are essential with a very large group. A handbook with logistical and academic information is vital. It is also important during the trip to monitor student attendance and participation so that no one is allowed to slip through the net. The importance of clear, advanced communication is particularly important given that it may not be possible to assemble all the students in one place during the trip. A simple device such as a notice board in the hotel foyer can be very advantageous.
- In order to ensure a high quality academic experience with opportunities to develop transferable skills, it is advisable to devote a large part of the programme to projects which involve students working in small teams. This overcomes many of the dangers of anonymity which could threaten the success of a very large

course. By having academic staff overseeing the small project groups, it is possible to ensure a good level of staff - student contact (a feature which is normally seen as one of the principal benefits of field courses).

- Parts of the programme can be delivered through parallel sessions much in the way that big conferences are often organised.
- The presence of large numbers of staff should enable the delivery of an attractive and diverse curriculum with opportunities for student choice and specialisation.
- The scale economies achieved by large trips may enable you to justify technical support and the provision of a small laboratory for IT and/or physical geography.
- The assessment load needs to be spread across the academic staff in order to share the work and reduce the risk of overloading.
- If groups of students are sometimes left to work without staff being present, it is particularly important to ensure good safety arrangements and supporting documentation and instructions.
- When working with large numbers, one must be mindful of the dangers of a passive student experience and of the problem of possibly overburdening an environmentally sensitive area.
- The larger the student group, the greater the risk of student misbehaviour and unruly crowd scenes in the bar or in the local streets. It is essential to have a firm and clear disciplinary code.

Many of the suggestions outlined above simply build on features of good practice in already established field trips running with more modest student numbers. Indeed, part of the success of organising large scale field courses comes from finding ways of scaling up existing good practice and taking full advantages of the opportunities which become available with large student cohorts. A few years ago, running field trips with groups as large as 200 would have been thought quite impracticable and academically indefensible. The Plymouth experience shows very clearly that field work with large numbers is logistically feasible and that if properly arranged it can also bring real academic benefits.

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## THE SEED PROJECTS

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**Project 3a: A handbook on field teaching in the Sciences.**  
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**Project 15: Webkit - a toolkit to produce interactive web pages in support of CAL.**  
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**Project 16: Qualifications update in applied Science for industry.**  
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