

# End of Year Report

## 1<sup>st</sup> August 2000 – 31<sup>st</sup> July 2001

### Contents

- 1) Strategic Level Report
- 2) Operational Level Report
- 3) Evaluation and Reflection
- 4) Looking Forward

Appendix 1: External Evaluator's Report

### 1) STRATEGIC LEVEL

The mission of the LTSN National Subject Centre for Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences (LTSN-GEES) is to promote and support high quality learning and teaching across the three disciplines. Our strategic goals (detailed in our Strategic Plan) include identifying and satisfying the disciplines' needs, collating and sharing good practice, providing appropriate opportunities for staff development and promoting innovation (including the use of C & IT). In effect, through its work as an agent of change, LTSN-GEES aims to become a major national and international hub in the exchange of ideas on learning and teaching across the three disciplines.

In our first year of operation we have taken considerable strides towards achieving these ambitions. Our discipline-based needs analysis led us to prioritise learning and teaching areas such as: understanding Academic Review, new developments in fieldwork, promoting transferable skills and enhancing graduate employability. We therefore designed a programme of events and services focussed principally, but by no means exclusively, around these key areas. This programme began with our launch events on Academic Review in London and Edinburgh and has since included one international and five national conferences/workshops, nearly thirty departmental workshops, a two-day residential event for new lecturers, the enlargement of our good practice database, the initiation of an Information Gateway project, the establishment of four small-scale learning and teaching projects and the publication of the first three issues of our journal, PLANET. While many of these activities have centred on the key issues identified by the needs analysis, the Centre has also been pro-active in taking forward emerging issues to which the three communities need to be alerted. These have included embedding careers education in the academic curriculum and responding to the new legislation and QAA Code of Practice on students with disabilities. In our opening year LTSN-GEES has therefore been both responsive to our disciplines' declared needs and quickly pro-active to new national agendas. There has been a good strategic balance in the range of work undertaken.

Both alongside and through this busy programme of events and activities (detailed in the 'operational' section which follows), LTSN-GEES has also been concerned to raise its profile and establish its credentials. This has involved an awareness/publicity strategy, regular contact with Heads of Department, liaison with the relevant professional bodies, the establishment of a system of liaison staff in every relevant department, the development of our web-site and links with the existing subject-based practitioner networks both in the UK and overseas. Although there is still much work to be done, LTSN-GEES has begun to establish its identity and profile on both the national and the international stage.

The events and services we have provided have been of high quality. We have engaged first-class speakers and workshop facilitators, produced good quality documentation and established a reputation for efficient organisation and delivery. Our events have been well attended and well received by staff from all three disciplines and from all kinds of HE

institutions across the country. The LTSN-GEES evaluator, Prof. Harold Silver, has summarised his views of our work as 'overwhelmingly positive' and has underlined that 'the benefits clearly reach out into all three subject communities' (see Evaluator's Report, Appendix 1).

The success of our first year owes much to the energy and enthusiasm of the LTSN-GEES team. We are exceptionally fortunate in the calibre of our staff, both the core team based in Plymouth, and the four Senior Advisors based in their own institutions. They have all worked together in a collegial and constructive way. The Plymouth base has provided coherence and co-ordination: the Senior Advisors, (Jenny Blumhof, Mick Healey, Neil Thomas and Geoff Robinson) have provided direct links to each discipline and to the field of C & IT. This hub-spoke model has proved highly effective in supporting the achievement of the Centre's strategic aims.

The Centre has also benefited from the valuable overall guidance and support of our Steering Group which comprises leading figures from each of the disciplines and is chaired by Rita Gardner, the Director of the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers (RGS/IBG). Similarly, the national LTSN team, led by Cliff Allan, has provided much useful guidance, as of course has our evaluator Harold Silver. In addition, the University of Plymouth has proved an excellent host, not least in the provision of good quality accommodation, and in facilitating close relationships with the relevant local departments.

Notwithstanding the many achievements of the first year, there have been some concerns and disappointments. The work pressures on all the Centre's staff have been very considerable; next year we will need to prioritise our activities very carefully to avoid overloading. The appointment of an additional part-time administrator will help to relieve the pressure. Another concern has been the delay affecting our Information Gateway Project (based at the University of Leeds). While much good work has been done, LTSN-wide difficulties about 'interoperability' have necessitated a re-scheduling of the Gateway's work programme.

Often, as a result of time and staffing constraints, we have also to date made rather slow progress on some other areas of work (such as developing our resource and materials base, promoting our enquiry service, taking forward pedagogic research and harnessing the expertise of our employers panel). The recent announcement that LTSN will fund our pedagogic research bid will accelerate progress in this area. Similarly, the success of our bid for funding for staff development manuals will greatly strengthen the sharing of good practice between Geography and Earth and Environmental Science.

Throughout our opening year, time and resource constraints have inevitably placed a ceiling on our activities (as illustrated by the major over-subscription of our departmental workshop programme). Other wider obstacles have included the lack of perceived incentive for academic staff nationally to invest in educational changes, particularly given the pre-eminence of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and now the uncertainties surrounding Academic Review and the work of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). None the less, despite these difficulties the Centre has got off to a strong start, as evidenced in Prof. Silver's report.

We have succeeded in establishing a culture which is both scholarly and collaborative and which encourages the three disciplines to work well together. Our programme of events, services and publications has been well received and we are establishing a profile at both national and international levels (albeit it is too early to gauge our impact on pedagogic practice). In general terms our original strategic aims and outcomes remain relevant and appropriate and so next year's programme (while responding to newly emerging issues) will build on the secure foundations now laid. Our opening year has seen considerable progress towards fulfilling our mission and achieving our strategic aims. We look forward to building on this platform of success in 2001/02.

## 2) OPERATIONAL LEVEL

As outlined in the Strategic Level report above, this year has been very successful and extremely busy.

Delivering the various activities, including conference and workshop programmes, launching our Information Gateway and learning & teaching projects, liaising with the Steering Group, conducting initial and ongoing needs analyses, designing, maintaining and redesigning for accessibility the web-site, establishing the full complement of departmental contacts and producing various publications, to name but some of activities, have kept the team at full stretch. The hard work has paid off in high levels of attendance at our events and favourable evaluations from delegates and colleagues throughout the UK.

### Activity Achievement and Scheduling

The majority of our activities have gone ahead according to schedule and have provided a valuable foundation on which to build next year's programme. As detailed in Part Two of this report, these activities have been very successful and have reached a wide range of departments and institutions. The national conference programme has involved participation by representatives from 80 different institutions (out of the 115 which have one or more of the GEES departments), including 29 'new' universities, 40 'old' universities and 11 colleges (65 English, 5 Welsh, 8 Scottish and 2 Northern Ireland). 30 different departments have benefited from our programme of departmental workshops which were run by a range of facilitators from across the three disciplines, four departments are hosting small scale projects (Cheltenham & Gloucester College of HE, Kingston University, Queen Mary University College and Oxford Brookes University) and the University of Leeds Geography Department is leading the Electronic Information Gateway project (Tellus). Additionally, through our Steering Group, the Heads of Department Committees, professional bodies and ad hoc / informal departmental visits considerable effort has gone into raising awareness of LTSN-GEES and its activities.

### Staff

Director:	Prof Brian Chalkley (0.5)
Manager:	Dr Helen King
C & IT Manager:	Mr Mike Sanders
Dissemination Co-ordinator:	Dr Steve Gaskin
Administrative Assistant:	Ms Judith Gill (0.5)
Senior Advisors:	Prof Mick Healey (Geography: Cheltenham & Gloucester College of HE) Dr Neil Thomas (Earth Science: Kingston University) Mrs Jenny Blumhof (Environmental Science: University of Hertfordshire) Mr Geoff Robinson (C & IT: University of Leicester)

Our staffing structure is working very well. The staff based at the University of Plymouth work very well as a team, allowing for effective and efficient operations as well as a very pleasant working environment. The Plymouth staff also have developed a good rapport with the four Senior Advisors (based in their own, separate, institutions). The balance of staffing is, in general, appropriate for the activities we are delivering and the model of a central 'GEES' team supported by the individual discipline-based Senior Advisors has proved very successful, particularly in meeting our strategic aim of encouraging collaboration between the disciplines whilst serving their individual needs. Each member of the team has their own specific tasks and job descriptions are fairly well defined. The good working relationship between all the LTSN-GEES staff has ensured that we are able to support each other on tasks, where appropriate, to share ideas and experience, and to offer each other advice and comment on all aspects of the LTSN-GEES operations (including Strategic Planning).

In addition to the staff who are formally employed by the Subject Centre, our activities are supported by various other individuals particularly in the area of workshop facilitation and project work. Again, these collaborations are working very well and have contributed towards the smooth running of the Subject Centre's activities.

### **3) EVALUATION AND REFLECTION**

A culture of critical but constructive evaluation is at the heart of the Centre's operations and activities. Everyone involved recognises the importance of reflecting on experience and learning both from success and failure. In our opening year, LTSN-GEES has used a variety of forms of evaluation. These have included self-assessment, peer assessment, delegate feedback, and the views obtained from the Steering Group, Heads of Department and our network of departmental contacts. In order to guarantee the quality of its content, Planet has established a small editorial board and made use of external referees.

An especially important part of our evaluation strategy is the work of our external evaluator, Prof Harold Silver. Prof Silver has attended several LTSN-GEES events and meetings, and commented on most of our key documents. His role is primarily formative and his advice has been greatly appreciated. In addition, Prof Silver has produced two summative documents, including his end of year report (see Appendix 1).

The feedback and evaluations on all our events and publications to date have been strongly positive. Prof Silver, for example, describes our events as "well prepared" and "well organised" and benefiting from an atmosphere which is "collegial, enthusiastic and constructive". He also comments positively on Planet, the Steering Group and the Centre's overall management.

Prof Silver's report notes two areas of work which made rather slow progress, namely the initial organisation of the departmental workshop programme and the promotion of pedagogic research. In addition, we are also aware of the need to develop further our resource base, advisory / enquiry service, and to enhance the content of parts of our web-site. These are matters which will be addressed in the coming year.

### **4) LOOKING FORWARD**

As a result of discussions with various stakeholders and from experience of running LTSN-GEES for over a year, the Strategic Plan has been updated. As well as aligning our aims with those of the LTSN overall and with the four LTSN dimensions of activity, this new updated version also includes an outline of particular areas of learning and teaching which LTSN-GEES consider to be priorities for itself and the disciplines over the next three years or so ('vision'):

- Employability
- Students Entering HE
- Accessibility (SEN and Disability)
- Fieldwork
- Scholarship of Teaching

These areas will be prioritised as foci for our events and other activities in the next few years.

In addition to these longer-term priority *themes*, the year 2 Operational Plan identifies priority *activities*:

- Continue current programme of activities and services
- Commence supporting pedagogic research
- Promote subject / topic-specific support (through the advisory service and Good Practice Database)
- Engage more fully with individuals and departments within the communities (more commissioned work, departmental visits etc)

The updated Strategic Plan, and Year 2 Operational Plan and budget accompanying this report indicate how LTSN-GEES intends to build on the activities of Year 1 and take account of the evaluations and reflections reported here in order to respond to the needs of the communities whilst leading the way in learning and teaching support across the GEES disciplines.

# LTSN-GEES End of Year Report 2000-2001 Part One: Appendix 1

## External Evaluator's Report

Professor Harold Silver

My evaluation activities for the Centre began in May 2000 and I submitted a brief interim report to the Steering Group in October 2000. I had by that time attended meetings of the Steering Group and the Senior Advisors, and spent some time discussing the establishment and operation of the Centre with the team at Plymouth. I judged the Centre to be well established, with workmanlike procedures, a Steering Group determining its 'steering role', Senior Advisors fully playing their part, and an operational plan taking shape and being accomplished. I explained in the report that my further contact with the Centre team would 'probably be mainly or solely at a distance', and that my main focus would be one of sampling the range of activities conducted under the Centre's auspices.

Since October my involvement has been as follows:

- December 2000, attended meeting of Senior Advisors
- February 2001, attended national workshop on 'Motivating and Engaging Students in Active Learning' in the three subjects
- February 2001, interviewed project leader, 'Group project work and student-centred active learning', Kingston University
- April 2001, visit to Plymouth office for discussion with Brian Chalkley and to consult documentation
- May 2001, attended two-day 'Workshop for newly appointed lecturers'; preceded by discussions with Brian Chalkley and Stephen Gaskin, and with three of the Senior Advisors (one was unable to be present)
- May 2001, attended Steering Group and gave oral report
- June 2001, interviewed project team, 'Reflective learning' in the three subjects, Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education

In addition I have received and been able to comment on operational and strategic planning documents, reports and papers of events I did not attend (e.g conference on Using C&IT to support fieldwork teaching), plans and drafts for the publication of *Planet*, the Employers Panel, and others.

The Steering Group has on several occasions directly addressed the nature of its role and this has resulted in some change in emphasis, with the Group extending its consultancy role, including between its meetings. It has proved to be an important forum for the discussion of the Centre's activities, past and future, and the relevance to the subject communities of related national and other developments. The Centre Director has found it increasingly helpful to bring issues to the Steering Group in order to obtain endorsement or advice. The sustained interaction amongst the Steering Group, the Senior Advisors and the Centre team is one of the most positive features of the management and operation of the Centre. The constant attention to priorities in its role is testimony to the commitment and vigour of the Steering Group.

The bid submitted in September 1999 for the establishment of the Subject Centre set out seven roles for each of the Senior Subject Advisors and the Senior C&IT Advisor. I reviewed these with the Advisors in the autumn of 2000 and again in May 2001, and they and I agree that these have remained their core activities. Two others have emerged however in the course of their work and I have seen these reflected clearly in their meetings – the advice they give to the team at Plymouth, and their increased share in the Centre's decision making. Given the high level of collegiality that has developed between the team and the Advisors these are natural and welcome developments. The Advisors certainly see considerable benefit in their collaboration not only with the team but also with one another and with others who take part as facilitators in workshops and other activities. The Advisors do their work under many pressures, and their relationships with their subject communities are diverse and demanding. There is no doubt about their commitment to the work they have undertaken.

The events that I have attended have had a number of clear features that have been welcomed by staff that have attended. The events have been extremely well prepared, and have had a balance of structure and open participation that has been much appreciated. For example, at a 'focus group' meeting attended by more than 15 of the participants at the recent workshop for new lecturers there was general agreement about the virtues of this kind of event, for the above reasons but also for reasons to do with networking, the 'neutral venue', the sensible organisation of the event, and in some cases the contrast with less appreciated university-based professional development courses and events. There was a strong feeling that Centre events of this kind could be usefully targeted on 'old lecturers', and participants felt that they would themselves continue to need support activities of this kind. I have circulated a separate brief report on this focus group to the members of the team, the Senior Advisers and others who took part as tutors. At this event and at the workshop on 'motivating and engaging students in active learning', there had obviously been careful preparation by tutors, valuable handouts and opportunities for participants with varied experience to help shape the discussion. The overall effectiveness of the planning and preparation by the Centre team was evident.

I was able to see the encouraging number (though also the quality diversity) of the bids submitted to the Centre for the small-scale project funding. The four that were funded in this first round covered a variety of topics and subjects, and my impression from interviewing the project leadership of two of them is that the projects build importantly on prior experience, have resonance within the host institutions and the discipline, and point towards valuable outcomes. Collaboration within and beyond departments is a feature of the projects, and the modest funding for the projects has made possible and accelerated the developments, and is warmly appreciated. The fact of Centre support, apart from the funding itself, has had important repercussions and heightened the profile of these approaches to learning and teaching in the institutions. Proposals about dissemination were incorporated in the original bids and were agreed with the Centre team, but new ideas about dissemination have also emerged at the sites. There is already (well in advance of the end of the funding) evidence of outcomes that will be of benefit to staff and to students and constitute a type of systematic experience that will be of benefit to the work of the Centre and in the institutions and subject communities.

There is a sustained attempt by the Centre team to develop appropriate forms of communication. The most ambitious is the publication of *Planet*, well edited and produced, and widely circulated. The intention to produce special issues on relevant topics was received warmly by the new lecturers focus group. Publicity material, 'headline news' emails and other such outputs are intended to keep the various constituencies in touch with the Centre's activities.

There are other activities that merit discussion, but with which I have not had direct contact, including the establishment of the Information Gateway at the University of Leeds, the creation of the Employers Panel and the programme of departmental workshops for which the Senior Advisors have taken responsibility. I had intended visiting at least one of the last of these, but these have so far been arranged for dates and locations impossible for my diary (an omission I shall hope to rectify when these workshops resume in the next academic year).

The team at Plymouth have well defined roles and constitute an extremely effective management and administrative focus for the Centre and its aims of supporting and enhancing learning and teaching. They conduct a system of planning, monitoring and implementation of its complex activities and relationships, within and beyond the subject communities. With the kinds of consultation outlined above they have a constant commitment to looking for new ways of addressing the needs of their constituencies. Their presence in the planning and implementation of all of the above, and other activities, testifies to the contribution they have made to establishing firmly the operation and credibility of the Centre.

My judgments, based on this sampling of activities and on discussions of various kinds, are therefore overwhelmingly positive. The diversity of activities is well organised, debated and monitored. The atmosphere everywhere I have been in connection with this evaluation has

been collegial, enthusiastic and constructive. The benefits clearly reach out into all three subject communities, and across them in collective and coherent activities of many kinds. The relationships with the national LTSN are strong and helpful, and collaborative activity with other Centres has taken shape during the year. Appropriate international links are being forged. There is a momentum of regular planning for continuation and extension – the former in the shape of strategic and operational planning, the latter exemplified by the bids for extension LTSN funding.

Any weaknesses in the Centre can be readily understood. For example, the complexity of planning departmental workshops led to a later start than anticipated – the sequence of events was that the team issued invitations to bid for such workshops, departments had to respond to this invitation, decisions had to be made, Senior Advisors then had to find facilitators or arrange to undertake the workshops themselves, logistical difficulties with the departments had to be overcome. The difficulties in some cases were also associated with variations in the base in the subject area on which the planning had to build – there had been more or less experience of this kind of activity. A second example, the slow start in the intended promotion of pedagogical research, was the result of the need to allocate priorities in the first year of operation. In both of these cases the weakness is not one of neglect.

The workshops are taking place and will continue. The research has been the subject of planning and preparation for the next phase.

The activities of the Centre that I have sampled represent a major achievement at this stage of its development. Commitment and enthusiasm at all levels are matched by strong processes, procedures, involvements, events and outcomes, all for the benefit of learning and teaching across the disciplines served by the Centre, and with wider implications. There is good reason to assume that the areas I have not sampled directly represent a similar level of achievement.

Harold Silver  
2 June 2001