

**Supporting the Disciplines
Evaluation Study**
GEES Subject Centre

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1 Introduction

The Higher Education Academy's Subject Centre for Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences (GEES) is one of twenty four Subject Centres established to provide subject-specific support for enhancing the student learning experience. More specifically, the GEES Subject Centre aims to:

- Enhance the quality of the student learning experience in geography, earth and environmental sciences in UK HE
- Develop and support individuals and groups of staff engaged in learning and teaching in geography, earth and environmental sciences in UK HE
- Provide a voice and profile for UK HE geography, earth and environmental sciences learning and teaching in the wider national and international arena
- Ensure the efficient, accountable and sustainable development of the GEES Subject Centre.

Whilst the discipline areas covered by the GEES Subject Centre are distinct in their own right, the Subject Centre took a strategic decision to provide services and activities that were appropriate across the three disciplines to encourage inter-disciplinary sharing of practice and debate. More specific subject needs would then be supported through focused departmental visits and workshops, and through the roles of the three Senior Advisors. The Senior Advisor team, a 0.2 FTE post for each of the three disciplines, is tasked with being the conduit for intelligence on the different disciplines into the Subject Centre and with representing the Subject Centre in the disciplines. Critical to this role is ensuring that the Subject Centre is aware of important issues within the disciplines and facilitating ways that the Centre might respond to the emergent needs. The Senior Advisors also represent the disciplines in wider forums of interest. As indicated above, these posts are part-time (equivalent to 0.2 FTE each) and the Advisors work out of their host institution.

Having taken this approach since its inception, the GEES Subject Centre wanted to review its approach and conduct an evaluation of the way in which it supports the needs of the individual disciplines. The evaluation sought to:

- Establish a contemporary picture of the context in which the three disciplines are operating
- Clarify the extent to which the needs of the three disciplines are similar or different in relation to learning and teaching
- Determine the appropriateness of the support provided by the Subject Centre and the extent to which it is oriented to addressing the contemporary issues in the three disciplines
- Explore the nature and extent of the impact of the Subject Centre's activities on the three disciplines.

The KSA Partnership, acting as the Subject Centre's external evaluator, was commissioned to undertake the study. This report describes how we approached the evaluation and presents our key findings.

We would like to thank those people who helped us by giving up their valuable time to answer our questions, and talking openly and honestly about the way in which the GEES Subject Centre has supported the three disciplines and their experiences of working with the Centre.

2 Our approach to the evaluation

KSA's philosophy and approach to evaluation is based on ensuring that all the key stakeholders are involved in the process without over burdening them. In achieving this we are guided by the following principles:

- **An opportunity for self-reflection and self-review by those involved** which draws on rich qualitative data
- **A process that is done with you and not to you** by engaging stakeholders throughout

- **Ownership of process and outcomes by the key stakeholders** which allows an incremental 'picture' to emerge
- **Outcomes that are evidence based and accepted** which enables issues to be resolved together and implications to be considered in future developments.

For the purpose of this project we organised the work into three phases of activity. The phases of activity undertaken between late November 2007 and the end of May 2008 were project scoping, evaluation data gathering and analysis, and sharing the evaluative outcomes.

2.1 Scoping

The scope and detailed approach were developed with the GEES Subject Centre. Given the need to explore potentially complex issues in more depth than would be possible through alternative methods, a qualitative approach using telephone interviews with the target audiences was agreed.

Through this process the focus for the study was clarified and a discussion guide (see Appendix A) was developed and agreed with the Director and Manager of the Subject Centre. The guide explored the following areas:

- Context
- State of the disciplines including the changes that have happened in the last three to five years
- Needs of the disciplines now and in the future
- Nature of the support available from the Subject Centre
- Impact of the Subject Centre's interventions.

The discussion guide was designed to support the telephone semi-structured interviews.

2.2 Data gathering

Perceptual data was gathered through a series of semi-structured interviews using the discussion guide. The interviews, each lasting between an hour and hour and a half, were carried out by telephone with 22 individuals. Those interviewed included a head of department and other academics in the three respective communities, a professional society representative from each of the three disciplines, GEES Subject Centre staff based at the University of Plymouth and the Subject Centre's two Senior Advisors¹.

Within the limitations of the study a representative sample of views from the academic communities was strived for that took into consideration, the range and type of universities, different regions, gender and level of interaction and engagement with the Subject Centre. Interviews were conducted to the agreed discussion guide; however, they allowed for free input from the interviewees to ensure any individual core issues could be explored.

Respondents were offered confidentiality in order to allow for free and frank discussions. In instances, where particular points were being made, additional information or evidence was requested although none was received.

2.3 Analysis

We then analysed the perceptual data to make an evaluative judgement against the key lines of enquiry relating to the agreed focus of the evaluation study. In analysing the information, we drew out the key messages and identified some areas for consideration by the Subject Centre in moving forward.

As the findings are the result of qualitative research and a relatively small sample size, they cannot be interpreted as being statistically significant. However, they do provide a depth of information regarding, for example, the

¹ The Senior Adviser post for earth science was vacant at the time the study was being conducted

commonly and consistently held perceptions of individuals working within and across the three disciplines.

3 Our synthesis of the data

The overall picture we present below is built from perceptual data gathered through the various interviewees. The picture has been framed against some key themes:

- Level of engagement
- State of the discipline
- Perception of the student experience
- Discipline needs
- Nature of support available
- Impact of the Subject Centre.

We have tried to present a balanced picture and this is our commentary constructed from the story as it was told to us.

3.1 Level of engagement

During this study we spoke to a range of people who have had differing levels of interaction with the GEES Subject Centre and over different timeframes. Some had been involved from its inception and had maintained a high level of interaction and support. There were other people who had interacted with the Subject Centre on a less frequent basis. Many people pointed to the fact that the majority of people working within the GEES disciplines are likely to have some level of awareness of the Subject Centre, but may not have detailed knowledge of the range of services and support available and may not be actively engaged.

The interviews suggest a segmentation of audiences into four broad categories. These are shown in figure 1 below, although it is important to emphasise that figure 1 is included here simply for diagrammatic purposes and should not be interpreted as a quantitative graph.

- **Evangelists** – these are people who are intimate with the Subject Centre and have been for a number of years – many from its inception (the ‘early adopters’ or ‘visionaries’). They actively advocate the work of the Centre and continue to be involved and provide energy and direction to its activities
- **Active contributors** – this group of people are passionate about teaching and learning; they concentrate much of their own time to improving the learning experience of students and are willing to share their insights and learning with others through the Subject Centre’s activities
- **Low level engagers** – these people attend events occasionally and receive regular information from the Subject Centre which maintains their link and sense of loose attachment
- **Those not engaged** – the majority of people within the three disciplines are thought to belong to a group who have probably heard of the GEES Subject Centre, but are not engaged with its activities.

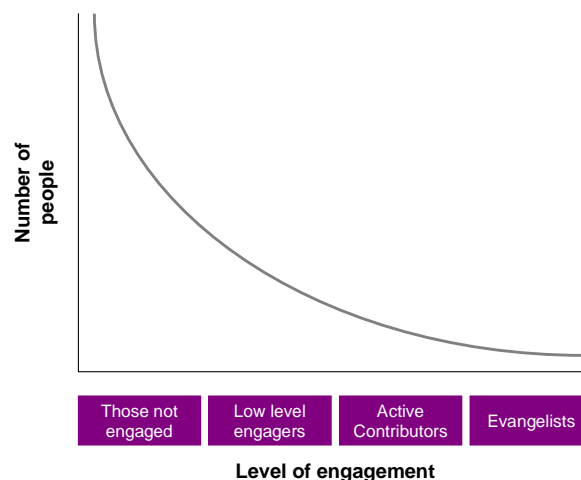


Figure 1 – Level and nature of engagement with the GEES Subject Centres

The majority of those people that we interviewed, we would categorise as evangelists or active contributors. Interestingly, while the sample was relatively small, trying to establish interviews with those that have been less involved in the Subject Centre's activities (a target audience for the evaluation study) was virtually impossible. In part this may be because supporting the Subject Centre to develop and improve its service is not a necessarily a priority for them.

The exact proportion of the community that fall within the different categories is hard to judge and while we have extrapolated our picture from perceptions of those interviewed, a more robust approach to such an analysis may provide a useful insight into the extent of the Subject Centre's reach into its three discipline communities. This would give a better understanding of the reality of the prevailing situation and as such the picture presented is there merely to stimulate debate rather than to provide a scientific analysis.

Data provided by the GEES Subject Centre on the discipline breakdown of Planet articles, small grants programme and events suggest that there is a wide variation in the 'uptake' by the different disciplines. For instance, around a quarter of Planet articles and 60% of the events cover all three disciplines, whereas less than five percent of departmental projects cover all three disciplines. The proportion of activity devoted to Geography is fairly constant – 36% of Planet articles, 42% of departmental projects and 31% of events. The coverage for Earth Science is similar for articles in Planet and projects (20% and 19% respectively), whilst it is much lower for events (at 5%). Environmental Science is the focus of a quarter of departmental projects and 15% of Planet articles, yet only 2% of events.

The breadth and depth of activity within and across the three disciplines is substantial. It is difficult, however, without data on the total number of schools/departments and academic staff in the different disciplines to make inferences about the relative coverage in the different disciplines.

Notwithstanding the picture we have presented, it is clear from our analysis of the interviews that across the three disciplines there is a genuine and active interest in learning and teaching, and a commitment to ensuring a high quality student experience. This is, in part, reflected in the high number of academics in the GEES disciplines who have been recognised in the HE Academy's National Teaching Fellowship Scheme and out of the 20 recently announced Senior Fellows five are from the GEES disciplines. That said we cannot say how universal this commitment is across the three GEES discipline communities.

Barriers to engagement

While the interviews highlighted that the GEES Subject Centre network provides a valuable focus for like-minded individuals to come together who might otherwise feel isolated, barriers to engagement still exist. The barriers to greater involvement with the Subject Centre identified by the interviewees were very consistent. These included:

- A number of interviewees highlighted that many of their departmental colleagues do not share the same level of interest in enhancing and developing new and innovative approaches to learning and teaching, and this can demotivate those that are and inhibits the extent to which they are prepared to engage in Subject Centre related activities
- The majority of interviewees raised the issue of time pressures as the greatest barrier to attending events and engaging more frequently and in greater depth with the GEES Subject Centre
- The main priority for academic staff was cited as being the drive to become an active and successful researcher, as a means to enhance their career progression – the shorthand most often quoted was the omnipresent pressure of the RAE
- A small number of interviewees highlighted budget pressures or actual lack of a travel/subsistence budget as a major factor in inhibiting greater attendance at events.

3.2 State of the disciplines

Interviewees were asked to provide a contemporary description of their discipline in terms of student numbers, popularity, external influences (e.g. national curriculum, government policy and initiatives) as well as to consider what significant changes in relation to teaching and learning have occurred over the past three to five years.

A number of interviewees identified that Geography 'feeds' the health of the other two disciplines at an HE level in that, very few pupils study Earth Science or Environmental Science as a explicit subject at school or college, and aspects of these two disciplines cut across Biology, Chemistry, Geography and Physics. Geography has always been a popular subject; however, changes in Geography at a school level are starting to impact on higher education. Geography is no longer part of the national curriculum above Key Stage 3 and the fallout of less students taking Geography as a GCSE and an A level is beginning to be felt by universities. Respondents indicated that while absolute numbers are fairly static the overall market share of Geography at a university level is believed to have fallen. Furthermore, a core periphery effect of these changes that was described to us is that all GEES courses are increasingly being concentrated in fewer and fewer institutions.

Environmental Science peaked in student numbers in the late 1990s. Since then undergraduate numbers have declined and these numbers are concentrated in fewer institutions. As courses have closed, environmental science academics have been subsumed into Geography or Biological Sciences and as such Environmental Science has become less 'visible' as a discipline in its own right. Although the employability agenda is perceived to have influenced the curriculum, there was a view that the explicit link between degree courses and the career paths they could lead to needs to be made much clearer to students. Whilst undergraduate students are static or declining there is increasing recruitment into postgraduate courses which provide routes into particular careers.

Earth Science student numbers are overall much lower than the other two disciplines but have remained relatively stable over time. One view was that Earth Science fits more closely to the STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) subjects. This discipline seems to have a much more vocational feel with about 50% of graduates going into subject related jobs or further study with a strong draw from the oil/gas industries. The price of oil, gas and metals has caused a boom in the energy and mining industries which has resulted in an increase in demand for Earth Science graduates, but this has not necessarily corresponded to an increase in recruitment as yet.

The issues surrounding the recruitment and retention of students across the three disciplines have been explored both in a GEES national conference and in a theme issue of Planet.

The cultural distinctiveness of the three disciplines was also highlighted – the differences being influenced by two dimensions. First, the respective balance of hard, natural and social science within the discipline and second, the extent to which the discipline is perceived to be vocationally aligned. For instance, within Earth Science the core knowledge and skill requirements are primarily driven by the requirements of the professional body and the needs of industry, whereas Geography tends to be more driven by the leading edge research interests of the academic team. The latter did raise a question in some interviewees' minds about the extent to which a research informed curriculum supports the professional or employment needs of students.

Views on the extent to which the cultural differences create a divide between the three disciplines varied across the interviewees – some thought the differences were of paramount importance whilst others felt the boundaries were more artificial.

Changes in learning and teaching

There was a high degree of consistency across the responses as to what have been the most significant changes in relation to learning and teaching across

the three disciplines over the last three to five years. The main changes were identified as being:

- a. There were two points raised about the **changing nature of academic staff**. The first is that academics are coming from more diverse discipline backgrounds. Moreover, they are often recruited from a larger international pool of academics and there is felt to be by some interviewees a greater tendency for academics to move around to build a career. The second point is that this change is being exacerbated at present as a significant number of academics recruited in the late 1960s and early 1970s are due for retirement; these individuals tended to have a background in one of the three disciplines, were born and educated in the UK and they have not (generally) moved around. As such interviewees see the next five years as a period of great opportunity or threat – the opportunity lying in introducing innovations as new academics from more varied and international backgrounds take up posts; the threat being that the ‘corporate knowledge’ held by the soon-to-retain academics will be lost
- b. Many mentioned the **changing face of students** – some raised the issue purely in terms of a passive observation, whilst others raised it as a problem. The change in the basic abilities of students was felt to be having an impact – they are less numerate and have less scientific knowledge and field skills, but conversely they have increasing experience in team work. Views on literacy skills varied with some comments that students are ‘*generally good at literacy*’, whilst others commented that their ‘*written communication skills are poor*’. Views expressed also suggested that students have increased ability and experience in report writing but less experience in essay writing. These changes have increasingly needed to be taken into consideration when deciding what is taught and how it is delivered
- c. **Student recruitment** was also a frequently mentioned issue and while the GEES Subject Centre has responded to this (e.g. devoting part of last year’s summer conference to the subject²), it seems to remain a ‘hot topic’. The perception being that different institutions who had either experienced a decline in recruitment especially in Earth and Environmental Sciences, were now experiencing falling recruitment or feared a fall in recruitment in the future. A key issue to consider in this

² <http://www.gees.ac.uk/events/2007/ac07/ac07.htm>

respect, as noted above, is the state of Geography in schools. This has been in decline for some years and though the effect on university applications has been delayed, the perceived risk is that it will eventually result in a significant decline in recruitment to all three disciplines. Moreover, in contrast to other disciplines (e.g. forensic science), high profile television series on GEES related topics have not had as much of an impact in recent years on recruitment to the disciplines

- d. **Institutional academic structures** are changing. In recent years some institutions have created larger academic schools which have brought together the three disciplines, while in other institutions the three disciplines are split across multiple schools. In some institutions small departments (particularly Earth and Environmental Science) have been closed. This has led to more or less integrated approaches to delivering teaching and learning in the three disciplines
- e. Degree structures have changed as have **learning and teaching methods** in recent years. There has been a tendency towards more modular and broad based degrees which are cross-cutting in nature, and teaching and assessment methods have become more diversified (away from lectures and final exam papers, towards more interactive teaching practices and formative course work assessment).

It was also recognised that national policy drivers have had a significant impact on learning and teaching in the GEES as well as other disciplines. The main agendas that have had to be contended with include employability and enterprise, special educational needs and disability (i.e. SENDA), e-learning, sustainable development, and recruitment and retention. These agendas have brought about many positive changes in the student learning experience and many still continue to challenge the GEES disciplines.

3.3 Perceptions of the student experience

The views of all interviewees were very consistent in regard to the student learning experience and the findings are consistent with those of the National Student Survey. The main points raised were:

- a. Students are overall satisfied with the learning and teaching experience – in fact the perception is that when contrasted with other subject areas, student satisfaction is above average and teaching is highly regarded
- b. Students value the varied nature and experience of the disciplines – content, delivery and assessment
- c. Students like the active learning experience and they feel part of a community due to the high degree of time spent together in practical learning and field work
- d. Students like the emphasis on enquiry based learning linked to the contemporary research in the disciplines
- e. Students don't at the time like group work – on reflection, however, they value the experience particularly at the time when they are applying for jobs or are in work
- f. Students don't like essays as the main form of assessment and instead would prefer more applied forms of assessment (e.g. reports).

3.4 Discipline needs

When thinking about discipline needs and what the current and future challenges are likely to be in the disciplines, there was again a high degree of consistency in the responses. All the issues raised cross-cut the three disciplines – the most significant of which are described below.

Employability and employer engagement

Over the past eight to ten years the employability agenda has significantly influenced curriculum content, design and delivery across the three disciplines. It is clear that the GEES Subject Centre has pro-actively responded to this agenda since its inception – a GEES Learning and Teaching Guide has been published³, there is a dedicated GEES wiki on the topic⁴, numerous workshops have been run on the issue and the forthcoming summer residential

³ www.gees.ac.uk/pubs/guides/emp/geesemployability.pdf

⁴ <http://gees.pbwiki.com/Employability,+Entrepreneurship+and+Enterprise>

conference will focus on employability, employer engagement and enterprise in the GEES Disciplines⁵.

The findings of this evaluation would indicate that this agenda is expected to continue to be a focus of attention well into the future. More broadly, the employer engagement agenda (as defined by HEFCE) has yet to take root and interviewees recognised that this would be a major challenge for the disciplines in terms of different skills sets in designing curriculum and facilitating learning for those already in work. Workforce development was certainly viewed by one of the professional bodies as a route to reach new learners. Demographic changes expected over the next decade or so are likely to have profound affect on recruitment. There is likely to be a smaller pool of young people from which to recruit and the social mix of students is likely to broaden as more students engaged in HE study will already be in work. Consequently workforce development – adult learners in work engaged in initial and continuing professional development – has become an area of interest for higher education and the GEES disciplines will need to determine how best to position themselves in responding to this agenda. The forthcoming conference will provide one opportunity for discussions in this respect. The conference will be followed up by the publication of a special issue of Planet on this topic.

Course content and delivery

In relation to course content the current and future challenges were identified as being:

- **Citizenship** – there was a common thread amongst interviewees, expressed in different ways, about the need to teach or instil the values of ‘citizenship’. The ethics, attitudes and values attributed to ‘citizenship’ have emerged as key skills in the modern workplace – it is no longer simply good enough to have the knowledge and skills to perform a particular role, employees also need to be aware of and be sensitive to the wider economic, social and environmental context
- **Sustainable development** – the importance of sustainable development, which is more systematically integrated into the GEES disciplines, is

⁵ www.gees.ac.uk/events/2008/ac08/ac08.htm

expected to gain in significance. Geography particularly was noted as having a leading role to play in working collaboratively across other disciplines in supporting the sustainable development agenda. Its natural and social science duality means that connections can be made across a wide range of disciplines (e.g. Science, Engineering and Technology simultaneously with Sociology, Law and Philosophy). Recognition was also given to the role and contribution of Earth and Environmental Sciences in this respect.

- **Employability skills** – interviewees anticipate a continued and increased emphasis on skills as much as, and perhaps dominant over, knowledge.

Updating teaching practice was also identified as an area to be addressed. New technology is more likely than ever before to drive these changes – approaches to e-learning will continue to be enhanced and the potential use of mobile technology (e.g. phones, PDAs) will need to be explored, particularly in supporting fieldwork.

Recruitment and retention

Recruitment and retention will continue to be a key issue across the three disciplines as institutions strive to maintain applicant numbers and evolve teaching practices to deal with an ever more diverse student body. The impact of tuition fees aligned to the increasing expectations of students, who are coming to see themselves as active and paying customers, not passive consumers, will need further consideration. One particular aspect that will require attention is that of learner support.

3.5 Nature of the support available

In providing support to the GEES disciplines it seems that the Subject Centre has predominantly taken a cross-cutting approach, where the majority of issues are seen as being pertinent to all three disciplines. However, the actual delivery involves an exploration of the issues within the context of each discipline. An essential question of this study was to explore the extent to which the GEES Subject Centre offer is oriented to the needs of the three disciplines.

Irrespective of the level of interaction with the GEES Subject Centre, overall interviewees were very positive about the appropriateness of the support provided to the three disciplines. The role of the Senior Advisors was seen as crucial. They are an important symbol of the link between the GEES Subject Centre and the three disciplines. The Senior Advisors perform an important ambassadorial role for the GEES Subject Centre – they have a top-down role in representing the Subject Centre in a formal capacity and a bottom-up role in influencing academics (spreading the word!) in a range of formal and informal situations as well as ensuring the messages (wants and needs) from the academic communities are taken into account in the planning of the Subject Centre's activities. A point to consider though is whether the focal points of attention for the Senior Advisors are the right ones and the ones where such a role can make most difference.

In relation to the balance of activity across the three disciplines, without knowing the exact number of schools/departments and academic staff in each of the three disciplines, it is difficult to assess whether or not the Subject Centre's activity is a representative or biased in any way. That said we do know that Geography by far is the largest of the three disciplines. Out of 21 workshops delivered in the last six months (September 2007 to February 2008) three were taken up by Earth Science departments, four by Environmental Science, 11 by Geography, and there were three cross-discipline workshops (e.g. on e-learning). The figures show the clear dominance of Geography and this would seem to reinforce the picture that we presented earlier in the report ([see section 3.1 above](#)) – all of the Subject Centre's activities are, however, promoted across the three discipline communities and the take-up of the activities is left entirely in the hands of respective communities.

A perception held by some of the respondents was that the Subject Centre does little for the Chemistry and Biology aspects of Environmental Science; however, these aspects fall under the remit of the Subject Centres for physical sciences and biosciences.

An issue raised by a number of the interviewees related to the extent to which relationships are being built and sustained with departments or schools that offer the GEES disciplines. A commonly held view was that while the interventions (e.g. departmental workshops) supported by the Subject Centre are beneficial in their own right, there tended to be little, if any, direct follow up. As a consequence the relationships are not necessarily nurtured and the difference the interventions make is very much left up to the energy and enthusiasm of the departments or schools concerned. It was therefore suggested that the Subject Centre could achieve greater impact through interventions which are sustained over a longer period of time. This would necessitate, for instance, the Centre providing 'consultancy' support oriented around enabling the implementation of a programme of development or change. The GEES Subject Centre has piloted such an approach – an extension to the departmental workshop scheme – over the last 12-months which may provide one means by which to address this issue.

From a professional body perspective, the links to the GEES Subject Centre were felt to be crucially important. However, it was felt that more regular face-to-face contact would be beneficial in ensuring the timely and rich exchange of intelligence. The Senior Advisor for Environmental Sciences illustrates particularly good practice in this respect – strong links have been established with IES and CHES which appear to be paying off.

3.6 Impact of the Subject Centre

The impact that the Subject Centre has had on learning and teaching practice in the three disciplines was also explored in the interviews. It was not possible though to explore this aspect in any great detail given the constraints on time and the breadth of the discussions. Moreover, our experience in evaluating the Subject Centre's departmental workshop scheme proved that generating substantive and robust evidence of impact requires a study in its own right focused on a particular activity or service.

Notwithstanding this issue the Subject Centre has been successful in fostering a positive approach to collaboration across the three disciplines of Geography,

Earth Science and Environmental Science. The approach has enabled the individual needs of the disciplines to be addressed through the sharing of practice and a network (or community of practice) with an active interest in learning and teaching has come together. Moreover, the opportunities open to academic staff from across the three disciplines to undertake pedagogic research and engage in curriculum development has led to the creation of a 'bank' of knowledge and expertise which is being shared more widely through events (e.g. conferences, workshops) and publications like Planet. This approach has successfully stimulated further innovation.

The resources produced by the Subject Centre such as Planet are perceived as valuable. The reach of Planet is extensive (in terms of its 'distribution list'); however, the full extent and nature of its and other such similar resources' impact is not well understood. Interviewees did suggest that Planet provides a 'translation' service by raising awareness of the latest national policies and drivers for change in the sector and encouraging a dialogue as a means by which to explore what it means for the GEES disciplines. In some instances this has led to changes in practice and conversely practice has then been used to inform policy.

4 Our conclusions

In this section, we draw together our conclusions and set out some 'things to think about' in moving forward. As such we hope to provide an agenda for the GEES Subject Centre to work through as it takes stock of the way in which the needs of the individual disciplines are supported.

The picture presented in this report ([see chapter 3 above](#)) would seem to suggest that the needs, now and in the future, of the three disciplines in relation to learning and teaching are very similar in nature. There appear to be no significant differences although it has to be recognised that the degree to which particular issues affect the respective disciplines will vary. As such **the nature of support currently provided by the GEES Subject Centre can be**

deemed to be appropriate and is valued by the discipline communities.

The support is clearly oriented towards addressing contemporary issues in and across the three disciplines. In addressing these issues, the Subject Centre's activities have led to changes in learning and teaching practice and improvements in the quality of the student learning experience. Yet these changes and improvements tend to be highly localised as a result of a particular intervention and as yet there is little readily available evidence of wider impact within and across departments or indeed institutions.

Hence, it has been suggested by some of the respondents that more could be done (within the existing funding constraints) to maximise the potential impact of the Subject Centre's activities. Since its inception the Subject Centre has developed its initial audiences and has had significant successes with the 'lead user' group of teaching-oriented academics (the 'evangelists' and 'active contributors') – new lecturers, mid-career academics and to a lesser extent with heads of department or school. The reach and depth of the impact of the Centre's activities could therefore be extended by redeploying a proportion of the Centre's resources in a well targeted way.

In summary, the GEES Subject Centre has built a strong platform of appropriate, well respected and valued support across Geography, Earth Sciences and Environmental Sciences. This support has contributed to improvements in teaching practice and to enhancements in the quality of the student learning experience. The key challenge for the Subject Centre in moving forward is now to bring about more substantive and structural changes in relation to learning and teaching practice within the constraints of resource available. This may require a trade-off to be made whereby resource is re-directed away from existing activities to a new model of engagement in the discipline communities. Some areas for consideration in moving forward include:

- Explore how key performance information collected on a regular basis can better inform the strategic and planning decisions within the Centre
- Continue to work with the Senior Advisors in agreeing plans for their activity to maximise the contribution of these posts to the strategic and operational priorities of the Centre
- Explore how contemporary information about the current 'state' of the three disciplines can be collected and responded to, so that strategic decisions are well informed and underpinned by a robust evidence base
 - This could include how intelligence on the Subject Centre's target audiences and their needs can be secured on a systematic basis to inform marketing activities
- Consider what the appropriate balance is between working with those individuals who actively contribute to the Centre's activities now and encouraging new people to become actively involved
- Explore how the engagement of those individuals intimate with the Subject Centre can be better harnessed and extended in supporting the work of the Centre
- Explore how the Subject Centre's leading role in supporting the HE sector's response to cross-cutting agendas (e.g. citizenship, sustainable development) can be deepened and extended
- Consider how the Subject Centre can provide sustainable support to a small number of high impact department-wide initiatives
- Consider how the development needs of the Subject Centre team can be met, particularly with respect to their role as consultants (or 'change agents').

Appendix A – Discussion guide

Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences: Disciplines Discussion Guide

Introduction

The Higher Education Academy's Subject Centre for Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences is conducting an evaluation of the way in which it supports the needs of the individual disciplines. The evaluation will seek to:

- Establish a contemporary picture of the context in which the three disciplines are operating
- Clarify the extent to which the needs of the three disciplines are similar or different in relation to learning and teaching
- Determine the appropriateness of the support provided by the Subject Centre and the extent to which it is oriented to addressing the contemporary issues in the three disciplines
- Explore the nature and extent of the impact of the Subject Centre's activities on the three disciplines.

This discussion guide has been designed to capture perceptual data from representatives from the three disciplines. All responses will be anonymised.

Interview questions

The sections to spend most time on, and to collate most evidence on, are shaded in beige.

Section A: Context	
1. <i>What is your current role? And, how long have you been in this role?</i>	
[For external stakeholders only]	
2. <i>What engagement have you had with the GEES Subject Centre in the last two to three years?</i>	
[For GEES staff only]	
3. <i>How does your current role support the GEES disciplines?</i>	

Section B: State of the discipline	
4. <i>What have been the most significant changes in</i>	

<p><i>relation to learning and teaching in your discipline over the last three to five years?</i></p> <p><i>And, what has driven these changes?</i></p> <p>[Probe in relation to: institutional structure; student recruitment, retention, progression and achievement; learning and teaching practice; assessment; employability and career destinations]</p>	
<p>5. <i>How would you describe the current state of your discipline?</i></p>	
<p>6. <i>If you asked one of your students about their learning experience, what would they say?</i></p> <p>[Probe in relation to likes, dislikes, what works, what didn't work so well]</p>	

7. Section C: Discipline needs	
<p>8. <i>What is challenging you in your role in relation to learning and teaching?</i></p>	
<p>9. <i>What are the current issues and challenges that face your discipline?</i></p>	
<p>10. <i>What changes in the discipline do you see happening over the next two to three years?</i></p>	

[Please explain your answers]	
11. <i>So, what are most important discipline-related issues in relation to learning and teaching to be addressed in the next two to three years?</i>	
12. <i>To what extent do you see these issues as cross-cutting the other two disciplines?</i>	

13. Section D: Nature of support available	
14. <i>To what extent do you think the GEES Subject Centre offer is oriented to the needs of your discipline?</i>	
[For GEES staff only] 15. <i>What do you take into account in planning the Subject Centre's forthcoming activity?</i>	
[For GEES staff only] 16. <i>How often are you approached for help to address a discipline-specific need as against a generic need by an individual and/or team working in one of the disciplines? And on what basis are you making this assessment?</i>	
17. <i>Has the GEES Subject Centre helped you in your role?</i>	

<p><i>If yes, in what ways?</i></p> <p><i>If no, why do you think this is the case?</i></p>	
<p>18. <i>What do you perceive as being the barriers to engaging more readily with the GEES Subject Centre?</i></p>	
<p>19. <i>So, how could the GEES Subject Centre better support you in your role in the future?</i></p>	

Section E: Impact

<p>20. <i>What would the landscape of the GEES discipline have looked like if the Subject Centre had not been established?</i></p>	
<p>21. <i>Do you think the GEES Subject Centre has had an impact on learning and teaching practice in your discipline?</i></p> <p><i>If yes, in what ways?</i></p> <p>[Probe in relation to the nature of the intervention that had the impact]</p> <p><i>If no, why do you think this was the case?</i></p>	

22. Section F: Other

<p>23. <i>Is there anything else you would like to add?</i></p>	
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