Real world experiences? Reflections of current and past students on practitioner inputs to environmental taught Masters courses

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It seems to be developing a momentum – it is likely to be the best way of communicating with the interested teachers.

If other departments are considering a similar exercise a few points need to be taken into account. The Department of Environmental and Geographical Sciences already had a good database of geography teachers because of our existing promotional activity. Some of these contacts were already 'warm' and perhaps more likely to become involved. Use social contacts wherever possible and ask colleagues with children at secondary school. This year at MMU three students are returning to their own schools and have made the arrangements themselves. It is also important to work with the local ITT providers to build on their links but to avoid conflicts with the schools they use for teaching practice.

In order to be time efficient, it is better to include the promotion of teaching within existing careers or placement activities. If there is enough interest from students ask the ITT providers and former students who have gone into teaching to give talks to prospective students.

This project was used to develop and enhance work which was already in existence, and it formalised a structure for existing contacts. It would obviously be more difficult to set up everything from scratch. For departments considering undertaking a similar project, the experiences of the existing funded projects are catalogued on the RGS-IBG web site within the Education section (the "Teaching Geography" tab) (www.rgs.org).

The project has raised the profile of teaching in the Department of Environmental and Geographical Sciences at MMU. However, the promotion of teaching is a subtle process. The complexity of students' lives mean that it may only bear fruit after some time. The effectiveness can only be fully measured by a long-term destination study.

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REAL WORLD EXPERIENCES?

Reflections of Current and Past Students on Practitioner Inputs to Environmental Taught Masters Courses

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Abstract

How can vocational degrees prepare postgraduate students effectively for the demands of the workplace? This article reports the findings from a multi-institution pilot study that has investigated the strengths and limitations of practitioner engagement on three vocationally-oriented environmental Masters courses. These courses possess strong links between university study and the 'world of work' by working closely with practitioners. The perceptions of practitioner engagement among current and past postgraduate students are compared. Contrasts are made between what knowledge and skills students perceive they need as preparation for the workplace and what they value in hindsight when they actually get there.

Introduction

So, you are engaged in student-centred instruction? There is an abiding dilemma – do you give the students what they believe that they need now or do you give the students what you know they will need when they have graduated? In the second case, do you actually know what they will need when they have graduated? It is commonly argued that a good way of connecting courses to the world of work is to build the direct involvement of practitioners into the educational process, but is this really beneficial? This article reports the findings from a multi-institution pilot study that sought the answers to these questions through a comparison of the perceptions of present and past postgraduate students on three vocationally-oriented environmental science Masters courses. These three courses all attempt to construct strong links between university study and the 'world of work' by working closely with practitioners.

Why Promote Links to the World of Work?

Today's universities are urged to 'embrace the world of work. [because]..To insist upon a division is to create, in a changing world, institutions that are not likely to survive... because they are not useful' (Gerth, 1998 p2). The challenge is to produce courses that are both attractive to would-be postgraduates and that will prove useful to them after graduation.

The recent White Paper on *The Future of Higher Education* sought to promote effective knowledge transfer and the production of an appropriately skilled workforce. This need is recognised by Britain's Regional Development Associations where, Small to Medium Size Enterprises (SMEs) especially, depend upon higher education institutions (HEIs) to produce suitable recruits (Compston, 1998). The Dearing Report on *Higher Education in the Learning Society* (Dearing, 1997) recommends:

"that all institutions should, over the medium term, identify opportunities to increase the extent to which programmes help students to become familiar with work, and help them to reflect on such experience".

"that the Government, with immediate effect, works with representative employer and professional organizations to encourage employers to offer more work experience opportunities for students".

Hence, many HEIs aspire to deliver vocationally-relevant, high quality, taught Masters (Level 7; HE Level 4) programmes that are tuned to changing regional workplace needs and regional development agendas. In fact,

internationally, HEIs strive to establish better and more effective modes of interaction with the world of work (Teichler 1998, 1999). Such matters also affect 'Bologna Process' thinking for the emergent European Higher Education Area (www.unige.ch/cre/activities/Bologna%20Forum/Bologna_welcome.htm).

Links with the World of Work – in Practice

Research into HEI / workplace interactions suggests that: (1) students and staff have only partial awareness of what employer's expect or need in terms of key skills at advanced levels (see Owen, 2000); (2) practitioners are variably concerned about and engaging in debates about changes in postgraduate environmental education; and (3) many employers find that 'universities are too remote from the world of work that their students face immediately after graduation' and this has caused graduate unemployment to reach 'unacceptable levels' (Compston, 1998).

So how can vocational degrees prepare students effectively for the demands of the workplace? The International Labour Office (2000) argues that preparing people for the world of work is best undertaken in a real-life situation through a combination of explicit teaching and practice. Tutors, therefore, need variously to take students into the workplace and to bring the work place back into the classroom through working in partnership with practitioners (Heard and Farrington, 1998; Church and Bull, 1995; Jenkins and Healey, 1995). When successful, the results on graduate employment and employability can be considerable, largely because the graduate has already made part of the transition and cultural adjustment required (Brennan and Little 1998). This is why Universities UK (the association of Vice Chancellors of British Universities) encourages HEIs to find ways of 'maximising the effectiveness of links with employers' (Universities UK, 2002). The motivation is enhancing graduate employability (Jenkins and Healey 1995).

The skills best associated with vocational training have been debated from the perspective of the student, institution and employer. Studies have addressed the relative importance of key generic and specialist skills, vocational relevance and employability. Several have dealt with geography and other GEES discipline areas but almost always at undergraduate level (Chalkley and Harwood, 1998; Jenkins and Healey, 1995, Hatton, 1994; Thacker, 2002; Derstine, 1981; Anderson, 1999)*. Brennan and Little (1996) observe that even graduates who are trained in vocational subjects do not always find their training especially helpful in the workplace, listing abstract benefits related to personal confidence and development as major personal outcomes. This is reinforced by those regular surveys of employers who report that they value personal transferable skills including communication, team-working more than technical skills (Hogg, 1998). They want employees that can fit in and perform effectively within the culture of their own organisation.

Although postgraduate study is an area of significant growth for many UK HEIs, best practice in practitioner engagement at taught postgraduate level has yet to be systematically appraised. However, it is already clear that there are significant questions about best practice in regional practitioner links and their role in both short- and longer- term preparation for workplace needs.

The LTSN-GEES Project

This article focuses on evaluations of the benefits of practitioner engagement provided by current and past postgraduate students on three vocationally oriented environmental Masters programmes. The study is part of a larger LTSN-GEES funded project carried out by a consortium of three partners (Coventry University; Oxford Brookes University and the University of Gloucestershire). All of these Masters courses employ, to varying degrees, three modes of practitioner-based engagement teaching and learning: (1) direct input to teaching and learning session(s) in-University, (2) involvement in student project work and (3) student placements in the workplace. Course contents span the GEES arena - but many of the themes and issues identified have wider applicability. The work involved a questionnaire survey of the different groups, which addressed the themes described in Table 1.

Target group	Themes addressed in specific questions
Current students	• Benefits of practitioner input • Special knowledge or skills elements that cannot be derived from other sources • What is unhelpful about practitioner input? • Nature of opportunities for feedback
Past students	• Practitioner inputs to teaching and learning that are remembered and valued now • Longer-term benefits of input from regional practitioners • Any changes to the input from regional practitioners that in hindsight would have been useful

Table 1. Design for survey of past and present students on the effects of practitioner engagement in their education.

Past and current student groups from two Masters modules per institution (i.e. 6 modules in total) were surveyed. Themes associated with practitioner engagement in the learning experience were investigated by both closed and open questions. Comments from the open questions were aggregated for each individual response to give the percentages in Table 2. For example, if a current student proffered without prompting that transferred experience was a 'benefit' or 'a special skill/knowledge that cannot be derived in another way', then that response was collated.

Results

Responses were received from 77 students (48 current; 29 past). These allow some preliminary assessment of, and comparison between, the prior expectations and actual experience of current and past students of practitioner engagement respectively. They also allow some differentiation between these postgraduate and common undergraduate expectations of practitioner-linked learning.

Learner perspectives on practitioner engagement: Current

Theme	Current students (48 responses)	Past students (29 responses)
The value of a 'real life' view*	33 (66.7%)	2 (6.9%)
Applying theoretical knowledge	6 (12.5%)	4 (13.8%)
Acquisition of specialist environmental consultancy skills*	8 (16.7%)	10 (34.5%)
Transferable skill development including inter-personal skill development	8 (16.7%)	3 (10.3%)
Practical skill development*	14 (29.2%)	4 (13.7%)
Transferred experience	12 (25%)	7 (24.1%)
Personal commercial capital	13 (27.1%)	8 (27.6%)
Insights into professional practice*	9 (18.8%)	11 (37.9%)
Students as practitioners	----	8 (27.6%)

Table 2. Preliminary exploration of themes (* indicates differences that may be considered significantly different, even in this small data set, if one accepts a $p<0.01$ in Chi-square comparisons of present and past student response frequencies).

*(Also see the article by Gedye in this edition of PLANET-Ed)

students

For many current students, the most important reason for engagement with the world of work was to gain experience. Most, especially those arriving directly from undergraduate programmes, worried deeply about their 'lack of experience'. Hence, current students, when asked what was 'special' about practitioner engagement, included many of those learning outcomes that cannot be obtained in learning settings outside the workplace. Here we concentrate on the top 5 response categories. These were:

- *The value of a 'real life' view (67% of responses)* - Insight into the knowledge and skills required in the work place was seen as paramount, with the opportunity to obtain first hand work experience under real constraints of knowledge, legislation, time and finance. The terms 'real-world', 'real-life', 'working world', 'professional practice', 'realistic' or 'reality' appeared in many responses. Current students shared a strong sense of the need to secure 'real-world' experience as a ticket to employability. They are less certain what this actually means in terms of course delivery.
- *Practical skill development (29% of responses)* – Other students highlighted the opportunity to put learning into practice; to learn by doing, to assemble and evaluate data in a 'real world' context; and to acquire useful experience in communication with external bodies/ the working world.
- *Personal commercial capital (27% of responses)* – Some current students were extremely self-centred in their evaluations of the benefits of interactions with practitioners and the work place. These were valued for adding to their personal marketability. With very few exceptions, most respondents stressed personal gain ahead of any benefits to the university, the practitioner, the practitioner's company or the wider community. Only 10 responses out of the 48 (20.8%) mentioned value to the practitioner in terms of work done. 13 responses out of 48 (27.1%) explicitly highlighted the direct 'commercial' benefits to themselves of practitioner input to their education.
- *Transferred experience (25% of responses)* – The opportunity to distil and 'download' the accumulated knowledge, skills and workplace savvy of experienced players in a short period was highly valued among some students and could only be achieved by practitioner engagement.
- *Transferable skill development including inter-personal skills (17% of responses)* – In some responses, course benefits were expressed in terms of the development of transferable skills, including the higher-level application of problem-solving skills. Students commented on the value of practitioner engagement in building their confidence, in guiding their development of interpersonal skills in a professional context and providing help in understanding how to shape their interactions with practitioners in ways appropriate to the workplace.

Learner perspectives on practitioner engagement: Past students

Universally, past students (0-3 years after graduation) remembered practitioner involvement very positively and, frequently, had highly detailed recall of the work done for named companies. However, these students have a very different perspective on their postgraduate training to that of the current students. For a start, they no longer worry about the 'real world' experience that they now possess. Again here we concentrate on the top 5 response categories. These were:

- *Insights into professional practice (38% of responses)* – Replacing the naive desire for a viewpoint on the 'real world of work', insights into practice may reflect a more refined appreciation of the need to learn how to operate in the new cultural context of the particular workplace.
- *Acquisition of specialist skills (35% of responses)* – Responses focus on the acquisition of specific skills rather than a general interest in 'real life' experiences (cf. current students). In a work context, finding the time and space to acquire new skills could prove challenging. So, retrospectively, the opportunities for this in-depth training provided during the Master programme were more highly valued.
- *Personal commercial capital (28% of responses)* – This highlights the opportunity for self-promotion through professional links (development of professional links; ability to test personal potential for employment with a 'practitioner as potential employer'; and the acquisition of up-to-date and relevant information). There was a strong view that having this practical vocational insight/experience increased subsequent employability and could inform choice of future employment and understanding the skills needs of employment markets.
- *Students as practitioners (28% of responses)* - Positive experience of practitioner/ employer engagement meant that several past students are positive about opportunities to contribute from the workplace as practitioners. A third of the past students who responded had subsequently become involved in higher education links, going on to contribute to university-based teaching and learning from the base in their current organisation. Current students commented very positively on practitioners who were past students. They appreciated their ability to bridge the gulf between academia and the workplace and sensitivity to the problems of moving between one and the other.
- *Transferred experience (24% of responses)* – As with current students, this element is seen as very important. To quote: 'They gave us a knowledge of how to handle work, combined theory and examples, different things from different people….real issues, case studies, live projects'.

What is unhelpful about practitioner input and what could be changed?

For most current students, the experience had negative elements that were manifest in different ways but which resolved to the fact that practitioners are not professional teachers and not entirely tuned to the needs of an academic programme. Responses focused on poor quality experiences from a very personal view and at worst, there was a perceived devaluing of time already invested in academic study. Recurring themes included:

- *Commercial barriers to the learning experience (27% of responses - data not presented)* - This included lack of employer time/ supervision/ accessibility; limited access to external contributors and information; the 'commercial' interests of the practitioner influencing the quality of the experience and links between limited resources and the poor quality of the experience.
- *Poor teaching (23% of responses - data not presented)* - This included inappropriate pitching or structuring of the subject matter, not enough supervision, the practitioner delivering material best delivered by the lecturer, poor teaching skills, overloading of case-studies and theoretical elements of the course made to seem useless.
- *Poor transferred experience (13% of responses - data not presented)* - This included the potential for preconceived ideas and narrow unrepresentative views among contributing practitioners, a lack of typicality of views expressed and the communication of bad habits.
- *Poor liaison/ administrative links (10% - data not presented)* - This involved duplication of other course material through lack of prior discussion between tutor and practitioner and links between poor communication and poor teaching. The notion of 'inadequate

knowledge about stakeholders' was also an issue. 'They don't know us' was as great a concern as in other contexts 'we don't know them'.

Most current students indicated that they had been given the opportunity for feedback on the success of the practitioner engagement. This was, however, predominantly in the end-of-module evaluation rather than led by the practitioner or the tutor immediately after the placement. The opportunity for formative feedback between all stakeholders, undertaken immediately after the teaching and learning experience, was frequently under used.

28% of past student responses indicated changes to the input from practitioners to student learning that with hindsight would have been useful. These tend to emphasize specific improvements rather than general criticism of practitioner engagement. For example, their suggestions include: to develop 'better understanding of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) in practice', 'a thorough understanding of audit procedures' and 'constructive working relationships'. Quite detailed changes are proposed in terms of additional specialist training, for example, 'to include a virtual environmental audit' and 'to provide the opportunity to spend time with officers who have implemented [*Environmental Management Systems*] EMS'. Other changes suggested included: ensuring that the employer/ practitioner is experienced in the area of application (cf. sending a student who is new to the topic to a firm that are equally new to the work involved is not a good policy); extending practitioner involvement to other parts of the programme so that there is a broader experience of this engagement throughout the course; the inclusion of the 'client' in actual assessment (e.g. of virtual environmental appraisals); and making sure that visiting practitioner/ employers are properly briefed in advance about the module's learning outcomes and the setting of the session within the module. This last point, of course, is hard to achieve in the timescales and contexts involved. However, the link between the quality of experience and communication between the tutors and the practitioner is emphasised.

Conclusions

There is a major difference in the current and past students' evaluations of the benefits of practitioner engagement. Current students stress the need for experience of the world of work. Past students, having gained that experience, emphasise the acquisition of useful skills and personal confidence as the major outcome.

Student responses confirm that practitioner engagement is a popular, valuable and at best inspiring element in postgraduate applied environmental teaching and learning, which adds essential immediate relevance to the learning experience. The perceived value of this engagement increases with level of pre-session briefing and within-session interaction between practitioner and student.

At best, the experience of employer engagement allows the effective trialling of practical specialist skills, the testing of the application of knowledge, the securing of external feedback beyond the teacher and confirmation of the external relevance of the course approach and content. Gaining learning of equivalent vocational relevance would be difficult to secure in any other way.

The employment-orientation of the current postgraduate students is demonstrated by the strongly self-centred character of student responses. These students are not there to gain any general education but direct career benefits for themselves. This motivation dominates the responses of current students and overshadows any consideration of other stakeholders involved in the same engagement or of the student's ability to engage with these stakeholders. By contrast, past students do not share this focus and show much wider awareness. This may emphasise that current students perceive their postgraduate training as an expensive and risky investment of time and energy. Past students, having secured the reward of employment and realised its benefits through experience, may be more disposed to taking a more liberal and open view of the enterprise.

Not all elements of practitioner engagement in learning are viewed as positive by students. Areas that can be problematic are poor teaching, poor transferred experience, poor liaison/ administrative links and commercial barriers to the learning experience.

Of course, in common with all pilot studies, this project generates more questions, suggestions and possibilities than secure findings. Additional research is required to investigate and develop further the themes identified. The success of the postgraduate learning experience, and practitioner engagement within it, is influenced by a complex set of factors that vary in their degree of control. However, increasing awareness of these issues among those involved may be an important first step. Educational facilitators at Master's level need to be more aware of the agendas and expectations of students.

Practitioner input is valued by current students for adding 'real workplace insights' and 'relevance' to the more theoretical elements of programmes. Most importantly, the value of learning involving productive practitioner inputs is remembered from the workplace as the ultimate evidence of employability and skill relevance.

Recommendations

As a result of this pilot study we are able to offer the following recommendations:

- *Future research needs* - This successful project represents a pilot that has highlighted some important issues. Further research is now required to explore the motives and interactions of different stakeholders within a larger sample of vocational postgraduate environmental courses and institutions. This will allow investigation of whether the motives of stakeholders can be inferred or extended to a larger population so informing good practice in learning at postgraduate level involving practitioner engagement.
- *Pre-session briefing/ liaison issues* - For the practitioner engagement to be successful, stakeholders (students, staff and practitioners) should have realistic expectations of the learning experience and be well informed about outcomes. Pre-agreement of the mutuality of the arrangements is very important here. Terms of agreement need to be established.
- *Feedback and review of practice* - The opportunity for formative feedback between all stakeholders should be undertaken immediately after the teaching and learning experience to maximise what is learnt to the benefit of future practitioner engagements.
- *Memorandum of understanding* - Future research should focus on producing good practice guidelines for environmental practitioners to support their engagement in teaching and learning at postgraduate level in higher education. This could be targeted both to decrease the likelihood of any negative aspects in the learning experience and to increase the observed benefits more consistently.
- *Value of recent graduates* - Past students represent an extremely valuable reservoir of experience to be tapped in bringing workplace culture back to academic institutions. Successful courses should work closely with their recent graduates to capitalise on the success of past investment and therefore feed graduate experience back to current students.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank all students, past and present, from the three institutions, that contributed to the survey and the teaching team members who helped facilitate the data collection. The research assistance of Mark Dempsey and Suzanne Dunne (GEMRU, University of Gloucestershire) is also gratefully acknowledged.

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Field courses provide European diversity at low cost

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(NB: London Metropolitan University was formed on 1 August 2002 following the merger of the University of North London and London Guildhall University)

Abstract

This article introduces the European field course programme in Environmental Management at London Metropolitan University. It shows how foreign field courses can provide student experience of European diversity at relatively low cost, at a time when finances have forced curtailment of many programmes elsewhere. The programme described allows students access to unfamiliar environments, utilizing the expertise of staff in host institutions.

Introduction

Within the disciplines that encompass environmental investigation, the specific value of field work experience has long been recognized (e.g. Bull & Church, 1995; Kent *et al*, 1997; Nairn *et al*, 2000.Fuller et al. 2003) and is invariably discovered anew by students participating for the first time and staff embarking on field-based tuition. Such field work in the tertiary sector has often been conducted overseas, primarily because specific environmental phenomena or communities that are the objects of the investigations do not occur in the UK, but an obvious secondary benefit has been the opportunities afforded to students to gain international experience. However, the extent of any field-based training has always been constrained by available resources. In the first renaissance in environmental awareness in the 1970s in the UK, one result of the increased interest in environmental study was the expansion of university field course programmes. Subsequently, the reductions in resources through the 1980s resulted in reducing opportunities. Field courses particularly in Geography, Environmental Science/Management and Biology thus expanded and then contracted both in number and distance to location. It could be argued that this has resulted in fewer students having the opportunity also to combine a field study experience with the stimulation afforded by working in foreign situations, as the inevitably more expensive field courses have increasingly been replaced by lower-cost courses run 'at home'. A significant consequence has been that fewer students have access to even this minimal level of international contact, even though such contact should be one of the important opportunities available to tertiary level students, especially in the GEES disciplines.