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POSTGRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

**Cylch Dysgu 3 | Teaching Cycle 3**

Helping Students to Envision Their Employability



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## Chapter 5

### Envisioning Level 3 Human Geography:

Helping students to envision their employability through collaborative learning and small group teaching

#### 5.1 Introduction:

In recent years the question of student employability has become a hot topic in Higher Education. Theoretically, this has emerged over what the term 'employability' actually means. In practical terms, it has developed in response to the publication of league tables about graduate employment by university and by degree course. More specifically, league tables have indicated the career destinations of leavers in certain subject areas. A 2006 publication by the Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences (GEES) sector of the Higher Education Academy tabulated data from a HESA survey of the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education. According to this information Human Geography graduates entered into employment in careers from commercial, industrial and public sector managers (12.5%) to marketing, sales and advertising (5.7%). A GEES Graduate Employability Survey of 30% of the graduates who graduated in 2000, 2001 and 2002 indicated that 89.2% agreed or strongly agreed that careers guidance should be an important part of the curriculum and 92.3% of graduates agreed or strongly agreed that the curriculum should include skills useful in employment.

Whilst employability is a national concern for geography graduates this is of particular relevance for UWA as recent figures indicate that UWA graduates have one of the lowest rates of employment in graduate level jobs six months after graduating. In 2004-2005 of 164 responses from IGES graduates about work/study destination outcomes, although 87.2% were in some form of work and/or study only 47.4% were employed in a 'graduate' role. This was above the UWA average of 46.6% but below the national average of 52.5%.<sup>2</sup> (See Appendix 4 for Careers Service figures). If therefore, as much of the learning and teaching literature argues, we are to make

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<sup>2</sup> Figures obtained from Emma Harrison, Director UWA careers advisory survey.

issues that are of relevance to students and their learning a focus in what we do (Barr and Tagg 1995) addressing the issue of employability should be a key concern in the development of learning and teaching at Higher Education level. As it was put during a presentation on the importance of employability, Universities will "be refusing to acknowledge student' motivations for entering Higher Education" if they do not support employability development.

Helping students to envision a relationship between learning undertaken for a degree and possible employment options, should therefore be a central concern in developing the intellectual climate that we create for undergraduates. And yet, following discussions with other peers and Higher Education practitioners, there is evidence of substantial resistance amongst academic members of staff to engage in a coherent manner with this issue.<sup>3</sup> The alleged reason for this lies in the belief that as academics we are not trained careers advisers. Additionally most academics argue that they have little experience of employment in other sectors and consequently feel ill-equipped to guide and monitor student learning around such themes. As a result of this, engagement with issues of employability outside the writing and development of student CVs is often contingent on the individual motivation of staff to engage with the issue rather than a necessary part of student centred learning.

To address this gap in learning provision, this teaching cycle seeks to explore the development of a series of small group learning activities at Level 3 that encourage students to envision links between the learning that has been undertaken during their degree and their future employment. Simultaneously, this learning cycle aims to address the problem of staff feeling under-equipped to deliver student centred learning about employability by promoting what Cross (1998) and others call *collaborative learning*. Firstly, I outline the existing promotion within IGES of issues of student employability. This is followed by a brief examination of what employers are looking for in graduates and how collaborative forms of learning might usefully be set to work in a small group learning and teaching environment to engage with the

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<sup>3</sup> Supporting evidence for this statement was gained from discussions that took place at a recently held workshop on employability held at IGES. It can be further evidenced by the low numbers of IGES staff (6) that attended the workshop. All attendees were under 40, 1 was the Director of Undergraduate Teaching, 2 had teaching awards for excellence, one had completed their PGCTHE two year previously and the other two were on probation undertaking their tHE. This was despite an e-mail sent out by the Director informing staff of their responsibilities in this area.

issue of student employability. Thirdly, I outline the content of a series of linked small group learning exercises. I conclude the chapter by reflecting on student feedback on the exercise. In conjunction with insight gained from a teaching observation of this session I put forward suggestions about how I might revise the exercise to further student learning from it.

### **5.2 Coverage of Employability within IGES**

Within IGES the question of student employability is addressed on a yearly basis at all programme levels and is interwoven into the tutorial programme. A minimum of one academic tutorial per year is allocated to the development of student CVs. The established way this exercise takes place is by staff encouraging students to find a job advertisement that they find interesting and then up-date their CV and write a covering letter to accompany their proposed application for the job. Students are then provided with feedback on the structure and form of their covering letters and CVs and advised about how they might fill 'gaps' on their CVs or rewrite their covering letters. This exercise in CV development is accompanied by a parallel engagement (at levels 1, 2 and 3) with Academic and Personal Progress Reviews (APPR). APPR is supported by meetings held between students and their personal tutors twice a semester. The meetings are designed to encourage students to reflect on their progress and to self-identify academic and personal strengths that should be celebrated and weaknesses that need addressing. Both practices are, theoretically at least, highly beneficial to students as they encourage students to revisit, reflect and develop their CVs on a yearly basis. The APPR process also provides staff-student time to help students to take ownership over the progress that they are making whilst at University.

#### **5.2.1 Identifying the problem with the delivery of Employability**

My decision to attempt to address this issue in a small group tutorial setting was fuelled by three things. This decision was in response to

1. feedback from students about how "useless" they found the APPR process,
2. how little third year students knew about how they might utilise the geography degree and their geographical skills to improve their employability

3. my own frustrations about not being able to support student learning in this area of their development.

On several occasions after students had completed the CV and covering letter exercise both I and the students found discussing the issue of their possible career development awkward. This was the case because, on the whole, both parties were unfamiliar with the sectors or industries that the students were interested in. Although a generic discussion about the transferable skills of geographers inevitably followed, I never felt that there was much evidence that the students had learned anything from the exercise or the discussion. I was equally disappointed by the inability of many students to articulate, beyond the level of standard mundane responses, how their geography degree might enhance or support their application for a job. My concern therefore was that the employability exercise, as I currently utilised it, neither specifically encouraged students to engage with the role that their degree might play in their future employment nor did the activities - beyond the CV and covering letter - focus on developing techniques or tools available to students to improve their level of employability. I reflected that perhaps this was due to a lack of collaboration between myself and the students about their career interests and the role that their geography degree might play in developing their employability. I also considered what the impact might be on student learning of giving only a limited period of time (1 tutorial) to the issue of employability and placing no emphasis on graded assessment.

### 5.3 Employability and collaborative learning

The Enhancing Student Employability Coordination Team (ESECT) define employability as "a set of achievements - skills, understandings and personal attributes - that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community, the economy" (2003:4). How we should engage with the issue of employability in Higher Education is less clear. GEES (2006:3) argue that engaging with employability should entail the development of experience, skills, attributes and knowledge of value to employers; self promotional and career management skills and a willingness to learn and reflect on learning". Importantly however, they also note that employability need not be at odds with traditional academic values and practices". An engagement with employability can therefore be *achieved through the subject* rather than as an external dimension to the subject. This suggestion, that the academic curriculum can

help develop employability, highlighted for me the possibility that my skills as an academic could be drawn upon *in collaboration with* student interest in employment to develop a learning experience that might enable them to develop and also enable them to evidence the attributes that employers are looking for.

Collaborative learning is not just about collaboration between staff and students. It also "involves students working together in small groups to develop their own answer - not necessarily a known answer - through interaction and reaching consensus" (Cross 1998:3) the emphasis on the role of the academic member of staff to provide the "right" answer is removed as the teacher is not considered the authority on the topic under discussion. As a result, knowledge about the topic is produced in collaborative discussion. For this reason, collaborative learning is most effective in small group environments such as tutorials. Consequently, when I was designing the session my intention was that the session would create an environment in which meaning, understanding and knowledge about student employability was interdependently constructed between myself and the students through our collaborative engagement the activities and discussions. This was instead of students considering knowledge about employability to be something that would be imposed or imparted from me to them. "Knowledge" and in this case, knowledge of student employability would therefore be "a consensus among the members of a community of knowledgeable peers - something people construct by talking together and reaching agreement" (Bruffee 1995:3).

The aim of the Employability small group sessions was to consider how knowledge of geographical themes/training in geographical skills might help students to identify a career path. It was hoped that the outcome of the session would be for students to learn how to appropriately articulate the range of academic and practical skills that they have gained from studying a geography degree course. This was to be achieved through the development of a collaborative learning environment in which knowledge about the students future career paths could be constructed and tools and techniques to facilitate student employability could be developed and practiced. The next section outlines the nature of and sequence in which the collaborative learning activities took place.

### 5.4 Collaborative learning to envision and articulate the employability of human geography students

The activities I selected to form the focus of the sessions were chosen to enhance student's ability to collaboratively share information in a group. They were also selected to develop the students understanding of and ability to articulate the value of their experiences to employers.

In preparation for the first employability tutorial students were asked to review their APPR forms to assess which skills they had already acquired during their time at university and identify those skills that they might need to think about developing before leaving university. In conjunction with this exercise they were asked to find a job advertisement and draw up a table illustrating the skills required for the job and compare this to the skills that they thought they currently had. Finally they had to fill out an application form for the job. If no application form or procedure for application was available students were advised to update their CVs and write a covering letter to go with the CV. The students were asked to submit their applications to me before the tutorial so that I could familiarise myself with their chosen jobs and they were asked to prepare themselves to answer mock interview questions from the other members of the group and myself in the tutorial. A copy of the tutorial guidelines can be found in Appendix 4. My desire to include the students in the process of asking questions was to help the students think through how an employer might want to question a geography graduate. By asking questions the students would be responsible for one another's development during the exercise as well as their own. Also, I wanted to encourage the students to listen to the answers that others gave to questions in the hope that the success of one student answering a question might help the other members of the group to develop their own answers.

At the end of the session we had a group discussion that reflected upon how well the group thought other members of the tutorial had answered the mock interview questions. Some of students admitted that the jobs that they had chosen were chosen out of necessity rather than real interest. Their reason for this was that they had no idea what they wanted to do. Other more committed participants answered that they found it hard to remember beyond the obvious their achievements at university. All of the students admitted that it was hard to articulate their experiences in a manner that was

suitable for an interview because it was a situation and a way of expressing themselves that they were unfamiliar with. These group observations enabled me to explain and set up the linked exercise to take place in the following tutorial.

To introduce the activities for the next tutorial, students were provided with a copy of an article written by Paul Cloke (2004). In the article Cloke which he reflects upon the relationship that he envisioned existed between his personal life and the geographical agendas that he was interested in. In preparation for the tutorial students were asked to reflect on the chapter and think about which geographical ideas, skills, experiences had had the most profound impact on them whilst they were at university. They were asked to make note of these and come to the tutorial prepared to discuss how skills and experiences obtained whilst studying for their degree might aid in developing thinking about their future career path. (See Appendix 4 for a copy of Cloke's article and the guideline sheet for the tutorial) It was explained to them that the aim of the exercise was for them to consider how knowledge of geographical themes/ training in geographical skills might help them obtain a job in a certain sector. The objective of the exercise was for the students to learn how to appropriately articulate the range of academic and practical skills that they had gained from studying a geography degree course.

The following tutorial began with a teacher-led discussion of Cloke's article. By paying attention to the group dynamic I tried to encourage students to share their enthusiasm for different aspects of their degree in the hope that through the expression of interest in their degree peer influence might encourage other less willing members of the group to join in with the activity. I decided that to facilitate the group discussion about the links between their study of geography and possible careers, I provided the group with a copy of a poster designed by the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) entitled *Geography what will it do for you?* The poster diagrammatically represented links between courses that many geography graduates take at university and possible career paths students might follow. I also gave the group copies of 10 biographies of ex Aber geography graduates that I had been involved in compiling. The recruitment and marketing team, of which I am a member, had been compiling the biographies to aid recruitment by evidencing the range of careers IGES graduates went into after graduation. The students were asked to



collaboratively pick out from the biographies and the poster key words and phrases that were used by the students and RGS to articulate the employment relevance of studying for a geography degree. My desire to use these biographies in the tutorial setting was to again make use of the educative power latent in peer influence. By showing the students career routes that other rGES graduates had followed my hope was they might be able to relate more easily to the discussion about how employability might be articulated, emotionally tap into it and find it an issue of relevance to their own experience. A copy of the poster and biographies can be found in Appendix 4.

To bring these activities together the group was provided with a handout entitled *recognising your skills*. The handout, which was derived from myOId university careers handbook, covered key areas of competency that employers look for (such as problem solving, team work and interpersonal skills). Under each heading were listed adjectives that students might use to illustrate these competencies and scenarios that could be used to evidence those competencies. The aim of providing students with the handout was to bring together in one place their discussion of their influential experiences at university with their engagement with the link between their degree and different types of employment and also consider how this might be articulated in an interview/ job application context. Again, by explaining that the handout had been derived from my university careers handbook and explaining that r had used these guidelines to put together my CV and to write covering letters for jobs r wanted to let the group know that r too had learnt about these issues, that r too had had anxieties about employment that r had had to address. By trying to emotionally connect with the students through shared experience r hoped to imbue the learning context with more meaning. (See Appendix 4 for copy of the recognising your skills handout)

Finally, the tutorial concluded with the explanation of the essay exercise attached to the linked series of sessions. (See Appendix 4 for a copy of the tutorial guidelines sheet). The essay should be no more than 2000 words and counted as one of the four assessed pieces of work towards their Level three tutorial. The essay asked students to dwell on the interconnection between the individual, the subject of geography and their possible career agendas. To help them prepare for this exercise they were encouraged to draw out their own diagram similar to the one on the RGS poster that

linked their degree choices and experiences at university with possible future careers. They were also encouraged to consult the poster and handout if they struggled to articulate their different experiences and use them as a resource whilst writing the essay. They had a choice of two titles. Students could either

*"Critically evaluate how the content and skills obtained from your geography degree might inform and support a number of career paths you are interested in pursuing" Illustrate and evidence your argument.*

or

*"Critically evaluate how the career you are interested in might be informed and supported by the content and skills you have gained from the geography degree you have studied" Illustrate and evidence your argument*

The essay was a valuable way to consider the impact of the session (Second copies of the student's essays with copies of the feedback I gave them can be found in Appendix 4). To provide me with more direct feedback on the collaborative activities that they had undertaken I designed a feedback activity that asked them to individually reflect on the different components of the small group exercises, discuss their responses to the questions with a partner and assess the overall impact of the collaborative learning activities on their future employability. Copies of the feedback forms can be found in Appendix 4. The final section of this chapter provides a summary of the student's feedback and my reflection on their comments.

### **5.5 Feedback and reflection.**

One student stated how hard it was *"to think about these issues when you didn't know what it is you wanted to do"*. The realisation a geography degree created *"a specific and unique individual"* that was trained in skills *"such as fieldwork and dissertations that are not undertaken by all students"* really helped develop the students confidence. As a consequence *"these sessions have encouraged me to look at what aspects in particular I have enjoyed about my degree and then how I may be able to apply these to real careers and ideas. This has subsequently allowed me to look into gaining work experience in this area"*.

In contrast with this another student wrote that *"before taking part in the sessions J felt that the skills J had attained were very specific to geography and J couldn't really see how they may benefit me later in life. Yet, after the exercises it became clear that J had picked up skills such as team work, time management, ability to structure myself and my work. These skills will be beneficial to all aspects of my life and career"*. In particular another student said that *"making the spider diagram/ chart was very helpful as it was a good way of brainstorming and sorting out my ideas clearly. After doing this it was easier to construct the essay. The information given on geography what will it do for you and the biographies were also useful as it actually showed you definite career paths that could be followed. Finally, looking at literature that J felt strongly about was useful in identifying areas of geography perhaps not only J was passionate about but that J was maybe more confident in"*. Most of though this student found *"discussing it as a group was really helpful and interesting in that you saw what others had in mind after university"*. The sharing of experience that the session promoted seems to have had a strong impact on some students.

A different student explained *"before J took part in these sessions my outlook was bleak, J had no drive or target. Neither did J understand the vastness of my skills learnt from my geography degree. The tutorials have been excellent in helping me understand what J did geography for in the first place, giving me drive and career prospects"*. For this student the most useful part of the exercise has been *"looking at career posters and breaking up my geography degree into interests and skills, this enabled me to match skills J had learnt to jobs as well as discover jobs in my fields of interest. Also reconstructing my CV helped me identify previous problems and enabled me to identify my own skills"*. The transformation in this student's outlook encouraged him to reflect that although the material that he had looked at and the way it was explained was *"very sufficient"* he would have liked *"to concentrate on interview technique further"*

In the feedback another student described how he had come to university knowing that he wanted to be a teacher and yet at times he had been concerned that the courses he had taken during his degree were not relevant to National Curriculum geography. For him, *"undertaking the various exercises has made me realise that the skills that J have obtained seem a lot more relevant and the broadness of the degree scheme has*

*appeared more of a benefit than a hindrance". He found that "The whole task has been useful in helping me write my personal statement, a large part of which involved justifying the relevance of a degree scheme to teaching. In many ways the assignment linked to the tasks was a more detailed version of what I will write in my PGCE application".*

The perceived relevance of the exercise was not however shared by all members of the group. One student made it clear that he had no intention of finding a career when he graduated. He wrote that *"these sessions detract from the course and I feel it is a university policy to try and get us into work after the degree in order for the overall percentage of people employed post uni to be higher. I have realised that at least immediately a post graduate position is not for me. I have however thought about future prospects but do not plan on using the skills from these sessions in the near future".*

Overall I had been very trepidations about how the students would find the tutorial sessions. As mentioned previously, feedback about employability issues had indicated a lack of enthusiasm for the topic prior to the tutorials as a result I was unsure what the student's engagement with the exercises would be. Subsequently, I was very pleased with the degree to which students felt they had learned from the activities. I was also very grateful for the detailed level of feedback that the students provided me with. I feel that the feedback outlined above is an indication of the degree to which students have learnt from the exercise. I was a little unsure about whether they had been able to clearly articulate what they had learned in the context of the essay. The feedback however indicates clearly what the students have taken from the exercise. In many ways I think this is a reflection of their personal involvement in the topic under discussion. I hope this was also a response to the collaborative way in which knowledge about many of the ideas were discussed. Of this however I can not be sure.

Following a discussion and feedback session with Luke Desforges, who had observed the session, I think that on reflection, the session was more of a cooperative learning environment rather than a collaborative one. By this what I mean is that I helped the students to interact to accomplish a specific goal rather than encourage more student centred activities. Consequently, due to the directive nature with which I ran the

session (probably due to the fact that many of the activities in the sessions were new) and the control I maintained over the session, ultimately the session remained teacher centred rather than a collaborative student centred series of activities. In light of this, if I run the session in the future, I would like to make a number of changes to the sequence of the activities to give more time to and place more emphasis on the students collaborating with one another in the tutorial environment.

On reflection I think the students would benefit from an alteration in the sequence in which students they are provided with the different learning materials. The alterations are summarised in bullet point form below

- Outline aims, objectives and assessments associated with exercise. Set Pre-tutorial reading: articulating skills sheet
- Tutorial 1: Introduction using the RGS poster and IGES biographies
- Tutorial activity practicing articulating skills in groups of 2/3. This discussion will focused on either articulating a) the specific skills of geographers or b) how geography provides you with skill that are relevant for a named career path.
- End of tutorial set essay question exercise and provide students with the Paul Cloke article to act as stimulus for their self directed research into the topic.
- Tutorial 2: Students provided with feedback in an oral and written form in the following tutorial. Set tutorial exercise 2: find a job/ career path which they are interested in following up, up-date their CVs, write a covering letter and be prepared to answer questions in an interview style format in the tutorial.
- Tutorial 3: Group participation in interviews. Provide feedback about the student's ability to articulating skills in interviews, applications and covering letters.