

Higher Education Network Annual Meeting

Sustainability Hub, Keele University, 15th January, 2014

Theme: Transitions

The Higher Education Network started the year promptly with its Annual Meeting held on the 15th January, hosted by Keele University. The meeting naturally brought together representatives of the Geological Society and the HEA with academics from a range of Universities across the North and West of England and Wales. The gathering itself took place at the Sustainability Hub, part of the University campus, and an icon for forward thinking. 'Transitions' was the major theme of the day. Presentations and discussions however, were not limited to this topic.

The first talk was given by keynote speaker Pete Loader (Chair of ESTA and Chief Examiner of the WJEC) who gave a very unique perspective of the transition (or 'progression') of students between School/College and University. According to Pete, student progression is monitored throughout the educational levels from the start of their academic career until the A Level, yet from here advancement is less well controlled. Previous knowledge of Geology is not a prerequisite when starting a degree course in the subject, making this issue more acute. Following this, Dr. Anne Wheeler (Aston University and GEES discipline lead), updated delegates on the support, events, resources, and funding opportunities available to those involved in learning and teaching at university level.

Subsequently the 'teaching' of geological thinking skills through enquiry-based and problem-based learning was the focus of Dr. Brian Whalley's contribution (Sheffield University), specifically with regard to the understanding and interpretation of geomorphological features. Equally, instruction in understanding and using geological principles rather than teaching factual knowledge was advocated. The final presentation of the morning session was given by Prof. Simon Kelley (The Open University) on how the Virtual Microscope has bridged the gap between formal and informal learning. The Virtual Microscope is an extremely powerful open access resource, which provides a broad scope of opportunities for teaching. Beyond this however, as its use is monitored, and as a website it is embedded in social media sites over the internet (e.g. Facebook), it offers the chance to understand the 'logistical' and behavioural patterns behind learning, and where formal learning becomes instead an informal interest and a curiosity in the world around us.

The second keynote speaker, Prof. David Schultz (Professor of Synoptic Meteorology at Manchester University) kept to the day's theme and spoke about plagiarism, which as mentioned in the discussion, is a key issue in the School-University transition. In this study, students', and especially international students', initial awareness of the underlying concepts of plagiarism was found to be limited, partly due to a lack of helpful information. Communication skills were introduced into the curriculum providing students with a better understanding of plagiarism. This was found to greatly reduce the phenomenon amongst the work submitted.

Dr. Tom Argles (The Open University) presented the final talk of the day on 'Virtual Skiddaw', a new gaming engine and Virtual Field Trip. This tool allows users to practise geological field skills, in an interactive, multi-user environment, both as a supplement to actual field geology and to facilitate distance learning.

In summary the day was a success, and was characterised by enthusiastic speakers and dynamic discussion. The meeting has allowed the forging of new connections, which hopefully, will result in new collaborations and enhanced communication both between and within Higher and Further Education. The GEES teaching and learning community is both passionate and committed and has valuable support in the HEA. With the Sustainability Hub as a symbol of progress, it provided the ideal setting for a meeting of likeminded people who want to move forward and advance learning and teaching in Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences. As Anne Wheeler put it "engagement is key".

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