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Research and Teaching – correlated or co-related?

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Abstract Template

The Value of Fieldwork

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Abstract:

Across a wide range of disciplines fieldwork is considered by many to be invaluable as a form of experiential learning. It is for example seen as an essential component of environmental and natural sciences degree programmes (Maskall and Stokes, 2008), a view supported by the QAA Earth Sciences Benchmark Statement which requires that students have *significant exposure to field-based learning* (QAA 2007a). The QAA Biosciences Benchmark Statement falls short of stating that field-based learning is essential (a mistake in our view) but does recognize that biology is essentially a practical subject and that fieldwork is potentially important (QAA, 2007b).

Worryingly however, there is evidence to suggest that field-based teaching is in decline generally (Fisher, 2001; Barker, Slingsby and Tilling, 2002) and in the HE context specifically (Smith, 2004). Moreover it is our perception that managers often regard fieldwork as being inefficient and expensive and laboratory based colleagues often seem to look down on field work as a second rate learning exercise consisting of little more than a day out. Clearly therefore there is a pressing need to demonstrate to students and programme managers alike that fieldwork is engaging, effective and efficient. It is often asserted that fieldwork is a particularly effective part of the student learning experience (e.g. Fuller *et al.*, 2006), but practitioner zeal alone is not a convincing argument unless it is supported by strong empirical pedagogical evidence.

In this paper we describe an experimental comparison of two carefully constructed practical exercises differing only in that one of them involved fieldwork. We discuss student attitudes to field-work in the context of their prior experience and we make a comparison of the academic outputs of those students undertaking a classroom based task and those undertaking the same task with a fieldwork dimension. Through this study we hope to make a positive contribution to the pedagogy of our discipline by providing much needed empirical evidence concerning the value of field-work in an HE context.