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The Geography fieldwork experience – Spain 2008 By Dr Tony Mellor

In the last week of April, Dr Tony Mellor and five colleagues from the School of Applied Sciences took 34 Geography students on field work to Andalucia in southern Spain. This residential trip takes place **annually as part of a core module on the second year of the BSc (Hons) Geography degree programme**. The module enables students to: (a) apply skills of observation, measurement and data collection in a real world field context, (b) demonstrate skills in project design, report writing, oral presentation and group work, and (c) describe and interpret physical and environmental processes operating in the study area and discuss how they contribute to the distinctiveness of its landscapes.

The module begins with a series of scene setting lectures focusing on the geographical and environmental characteristics of the field area. The trip then follows and is split between two venues: first, the Alpujarras region on the southern flanks of the Sierra Nevada where students investigate agricultural terrace degradation in response to rural depopulation, and second, the spectacular El Chorro area in Malaga province where students study geological and ecological influences on landscape geomorphology. The projects at both venues have evolved from staff research interests and provide classic examples of research-led teaching. The module is assessed by a field note book (30%), two group project presentations, one at each field venue (40%), and an individual written report of any one of the two projects (30%). A 'virtual fieldwork' package, to be made available via Blackboard, is also being designed to support and enhance student learning as part of this module.



As group work assessment features strongly in this field work module, a questionnaire was used to obtain student views on all aspects of the group assessment experience, including the group selection process, group dynamics and assessment feedback. Students were also invited to comment on the most and least enjoyable aspects of the work, and on how the learning experience might be improved. Student views were also sought using structured interviews with selected groups.

Key findings indicate that most students (c. 75%) felt that they learned more as a result of being part of a group than they might have done individually; they also felt that learning was enhanced by having to do a presentation. Interestingly, most students selected their groups for personal and social reasons rather than academic ability. The majority of students felt that the group dynamics worked well, although some were concerned about unequal workload, dominant individuals and poor listening skills. Most felt positive about their individual contributions to the group and overall achievement. Most enjoyable aspects of the work included the different ("awesome") learning context, working as a team and application of ideas and techniques discussed in lectures. Least enjoyable aspects included the planning and delivery of the presentations, and the sometimes physically demanding nature of the work. Students felt that their learning experience might be improved by having preparatory sessions on group work and by allowing more flexibility in terms of roles within the group so that individuals can play to their strengths, rather than expecting all individuals to contribute to all aspects of the work.

It is suggested that group assessment on a residential fieldwork module may be more effective than on many other modules because of the highly motivating and engaging nature of the learning environment, and because the students live and work together, and have access to academic staff for the duration of the trip. Consequently, it is argued that problems such as time management, conflicting priorities and loss of motivation and momentum are considerably reduced. Hasta próximo año.