# RESPONSE TO STUDENT CONSULTATION ON:

# Fieldwork and practical experiences

## SUMMARY

This is a response to the Environment, Earth and Ecosystem Sciences (EEES) Board of Studies Student Consultation on **'Fieldwork and practical experiences'** which took place between 24th February and 6th March 2023. 46 students participated in the forum discussions, which comprised 267 posts in total (229 by students). There was an estimated audience of 162 readers. There were 6 main discussion threads, which attracted between 40 and 48 posts each. The aim was to use the information gathered to inform future development of, and approaches to, field teaching and tuition, virtual or digital field experiences, as well as other practical experiences – in particular, activities outside the OU that students could gain OU credit for in the future.

As always, our thanks to the two AL moderators, **Jo Davis** and **Andrew Southworth**, for kindling and coaxing the discussions.

*The following questions were asked:*

1) *What is the purpose of undergraduate field work?*
   *Your answers/views could include the experiences, the learning, meeting staff/other OU students etc etc.*
2) *What's most important in a field school (virtual or residential):*
   - *reinforcing theoretical learning*
   - *introducing new concepts*
   - *focusing on practical skills*
   - *opportunities for group work*
   - *networking/discussing with peers*
   - *other (please explain)?*
3) *How do you think you should present your independent project work?*
   *Feel free to suggest any ideas that you feel would be best for you.*
4) *What are the best things about virtual field work?*
   *These could be your experience, the products, the learning etc etc.*
5) *Would you be prepared to travel to the Open Living Lab to participate in citizen science?*
   *(For a brief outline of our plans for the Open Living Lab, see the Welcome thread).*
   *What would you like to gain from the Lab, are there any reasons why you might not want to/be able to visit the Lab etc etc?*
6) *What practical experience would you like to be able to bring in from outside the OU to show skills development?*
   *These could be from your day to day work, other non-OU courses etc etc.*

The purpose of the Board of Studies is to oversee the development of curriculum, to monitor the performance of modules and qualifications within the school and to sponsor appropriate actions and interventions.

*The headline messages received were:*

*VALUE OF FIELDWORK IN CURRICULUM*
*There was overwhelming support for field teaching, and recognition of many diverse benefits to students: consolidation and practical application of theory; developing/practising practical skills relevant to employers; chance to interact with tutors and peers both academically and socially; boost to morale; challenge of problem-solving.*

**Response**: We are reassured that students appreciate the key role that field learning and other practical experiences play in EEES disciplines. Over the next few years, as we replace two core Stage 2 modules (S206 *Environmental science* and S209 *Earth science*), we are aiming to retain residential fieldwork options alongside improving and expanding our virtual field experiences. In addition, we plan to teach key skills that support fieldwork such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and modern data analysis using statistics software.

*PRACTICAL PARTNERSHIPS*
*Several students suggested we explore developing formal or informal partnerships with other organisations to offer*

*students opportunities to expand their practical experience through volunteering, placements, internships etc. Various organisations were proposed: Environment Agency, Wildlife Trusts, Rivers Trust, RSPB, WWT, Butterfly Conservation and more.*

**Response**: As we refresh and update our curriculum, we have been looking for opportunities to offer students more practical experience in flexible ways that are cost-effective. One innovation is the introduction of 'empty box' components of modules, which allow students to present practical experience gained outside the OU for credit within an OU module. This approach is being introduced in two new modules:

- **S831** *Environmental science challenges*, a new module launching in October 2023 for the new Integrated Master of Environmental Science (M05). Students will be able to gain credit for external practical experience, such as field courses, workplace projects, internships and placements. The module also offers opportunities for students to use Geographic Information System (GIS) software to investigate environmental problems, and climate modelling software to explore global climate change.
- **S319** *Geology and sustainability*, a new module for the BSc Geology degree (R53), also launching in October 2023. From October 2024, students will be able to gain credit for external practical experience in a similar way to the 'empty box' in S831.

*ACCESSIBILITY*
*This was a recurring theme in relation to both virtual and residential field schools. There was widespread appreciation of the way in which virtual field activities were more accessible to students with disabilities, unusual work patterns, working in a different time zone, childcare issues, lacking a car, and living in areas with no local events. Collateral benefits of virtual activities included low cost (for students); reduced environmental impact; preventing spread of infections; the ability to revisit tasks. There was also support for the interactions with other students and tutors that these virtual activities encouraged. The S206 fieldcasts and S209 Virtual Skiddaw field trip both attracted praise.*
*Some students commented that virtual field trips cannot replace on-site, outdoor field trips in terms of learning and practising field skills – a blend of both was seen as the most favourable approach.*

**Response**: Awareness of accessibility issues, and the significant role field teaching plays in the low diversity of the field-based disciplines, has been raised substantially in the School (and the wider UK sector) in recent years. We are constantly reviewing how we can make residential field schools more accessible for all students, and this work will intensify as we rewrite S206 *Environmental science* and S209 *Earth science* in the next few years. We recently took the decision to continue offering residential field schools as an optional rather than a compulsory element of SXF206, and we plan to operate the same scheme on the replacement module for SXF206 (S226). This will give students more flexibility and remove a potential barrier to study for many students who would struggle to attend a residential event. We hope this will widen participation and increase the cohort diversity in our environmental science programmes.

**Dr Tom Argles** Chair of EEES Board of Studies

## FULL RESPONSE

| You said | OU response | Next steps, if appropriate |
|---|---|---|
| You preferred a blend of virtual and authentic, outdoor field teaching activities to acquire and embed practical skills. | We are retaining both virtual and outdoor field teaching in our programmes and innovating as we rewrite our core Stage 2 curriculum. Residential field schools will remain optional to offer greater flexibility and improve accessibility for all students. | Review and update residential and virtual field experiences in S226 (replacing S(XF)206) and S229 (replacing S209).<br>Integrate virtual field schools with GIS teaching for improved support and authenticity (S226 and S229). |
| You suggested forming formal or informal partnerships with organisations that could offer practical experiences to OU students alongside, or as part of, their OU study. | We are in the process of introducing 'empty box' components to two new modules, S831 and S319, that will allow students to gain credit for external practical experience. | We will review organisations that could offer beneficial practical experience for OU students.<br>We will explore ways to connect with particular organisations, perhaps by contacting past alumni, to offer practical experience beyond the OU. |

**Date:** **25 July 2023**