

# DAS BRITISCHE ‘SUBJECT CENTRE’ SYSTEM – WAS KÖNNEN WIR DARAUS LERNEN?

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Emeritus Professor, University of Plymouth, UK

Conference “Lehre neu denken!”

Berlin, 28-29 October 2010

*Working in partnership with:*



The  
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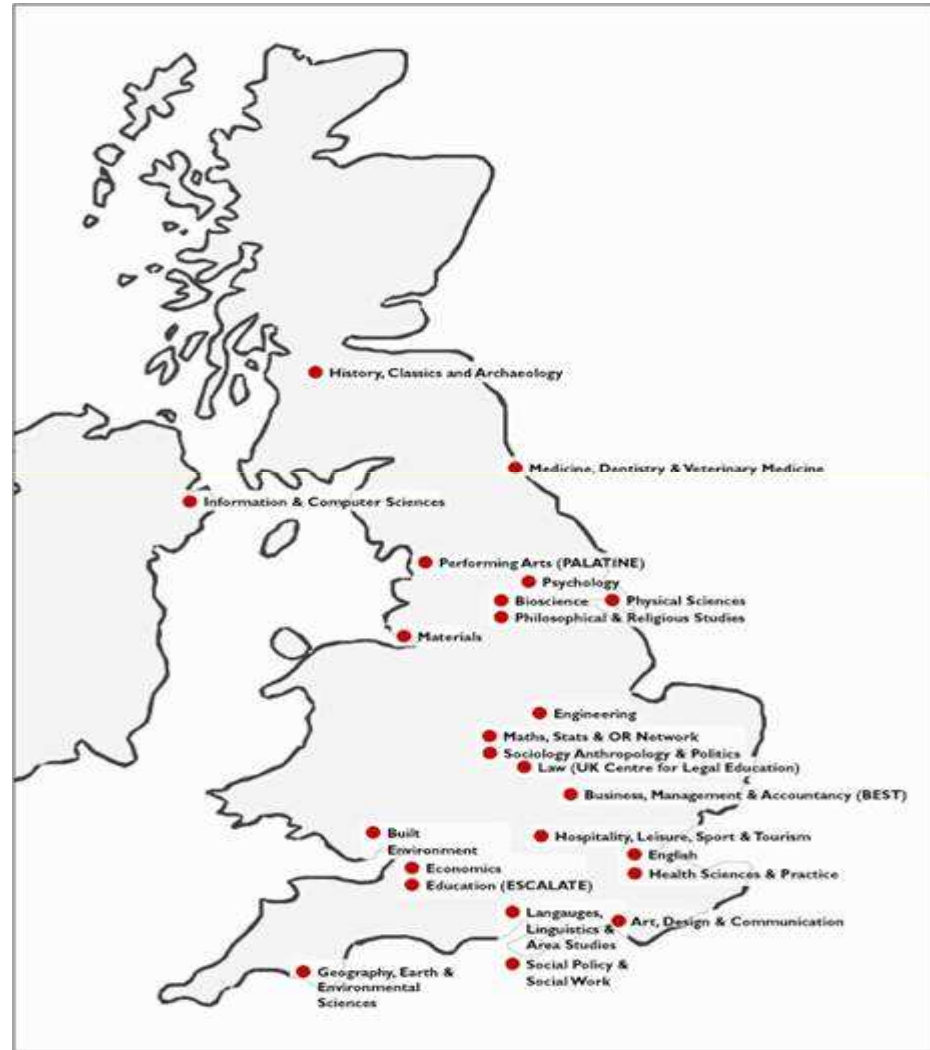
# AIMS

- To introduce the UK's network of Subject Centres
- To outline what they do
- To consider what lessons can be learnt from the UK experience

# INTRODUCING THE UK SUBJECT CENTRE NETWORK

- 24 Subject Centres established in 2000
- Part of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk>
- Funded by national government: about 0.6 m Euros each pa
- Focus is on discipline-based staff development in teaching
- Hosted by Universities across the UK

# SUBJECT CENTRES MAP



# **CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF THE HE ACADEMY – *PROF CRAIG MAHONY***



# WHAT DO SUBJECT CENTRES DO?

## *Key roles*

- To raise standards and explore teaching issues specific to the disciplines e.g. how to improve Geography fieldwork
- To promote national priorities through the disciplines e.g. employability, education for sustainable development (ESD), e-learning
- To liaise with other Subject Centres, the HEA, and organisations such as professional bodies

# WHAT DO SUBJECT CENTRES DO?

## *Typical activities*

- Conferences and workshops
- Publications and guides
- Small grants and competitions
- Educational research
- Advice and enquiry service
- Websites and good practice databases
- Short courses for new academic staff

# LESSONS FROM THE UK EXPERIENCE– *Some positives*

- Subject-based staff support is often more effective than generic support
- Academics define themselves by their subjects/disciplines  
“I’m a Geographer”



- A good way to promote change, share ideas and improve teaching
- A good way to embed national priorities into subject-based courses

# LESSONS FROM THE UK EXPERIENCE– *Some concerns*

- Difficult to reach all departments and staff
- Danger of “re-inventing the wheel”  
(duplication)
- Difficult to measure precise impact
- Currently at risk of budget cuts and contraction
- Work best as part of a wider set of programmes to raise teaching standards

# **SUBJECT CENTRES IN THE UK CONTEXT**

## ***SOME NATIONAL MEASURES WHICH ENHANCE TEACHING QUALITY***

National Teaching  
Fellows



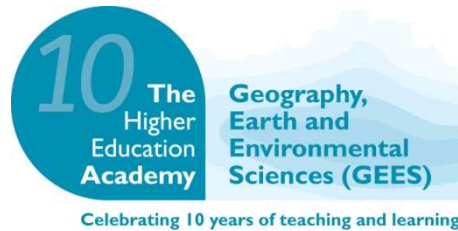
Centres for Excellence  
(CETLs)

SUBJECT  
CENTRES  
(HEA)

National Student  
Survey (NSS) and  
League Tables



Quality Assurance Agency



# THE UK SUBJECT CENTRE FOR GEOGRAPHY, EARTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES (GEES)

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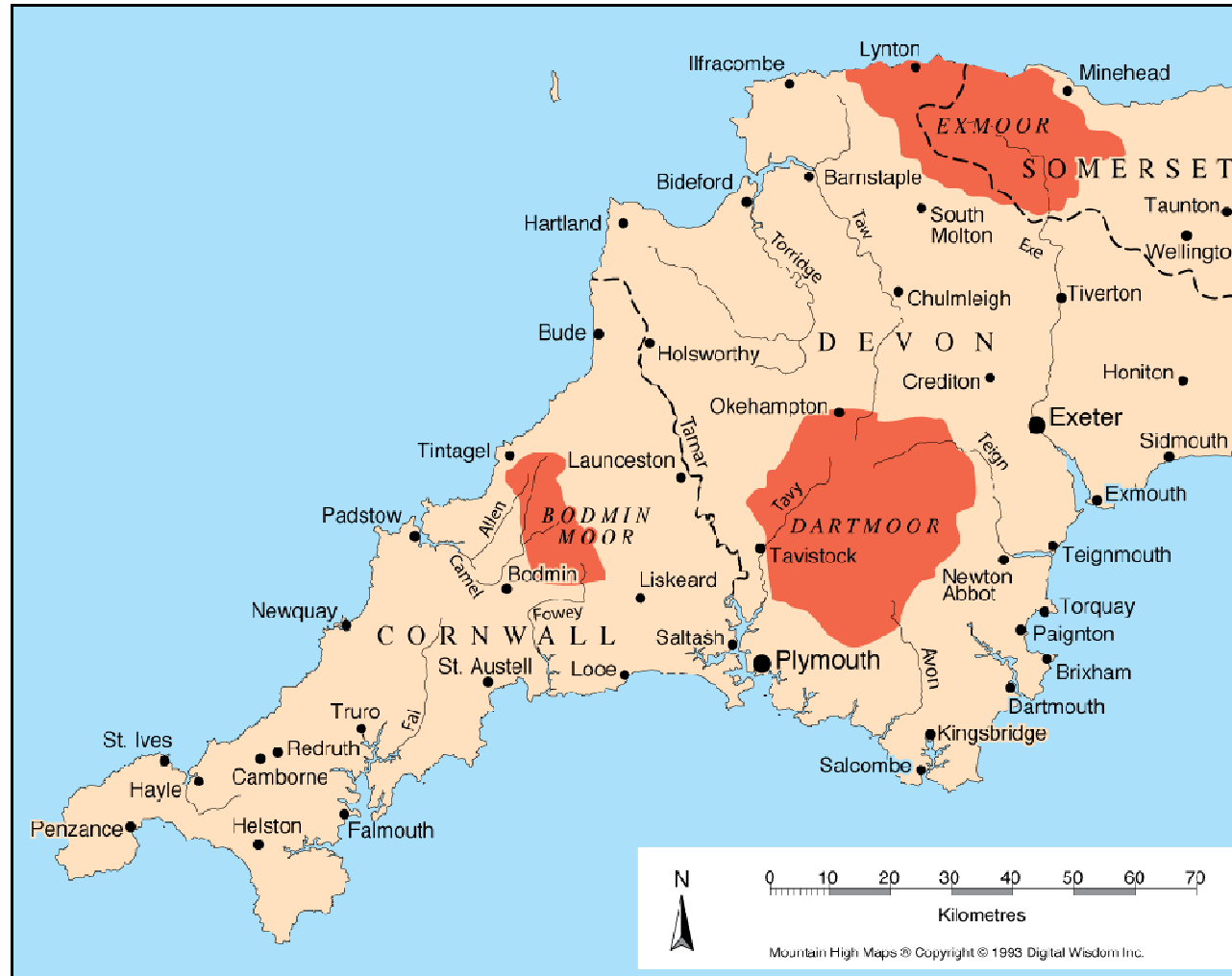
# AIMS

- To introduce you to a typical British Subject Centre
- To outline how it was established, how it is organised and what it does
- To provide you with information and ideas which will help you to design your own Subject Centre (our workshop exercise)

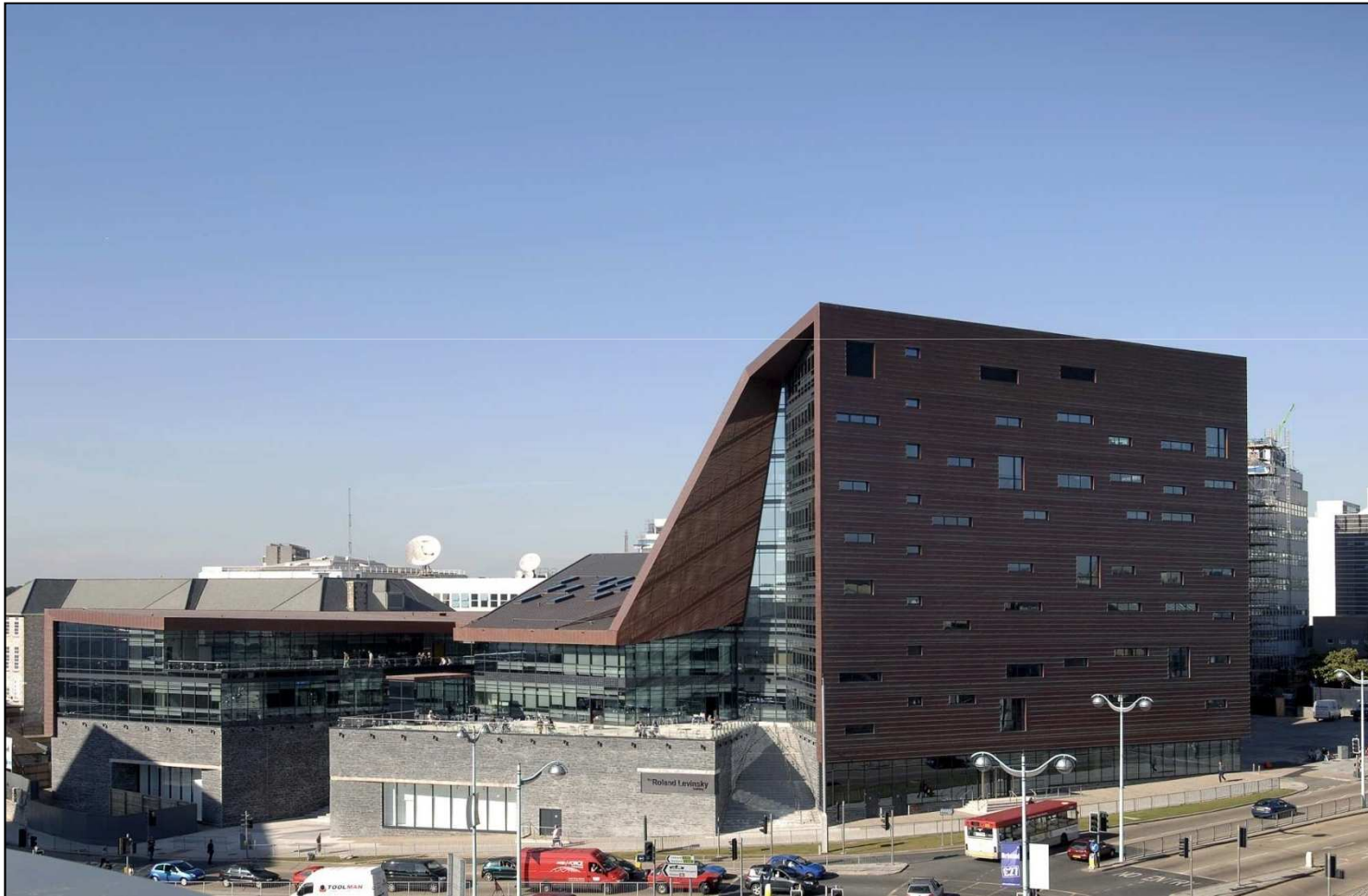
# INTRODUCING THE GEES SUBJECT CENTRE

- One of 24 Subject Centres
- Part of the Higher Education Academy (HEA)
- Through supporting and advising GEES academics across the UK, the Centre aims to enrich the learning experience of students who are studying for GEES degrees (undergraduate or post-graduate)
- Based at the University of Plymouth

# PLYMOUTH AND SOUTH WEST ENGLAND



# THE UNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH



# THE PLYMOUTH WATERFRONT



# THE BARBICAN HARBOUR



# BUCKLAND HOUSE



# THE CHOICE OF LOCATION

- Plymouth chosen following a national competition
- Has large and successful courses in the GEES disciplines
- Strong reputation in teaching and learning
- Local senior academic ready to lead

However, remote location perhaps not ideal

# THE SETTING-UP PHASE (Jan-July 2000)

- Appointing staff
- Establishing the office accommodation and facilities
- Agreeing administrative procedures
- Liaising with GEES professional bodies and departments
- Identifying the needs of GEES academics and networking
- Building profile (marketing/PR)

# FUNDING AND BUDGETS

- Funded by national government (via the HEA)
- Approx. € 500,000 p.a. (plus € 140,000 to Plymouth)
- Main expenditure areas:
  - Staffing and office costs
  - Publications
  - External grants
  - Conferences
  - Workshops
  - Travel

# GOVERNANCE

- Director reports to HEA and University of Plymouth
- Advisory Board (members of different disciplines)
- Annual plans: guidance from HEA etc.
- Independent evaluator
- GEES Director has considerable autonomy
- Need to maintain good relationships with stakeholders

# TEACHING AND LEARNING ISSUES ADDRESSED

## *Some examples*

- Fieldwork
- GEES student projects
- Employability and enterprise education
- Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)
- Placements and work-based learning
- E-learning
- Assessment and feedback to students
- Teaching in specialists areas e.g. GIS, hydrology

# TYPES OF ACTIVITIES AND SERVICES

## *Some examples*

- National conferences and departmental workshops
- Two day course for new GEES academics
- Planet Journal and theme guides
- Small grants programme e.g. for educational research
- Advice and enquiry service
- Web-site and good practice database ([www.gees.ac.uk](http://www.gees.ac.uk))

# GEES SUBJECT CENTRE TEAM



# STAFFING AT GEES

- Director
- Manager
- Administrator
- Dissemination Co-ordinator (conferences, Planet etc)
- Resources Co-ordinator
- Web and IT Co-ordinator
- Occasional placement student

# GEES EVALUATION

- Over 300 workshops, 50 conferences and 40 publications/guides
- More than 95% of GEES departments involved
- GEES NSS results are among the best
- Worked early on emergent issues e.g. disabilities, enterprise, ESD, linking teaching and research

## But

- Difficult to measure precise impact on the quality of student learning

# DESIGNING A SUBJECT CENTRE

## *Your workshop*

1. Groups develop proposals on key areas
  - a. Funding, budgets and financial management
  - b. Governance, decision-making and accountability
  - c. The key teaching and learning issues
  - d. The mix of activities/services
  - e. Staffing, structure, posts and skills
  - f. Marketing, profile and relationships
  
2. Brief feedback from each group
  
3. Final plenary to identify main conclusions and recommendations

## Conference on 'Exzellenz in der Lehre' - Berlin, 28-29 October 2010

### SUBJECT CENTRE WORKSHOP BRIEFING

Prof. Brian Chalkley - Emeritus Professor, University of Plymouth, UK

The aim of this workshop is for you to explore the issues involved in designing and running a Subject Centre.

The workshop will begin with a brief PowerPoint presentation about a typical UK Subject Centre – GEES – which is the Centre for Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences.

Delegates will then be divided into 6 groups, each of which will focus on a particular aspect of a Subject Centres' operation and activities. In working on your particular topic, please draw on the UK GEES experience but also, most importantly on your own knowledge what is likely to work best in Germany (or your own experience, if you have any, of helping to design a German Subject Centre). Please do not feel obliged to follow the UK/GEES model in every detail, do think creatively and come up with new ideas.

During your discussion it is likely that you will encounter the fact that different academic subjects/disciplines have different approaches, needs and expectations. Please feel free to highlight these differences specific to particular academic cultures as part of your feedback.

For each group there are some suggested discussion questions (please find overleaf). These parallel groups will have about 20/25 minutes to discuss their areas of responsibility and to develop proposals. In the plenary session which follows, a spokesperson from each group will briefly feedback a summary of their groups' key ideas and recommendations, and respond to any questions from delegates.

The workshops' final 15 minutes or so will be used for drawing together the main conclusions from the session as a whole and for identifying the "do's and don'ts" and the key issues to be considered in setting up and managing effective Subject Centres.

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#### GROUP A FUNDING, BUDGETS AND FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

What are the possible funding sources and how could they be persuaded to help? What is the minimum sum of money needed? What are the prospects of success? Might some organisations be able to provide “in kind” assistance i.e. non-monetary resources? How will decisions be made about allocating your budget? How will you ensure effective financial control and monitoring? Will you charge for your events and publications or will your activities and resources be free to the user?

#### GROUP B GOVERNANCE, DECISION-MAKING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Who will make the strategic decisions about the Centres’ development and have prime responsibility for its success? To whom will they be accountable? Will there be a management committee and/or an advisory board? If so, what will be their roles and who will serve on them and chair them? What kind of planning and reporting procedures do you suggest? Will there be an independent evaluator? How will you relate to the key stakeholders and other Subject Centres?

#### GROUP C KEY TEACHING AND LEARNING ISSUES

How will you decide which teaching and learning issues to concentrate on? What steps will you take to identify the disciplines’ needs? How will you balance national/federal education priorities as against the particular aspirations of the subject area? What are your groups’ initial judgements about the issues to prioritise e.g. assessment, employability, e-learning etc?

#### GROUP D ACTIVITIES AND SERVICES

What kind of activities and services will the Subject Centre provide? Given that you can’t do everything, what do you consider the most useful/cost-effective activities? What will be the balance between conferences, workshops, publications, small grants etc? What percentage of your resource do you expect to devote to each?

#### GROUP E STAFFING STRUCTURE, POSTS AND SKILLS

Roughly what proportion of your budget do you expect to spend on staff? What roles/posts will you prioritise? What jobs will need to be done? What skills and expertise will be required? How will you advertise the posts and take forward the recruitment process? What importance will you attach to appointing staff with qualifications in the relevant discipline(s)?

#### GROUP F MARKETING, PROFILE AND RELATIONSHIPS

How will you encourage academics and others to support and contribute to the work of the Subject Centre? What will you do to “win hearts and minds”? How will you raise the Centre’s profile and reputation? Who are your key stakeholders and how will you build good relationships with them?

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