

Institution:	University of Newcastle upon Tyne
Programmes:	Available to all MSc students in the Department of Agricultural and Environmental Science
Module:	The Environment Business (AES847)
Activity:	A course exploring the running of a small environmental consultancy
Level/Year:	M
Learning hours:	100

Work-related learning outcome(s)

To complete this module successfully students must have developed knowledge in the following areas:

- business systems and practices appropriate for a small or start-up environmental consultancy;
- current regulatory frameworks that affect business activity from the environmental and health and safety point of view;
- current quality management systems and their limitations.

They will also develop skills in:

- planning a hypothetical business;
- reporting to a hypothetical business client;
- identifying sources of funding;
- formulating a project proposal.

Description of the teaching activity which achieves the learning outcome(s)

The module is delivered over a 6 week period, timetabled with one 2-hour and two 1-hour sessions per week.

In Week 1, the students are flung together having never met before. As a warm-up exercise, they are asked to produce a skeleton for a business plan. This first group assessment requires them to share skills and experience. In practice (session 2001-2), students carried out this work in the Men's Bar, meeting the exercise's primary objective of getting the group to gel.

In Week 2, the submitted business plan is reviewed, and feedback is given on its strengths and weaknesses. The nature of the market in which a small environmental consultancy functions is explained in a more-or-less traditional lecture. Students discuss scenarios in which they need to identify stakeholders, and then present the results of their discussions to the Module Leader. Students consult the Labour Market Information report produced by the Academic Development Unit in support of the original programme proposal.

In Week 3, the shape of a business and roles played by individuals within it are covered, and sources of work and finance are introduced. In class, students carry out the Business Shape questionnaire from the Small Business Guide. Students complete the Lloyds Bank start-up pack questionnaire for discussion during the week. The structure of a Board Meeting is introduced and adopted for at least one meeting per week.

In Week 4, the focus is on dealing with clients. Students carry out a writing clarity exercise in class (using newspapers), to demonstrate the technical aspects of writing for different audiences. Students are set a short report to write as an individual assignment, so that the Module Leader can pick up any serious problems in individual writing ability.

Week 5 addresses quality issues, requiring students to consider what a small business needs to do in this area, and how this is one area in which they could have a genuine competitive edge. Students raise issues concerning the drafting of a revised business plan; in response, a model business plan is discussed using material based on 'Running your own business made easy'.

Week 6 is devoted to the development of a revised business plan, to be presented to external consultants (Penn Associates). In preparation for this, cash flow and profit and loss accounts are discussed, using real examples (slightly modified) from the start-up of Mineral Solutions Ltd in 1996. This emphasises the need to plan for an initial 6 months with no income (because of slow payers as much as little work). A formal board meeting is held to progress the business plan. The submitted business plan is assessed as group work.

Rationale for the selection of the teaching activity

This module is designed for students who are interested in joining a very small business or in setting up their own business. It is intended to cover the key aspects that permit a business to function, drawing attention to the need for expert advice concerning the law and obligations placed upon directors.

The module draws upon the business experience of Professor David Manning (Module Leader), gained during the establishment of a university spin-out company, Mineral Solutions Ltd. It is also supported by Lloyds Bank, who have provided copies of their business start-up pack and associated book (the Small Business Guide) free to all students. Rachel Penn and Fiona Mackenzie from Penn Associates also assist in providing feedback to the business plan produced at the end of the course.

The choice of the Lloyds Bank start-up package implies no endorsement of the Bank or its products. From the Module Leader's experience, this package is ideal for a start-up by science graduates, and is pitched at just the right level.

The course is delivered through formal meetings between the students and Module Leader around a table, following the pattern of a board of executive directors (the students) meeting a chairman or mentor (the Module Leader).

Assessment – approach and detail (copy of assessment sheet)

Business plan - first pass.

This assessment is undertaken as a warm up exercise for the students in the first week. The students must pool their skills and experience and begin to develop the virtual company that will form the basis for their work through the course.

During Week 4, which focuses on dealing with clients, the students are set short reports to write to particular audiences. This exercise enables the Module Leader to pick up any serious problems in writing ability.

Business plan - second pass.

In the final week the students concentrate on revising the business plan for their company. This second plan is presented at a mock board meeting to which the Module Leader is invited. Also invited are Rachel Penn and Fiona Mackenzie from Penn Associates – a local environmental consultancy. Penn Associates give feedback to the students on the content of their business plan and this is included in the assessment of the exercise.

Future developments

It is expected that, in some years, students will want to develop a business themselves. This possibility is taken into account in a following module in the Environment Business MSc programme that places emphasis initially on sources of start-up funding and subsidies. Material for this is provided by BusinessLink.

In feedback, students have asked for the Environment Business to be extended to cover a 12-week period and the course may be restructured to take this into account, depending on other modules within the MSc framework.

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