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Determining "Best Practice" Methodologies in the Pedagogy of Tourism Related Fieldwork.

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2 Determining "best practice" methodologies in the pedagogy of tourism related fieldwork

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Abstract

This project explores issues around the practice of fieldwork related activity which is undertaken as a teaching and learning methodology in third-level education. The main focus in this project is to glean best practice examples from colleagues who undertake fieldwork in the broad area of Tourism education (encompassing hospitality, leisure and event management), but also related disciplines of Geography and Business/Management.

Having initially scoped out the available literature and explored the topic in strategic interviews with colleagues (Irish and international), it appeared that very little work has been undertaken heretofore on the particular angle being investigated – that of planning and managing fieldwork. A reasonably solid body of work exists on the learning outcomes of fieldwork (albeit very descriptive and focused on individual iterations – see Bibliography), but very little material has emerged related to the management of such activity.

In order to commence a dialogue on this topic, an online survey was administered, with a range of closed and open-ended questions. In total 152 usable surveys were returned, with 45% of respondents from Ireland, the remainder being from 29 different countries.

Overall, the project finds that educators who use fieldwork as a teaching tool are very enthusiastic about the practice and think deeply about the pedagogical value of this activity. However there are many concerns in evidence, ranging from health and safety, financing of trips, to the amount of additional time that is required to plan and manage such trips.

This project has merely opened the doors for a discussion, but the enthusiasm of respondents and their desire to engage with any future action suggests that a rich vein of research has just begun.

Keywords: fieldtrips, pedagogical methods, tourism education

Introduction

With increased workloads and larger class sizes, academics and institutions across Ireland (and internationally) are suffering the impacts of terminology such as rationalisation and increased efficiencies. This leads programme planning groups to identify areas where non-essential and "extra" activities are being cut back or even eliminated.

As a researcher/lecturer I come from a Geography background, whereby fieldwork is an integral component of many modules, and I have continued to utilise Geography-influenced pedagogical approaches in the teaching of tourismrelated modules. However, with increased external influences such as concern over "health and safety", insurance, liability, not to mention the time element of organising and running fieldwork related activities, I have begun to question whether the benefits I see in fieldwork might be achieved more efficiently in other ways.

The purpose of this project is to commence a dialogue with colleagues in Tourism, Geography and other related disciplines, to explore this social/educational tool, and begin to develop guidelines and frameworks for more efficient and more effective fieldwork activities. Some of the objectives set at the outset were to examine:

- current best practice,
- limitations (human and institutional),
- aims and objectives (why do we do it),
- logistical frameworks (overnight versus daytrips etc.)
- educational evaluation processes (how we assess the activity).

Outline of Project

Phase 1: Literature review

This initial phase involved scoping of extant literature (see sample bibliographical information at end of this paper) and seeking buy-in from colleagues within DIT, more broadly within Ireland and internationally – mainly in the Tourism discipline, but also in other areas such as Geography.

Phases 2 and 3: Strategic conversations – best practice and international best practice

The next phase was highly qualitative and involved one-to-one strategic conversations with programme tutors, lecturers and administrators. These elements were undertaken via telephone Skype and in person, face-to-face.

Portions of this work were undertaken at the Travel and Tourism Research Association International conference which provided an opportunity to undertake a range of conversations with international colleagues in a relaxed and convenient situation.

Throughout the various conversations, it emerged that a broad range of activities/practices and methods are being utilised by colleagues, and that therefore a survey could/would yield valuable results in a more efficient manner. Thus, a 20 minute broad-spectrum survey was developed and distributed to approximately 1,000 respondents, the large majority being known or linked via research networks to the researcher. The final result was 152 completed surveys. A larger response rate could have been attained by broadcasting the survey via listservers/facebook pages, but it was felt that this may be utilised at some future stage in seeking more refined answers. Because of the "scoping" nature of the survey, it was felt more appropriate to only deal with respondents who would know or be acquainted with the researcher.

Phase 4: Development of best practice guidelines

What has been learned from this research has been distilled and refined into a set of themes regarding best practice and, ideally, with further work will lead to the development of best practice fieldwork guidelines. It is expected that these will be produced using a Delphi-style research model, utilising the enthusiasm and expertise of the various participants (national and international) who responded to the survey. The first stage of this process will be the development of material to be "tested" in a conference presentation in December 2014.

Phase 5: Dissemination

The researcher will offer papers at a number of conferences and will publish findings in the form of book chapter(s) and academic paper(s).

Preliminary Findings

The findings from the survey are very extensive, and I have only begun to explore them in detail. The following sections illustrate some of the richness of this material.

Operational elements

This section illustrates how academics perceive the importance they, their students, and their institutions place on various logistical elements of fieldwork. Interesting patterns emerge, such as institutional interest in "insurance" and student interest in "fun".

Educational issues

Figure 2.1 illustrates the importance that the academics place on the learning/educational aspects of fieldwork. The large majority (90%) claim that such aspects are very important, however, they feel that this importance is not placed on fieldwork by either students or their institution (50% and 53% respectively in the "very important" category).

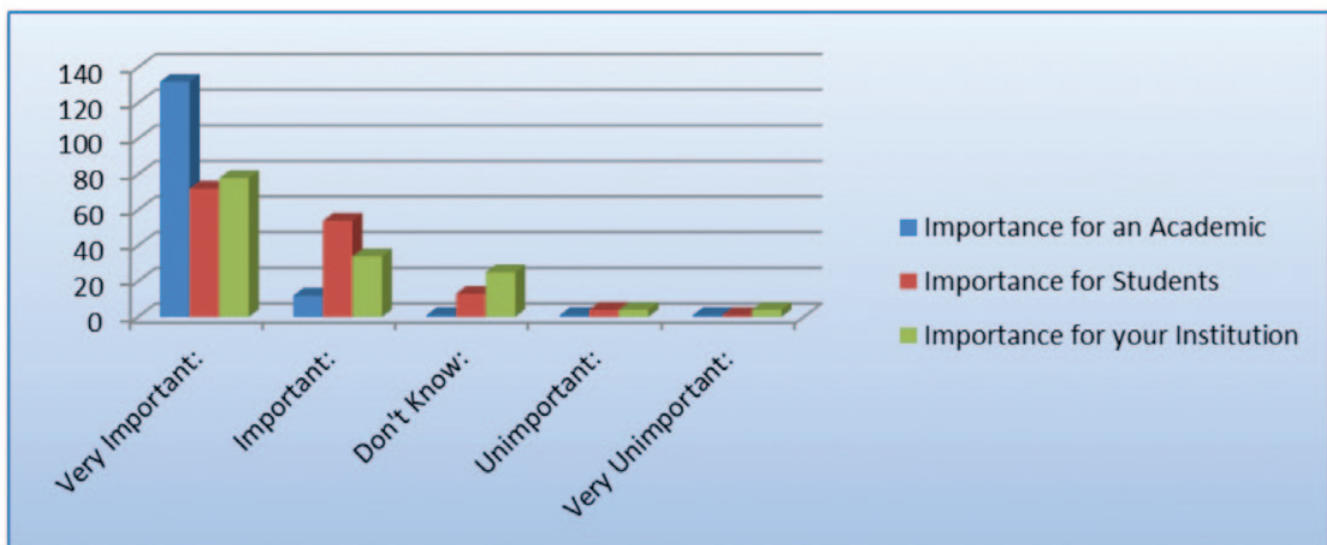*Figure 2.1: How important are learning/educational issues?*

Logistics

A number of discussions undertaken in Phase 2 of the project suggested the importance of correctly and effectively planning and organising fieldtrips. This importance is reflected in Figure 2.2. Interestingly and somewhat curiously, 13% of academics feel that students place little or no importance on the logistical issues regarding fieldtrips.
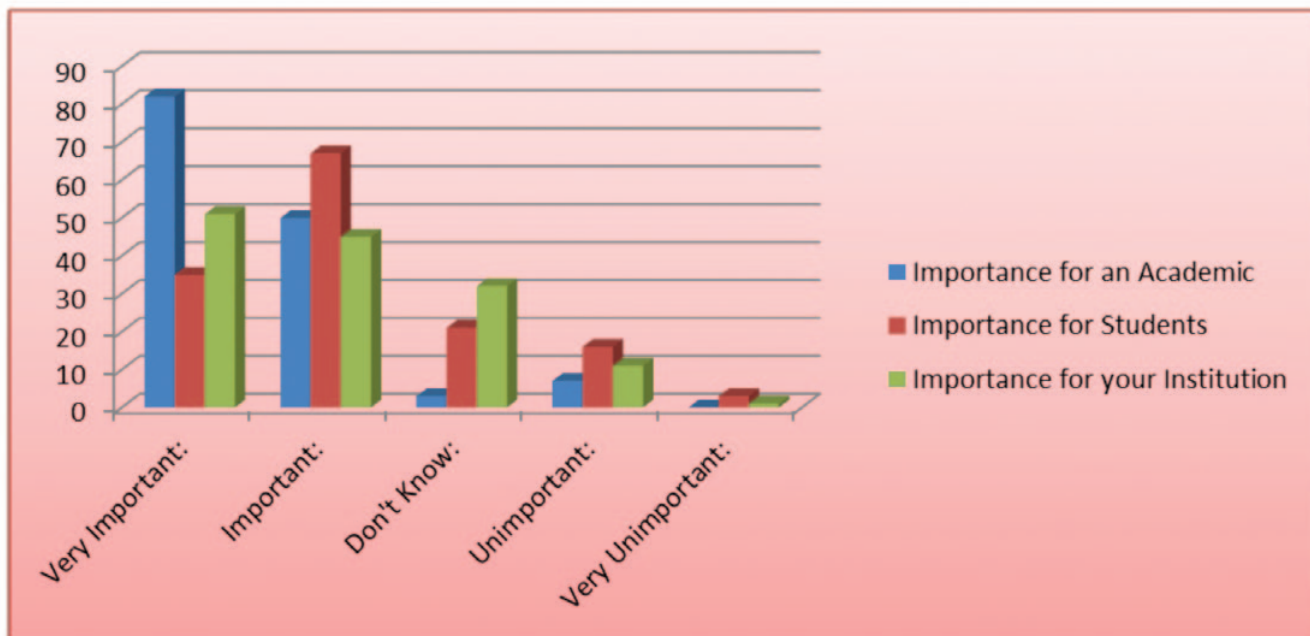
Figure 2.2: How important are issues of logistics?

Insurance

In an increasingly litigious environment, it is not surprising that insurance is seen as being important for both academics (81% of academics see insurance as important or very important) and institutions (88% regard insurance as important or very important). The unimportance of insurance for students (only 46% viewing it as important or very important) raises various issues, and perhaps suggests that students could be encouraged to take more ownership of such issues, which potentially have major importance in their future careers. For instance, many of the respondents working in tourism and hospitality education are producing graduates who will be dealing professionally with travel-related activity in the near future.
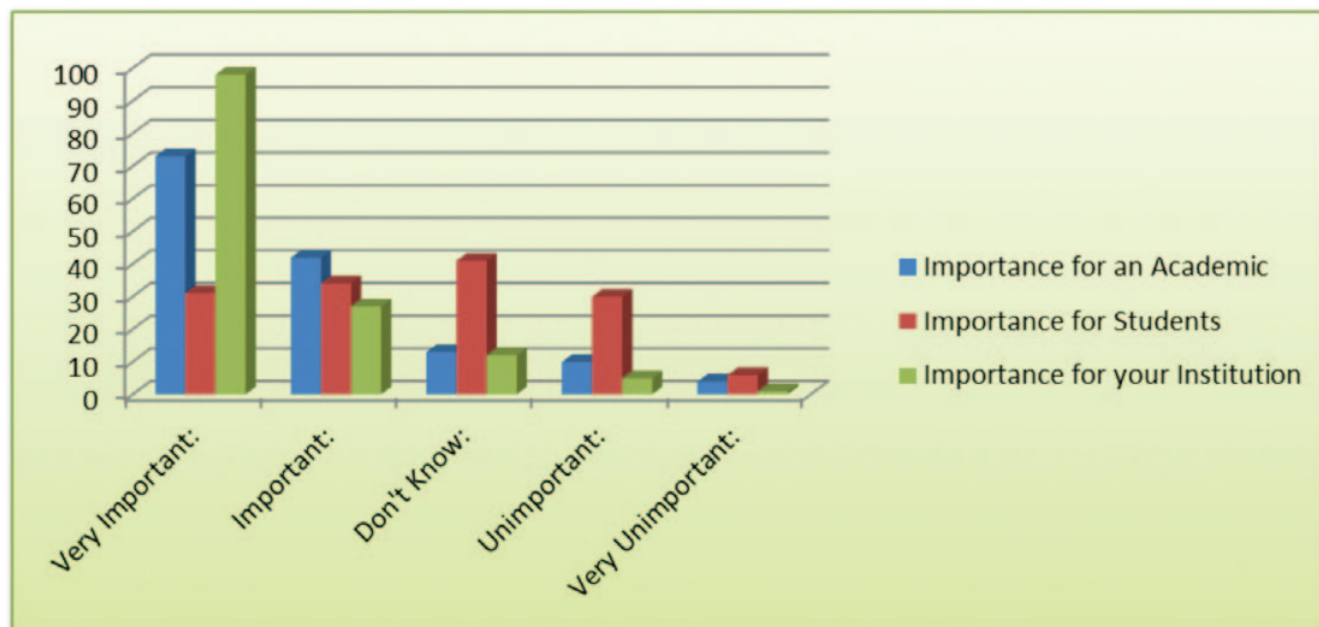
Figure 2.3: How important is insurance?

Health and safety

Mirroring the views of insurance outlined above, Figure 2.4 demonstrates that students place little importance on issues related to health and safety, whereas this issue is very important for 74% of both academics and institutions.
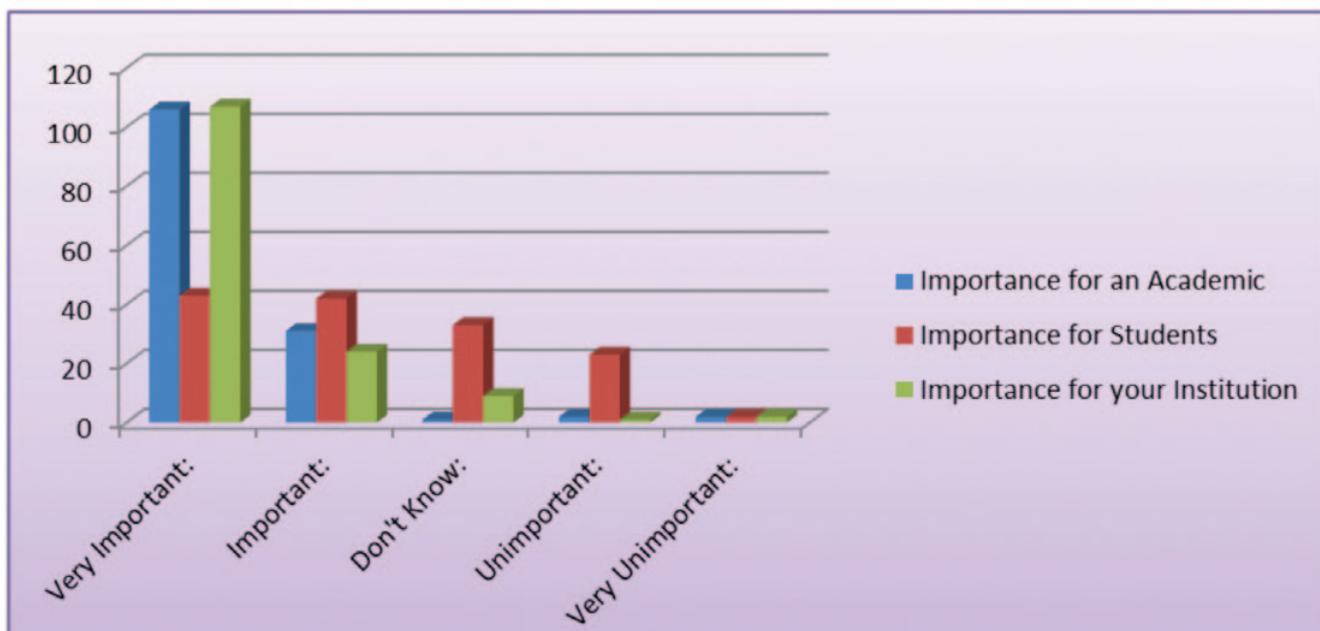
Figure 2.4: How important is health and safety?

Fun

The respondents (as demonstrated in Figure 2.5.) suggest that while fun is more important for students than academics, both see the importance of fun in fieldtrip activity. In total 82% of academics see fun as either important or very important, whereas 93% of academics suggest this is the case for students. The unimportance of fun for institutions is clearly evident, as is the fact that 15% of academics see fun as unimportant (13%) or very unimportant (2%).
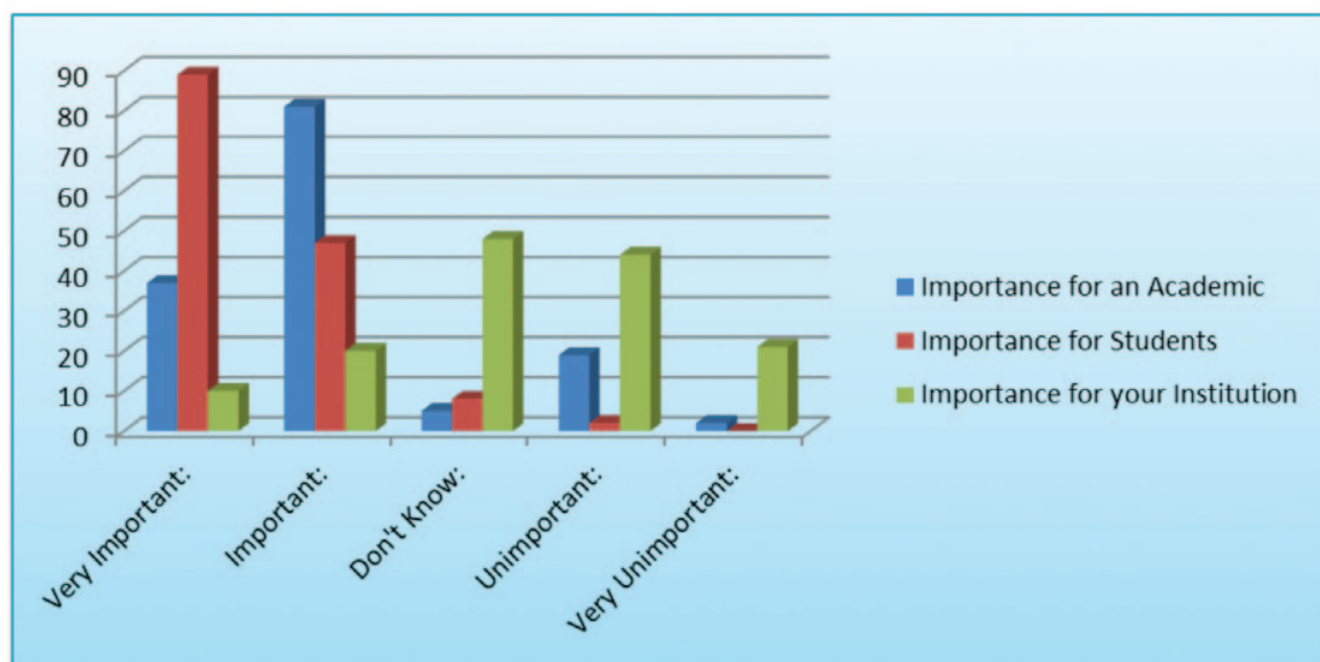
Figure 2.5: How important is fun?

Educational alignment

Figure 2.6 clearly demonstrates the importance for academics to have fieldtrips aligned to their educational objectives. For 75% it is very important and for a further 21% it is important. Students are least interested in educational alignment (11% unimportant or very unimportant) whereas only 4% of institutions are perceived to view this element as unimportant.
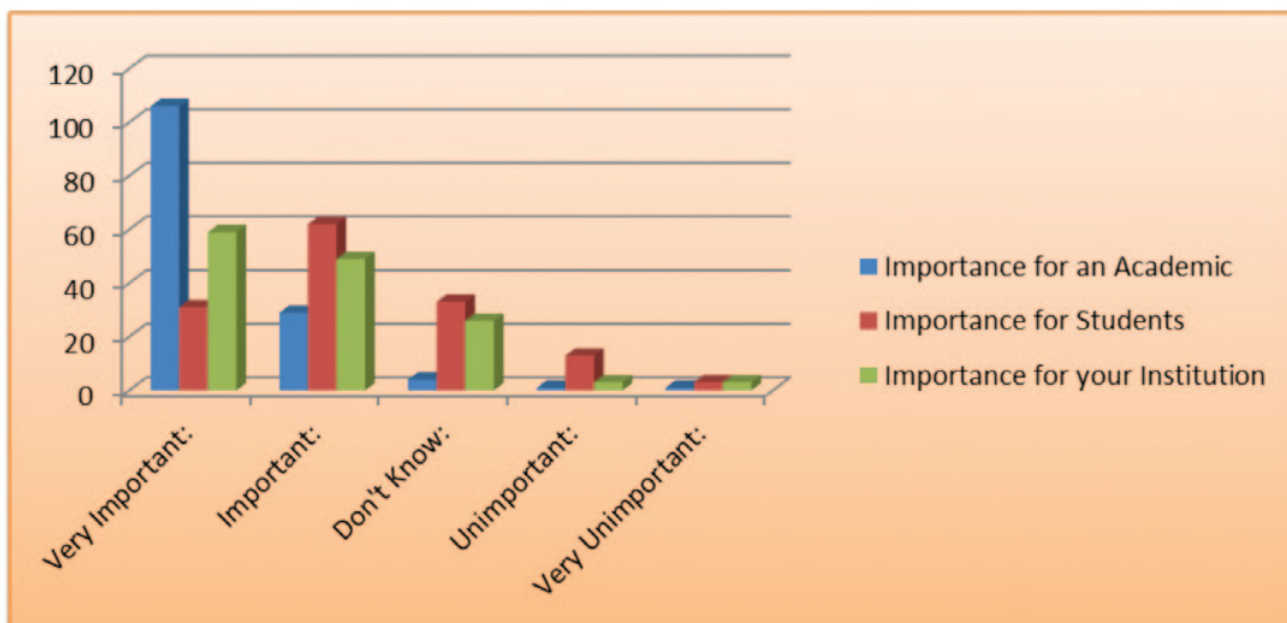
Figure 2.6: How important is educational alignment?

Educational considerations

Most important elements of fieldwork

Table 2.1 illustrates the many different elements that the academic respondents include in their fieldwork activities. While social elements (35%) and nightlife (8%) are important to some, the large majority of important activities are related to pedagogical and programmatic motives (i.e. observation, 88%; talks by professionals, 78%; walking tours, 55% etc.).

Activity	No. Respondents	% Respondents
Observation	134	88.2%
Talks by professionals on-site	118	77.6%
Walking Tour	83	54.6%
Recording – photography	78	51.3%
Survey work of landscape / facilities etc	63	41.5%
Interviewing locals / tourists	63	41.5%
Socialising	53	34.9%
Bus Tour	36	23.7%
Nightlife	12	8.0%
Other	12	8.0%

Figure 2.1: How important are learning/educational issues?

Evaluation of fieldwork learning

Educational feedback/assessment is important for many of the participants, with a broad range of methodologies being employed. Many participants utilise a variety of assessment methods, with Table 2.2. outlining the main approaches taken. The interesting finding from this is the broad range of summative and formative methods of assessment.

Activity	No. Respondents	% Respondents
Feedback sessions (formative)	86	56.6%
On-trip activity (formative)	73	48.0%
Integrated into my module assessments	72	47.4%
Essay style report	65	42.8%
Unstructured feedback from participants	57	37.5%
Word of mouth	26	17.1%
Integrated into a variety of module assessments	24	15.8%
Other	16	10.5%

Table 2.2: Assessment methods

Issues and challenges

Biggest issues and challenges

Interestingly, when asked to identify the category of challenge which they found to be most difficult, only 9.7% of respondents find educational challenges to be the most important, whereas by far the largest challenges (53.1% of respondents) are seen as operational and logistical. In total, 29.7% of respondents cited bureaucratic challenges as being the most difficult to deal with.

Eductional challenges:	9.7%	14
Logistical / operational challenges:	53.1%	77
Bureaucratic challenges:	29.7%	43
Other (please specify):	7.6%	11

Table 2.3: Biggest challenges in organising fieldtrips

Biggest challenges

Figure 2.7 outlines the answers presented when respondents were asked to comment on what they saw as the single most challenging issue for fieldtrip organisers. Health and safety issues are of concern for many of the respondents, finance of costs are challenging for others, while many have concerns about the amount of time that this form of activity takes. Basic logistics and the level of paperwork involved are further issues. Interestingly, very few educational challenges were expressed, other than the challenge of motivating some of the students involved and some comments on the absence of guidance or training from institutions.

Figure 2.7: Single most challenging issue

Best advice

One of the most interesting findings of this entire survey is that when asked to identify best practice (i.e. "the single best thing either you or colleagues do in managing fieldtrips"), the vast majority of responses centred on educational and organisational advice with none of the 109 respondents who answered this question citing tasks related to bureaucracy or finance (despite the prevalence of these themes when identifying challenges and problems). The importance of the organiser's experience was emphasised by a number of the respondents (see Figure 2.8) when planning a fieldtrip exercise, as was the importance of careful advance planning.

Figure 2.8: Single best

Evaluation and Conclusions

The main evaluation of this project will be peer response/reaction to the formal outputs of the work; these will be in the form of a conference paper and a book chapter.

In addition, all participants were invited to comment/provide feedback. The following word cloud summarises the various comments that were made.

Figure 2.9: Feedback word cloud

Recommendations to DIT

Analysis of the findings is at too early a stage to provide detailed recommendations to the DIT. However, some preliminary findings include the following.

- Respondents clearly emphasised the importance of "experience" when organising fieldtrips; therefore the institute should consider formally supporting communities of best practice in this area.
- Funding is a major issue for colleagues in Ireland and abroad; therefore if pedagogical outputs are important, the institute should explore creative ways of financially supporting colleagues who undertake fieldwork.
- Throughout the survey, colleagues note that the passion of individuals drives this form of academic activity, however they also comment that organising and running fieldtrips is very time consuming and this activity is usually undertaken over and above an academic's timetabled work.

At a later stage of the research, best practice guidelines and recommendations will be presented to the Institute.

Proposed Future Work

Follow-up research (in the form of more focused identification of a Best Practice Model) is being planned by the researcher. In the meantime, the current work will be presented at a well-regarded academic conference in December 2014, and will be disseminated through a peer-reviewed book chapter in 2015.

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