

# Experiences with a Virtual Placement

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## SUMMARY

The aim of this paper is to discuss experiences of using a series of on-line work-based exercises set up in the form of a work placement with a small GIS consultancy company. These experiences represent the first use of the package by staff not involved in its development.

Edina is a service unit within Edinburgh University Computing Services with a main role to supply datasets to the academic community, including Ordnance Survey digital mapping. The e-MapScholar project was set up by Edina to develop on-line educational material 'to enhance the usability and learning potential of spatial data resources'.

The aim one project within e-MapScholar is to take the advantages associated with work experience as part of an educational programme and combine it with the flexible learning possible by using web resources, resulting in the 'Virtual Placement'. The Virtual Placement involves students being employed by a virtual GIS consultancy and completing a case study involving problem solving using GIS. All communication with students is carried out electronically via fictional personnel of the virtual company, played by one or more academic staff. The case study is set up to run in the way such a project might operate in a small company. Students carry out a series of nine structured tasks, each with deadlines which can be set by tutors.

The Virtual Placement is being trialed with five postgraduate students as an optional module in the MSc in Geoinformation Technology & Cartography at the University of Glasgow. Staff responsible for the course recognised the value of work placement, but within the restrictions of a one year postgraduate course, with a significant overseas student enrolment, it was considered impractical to include a meaningful conventional work placement component. The Virtual Placement is seen as a potential solution to this dilemma.

The paper explains how the project is structured and the workshop presentation reflects on the experience from the point of view of staff and students.