

Building a Graduate Employability Community in Computing: GECCO Evaluation Report

GECCO was a CPHC-funded initiative focussed on employability. It comprised a series of workshops modelled on the *Disciplinary Commons*, a proven way to share practice across institutions. Participants met on three occasions (in three series) additionally, undertook a cross-institutional visit, prepared a showcase of a piece of their practice, and peer-reviewed each other's work.

	London Series	Manchester Series	Edinburgh Series
Meeting 1	Friday 13th May 2016	Friday 20th May 2016	Friday 27th May 2016
Meeting 2	Thursday 7th July 2016	Friday 16th Sept 2016	Friday 14th October 2016
Meeting 3	Friday 18th Nov 2016	Friday 9th Dec 2016	Friday 20th January 2017

There were 41 participants in the GECCO workshops, representing 35 institutions. 28 participated “completely” – that is to the point of completing and submitting a showcase of their practice. A further 9 attended at least one (and often all) sessions, but did not complete a showcase. Four attended only one session.

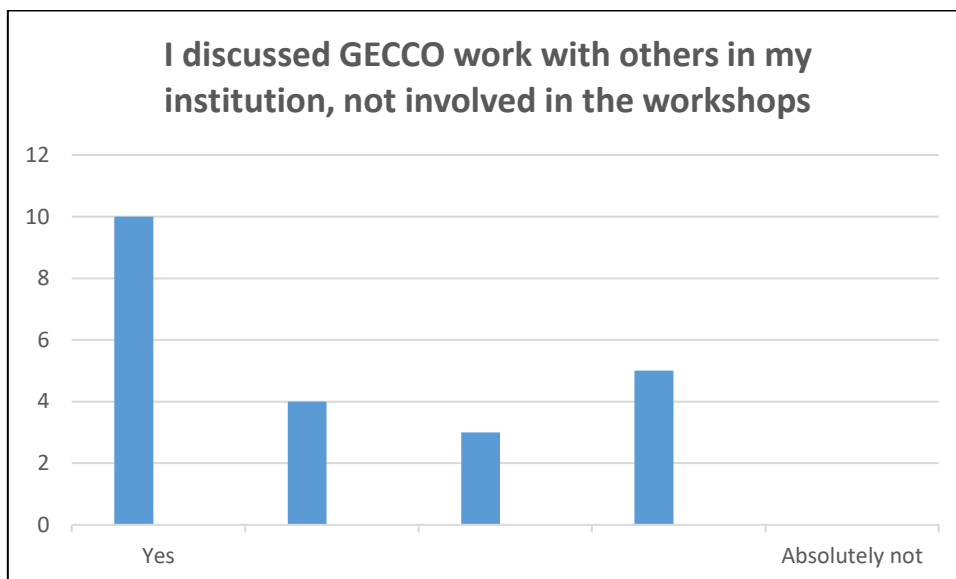
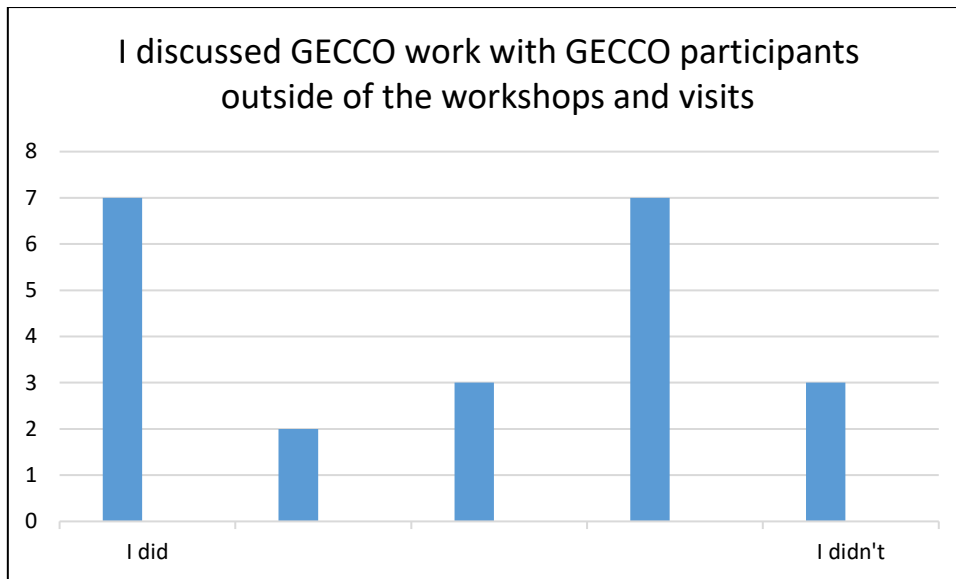
An online evaluation was conducted after the final session of all series, and after the presentation of the posters and final report at the CPHC conference (25th April 2017). 27 participants completed the survey (65%) and another 5 sent comments separately, by email. For those respondents who attended sessions, responses were evenly divided between attendees at the London, Manchester and Edinburgh series. This evaluation report draws both on the online questionnaire and the emailed comments.

Overall reaction

In terms of content, the majority (68%) found that the material was pitched at the right level and 71% indicated that it was relevant to their needs. Several participants commented on using specific materials and techniques introduced in the workshops back into their own departments, as identified in these comments (sent by email):

- *... a lot to learn ... for our School. It was a great experience working with you all and with the other workshop attenders—we will definitely make use of some of the workshop exercises.*
- *I generally found the workshops very interesting and useful, not least the exchange of experience between different universities. I've also found the specific methodologies employed very useful. In fact, we are currently running a study at [our University] using this methodology to help us actually understand our student population and their interaction with employability offers. This has already brought up some interesting points we will follow up on.*

In terms of building community, there was discussion between participants, as might have been expected, but also discussion with others external to the workshops, disseminating ideas beyond the activity.



Note: the points between the binary assertions were left blank for participant interpretation.

Cross-institutional visits

A feature of the *Disciplinary Commons* model is that participants visit each other's institutions. This is a simple, but surprisingly powerful, way to identify successful practices and surface hidden assumptions.

15 participants who responded to this question reported completing a visit, a further 4 that they "cheated" (that is, conducted a virtual visit, by skype or similar): the remaining 3 respondents did not do it. This was unfortunate, as it was a highly valued activity. The visits had a specific purpose within the workshops, to assist participants in completing the "context" section of the showcases. However, in response to the question "Did you get any other value or benefit from the visit?" 20 participants added a write-in comment, 19 of them positively.

- *I think they are hugely valuable. They can provide reassurance and support, a sharing of ideas, identification of best (or better) practice and an opportunity for relationship building*

As well as general comments about the value of the visits as a networking opportunity, there were two further clusters of response.

One focussed on the benefits of the physicality of the exchange:

- *It was great to visit another institution and to get a better understanding of the context people were working in. It brought it to life much more.*
- *Yes, huge benefit from meeting other staff, discussing employability related issues and observing the environment*
- *Both visits were useful as an opportunity to explore in-depth the experience of another institution*
- *Seeing someone else's context.*

The other remarked on the extended opportunity for focussed discussion that the visits afforded:

- *Interesting to compare and contrast similar issues*
- *Yes, more detailed discussion of context and shared challenges.*
- *Exposure to different structure for placement organisation and different practices. Useful to compare with our practice.*
- *Yes. We had much to talk about in and around the GECCO workshop itself; many practices in common. My visitor has become an external examiner for my institution as a result of our networking.*
- *Very interesting to see other organisations*

The single negative response was simply because the visits weren't undertaken;

- *No - it was organised around a busy time for both institutions, so neither party had the gumption to complete it*

Best Thing

22 participants responded to the question *For me, the best thing about GECCO was.* Most were positive about the experience in general:

- *Cross-pollination of ideas*
- *Learning more about the diversity of practice in this area across a range of institutions*
- *Hearing from other institutions initiatives*
- *The chance to hear and compare practice*
- *Hearing what other institutions are doing, workshop techniques*

Others picked out specific aspects, such as the cross-institutional visits

- *Visiting another university*
- *The cross-institutional visit.*
- *Institutional visit*

- *Engaging with peer institutions, experience their practice and being held up a mirror of our own practice.*

Or identified sharing practice explicitly:

- *Sharing of good practice, getting to meet people with an active interest in employability.*
- *Sharing good practice with other academics in the field*
- *Opportunities to share and hear about other practices, while learning some new approaches.*

Many acknowledged the value of the time and opportunity for engagement that the workshops afforded:

- *Time to reflect upon what my University and department is doing in employability*
- *Chance to allocate time to employability and discuss with peers*
- *Meeting people who are committed to improving students' employability skills. It was great to be in a room full of people who wanted to be there and were open to new ideas and keen to collaborate.*
- *Meeting colleagues and learning about different practices*
- *Getting to meet other colleagues, hearing about their experiences.*
- *Networking. Sharing the same issues with others -some new approaches to same problems.*
- *Meeting colleagues from other institutions battling with the same issues and challenges.*
- *The time out from my institution*
- *The workshops weren't just an opportunity to talk, but there was just enough formal structure to prompt action.*

And for one participant, GECCO provided a more direct personal endorsement

- *It made me realise that I had actually done quite a lot of work already*

Most Valuable Thing

The 21 responses to what *the most valuable thing about GECCO* were similar, although not identical to those aspects identified as “best”. Participants named the networking opportunities positively:

- *Time and space share/discuss practice*
- *Discussions between practitioners for ideas and reflection*
- *Networking (mentioned three times)*
- *Exchanging ideas / establishing new contacts.*
- *Contacts. Ratification that we are not alone!!*
- *New contacts at other institutions.*
- *The networking opportunities*
- *Talking to colleagues about employability across the sector*

They also found value in the validation of their work:

- *Discovering that the research work I've been doing is valued more by colleagues in other institutions than it is by my own line management*

- *An opportunity to think about what we do and how we do what we do as part of the homework.*
- *Making me realise how much work I'd done already*

Several participants talked about the benefits of GECCO to their own work

- *Finding out what everyone else is doing, learning what doesn't work and stealing good ideas!*
- *The number of ideas I can steal/adapt*
- *Meeting staff from other institutions and being able to share experiences and identify good practice.*
- *Engaging with peer institutions, experience their practice and being held up a mirror of our own practice.*

Two people mentioned the structure of GECCO specifically:

- *Taking part in the workshops. They were really inspiring and motivating.*
- *The final posters, hard copy, shows a tangible result.*

Change

A well-known problem for interventions of this nature is that people are enthusiastic in the workshops, in the meetings, but revert to “standard practice” when they return to their everyday environment. One of the things we were particularly interested to find out, therefore, was whether there was an effect beyond the workshop experience. To probe this, we asked the question *Did you make any changes to your practice (or plan to in the future) as a result of attending GECCO?*

Eight respondents were purely positive

- *Yes. By identifying the showcase we've embellished it and produced material to support it.*
- *Yes. The sharing of practice and cross-institutional focus has provided me with a number of areas to further explore in relation to enhancing employability practice within my institution*
- *Changes were implemented after the first workshop and new practice honed as the workshops progressed*
- *I intend to 'steal' some of the good ideas I heard about. The practice I showcased i think benefited from my having to think about it more deeply and explain to others.*
- *Yes - picked up some ideas from others and we are looking to implement one or two*
- *Yes -marginal rather than wholesale but very useful*
- *Yes, some mentoring ideas and student self-assessments to be developed*
- *Yes, I will be introducing the practices with others at my institution and monitoring the results.*

A further five were making changes, although perhaps not as they had anticipated (or thought we wanted to hear):

- *Working on it!*

- *The workshop galvanised and informed a change process that had already been initiated, no fundamental changes but definitely details.*
- *I haven't changed my existing practice, but I have enhanced it based on work described in a case study from another institution which I enhanced and adapted to my own/ my School's specific circumstances*
- *Not yet but may do in future development*
- *"No" to the showcase practice, but "yes" to other things.*

Three were more equivocal:

- *There are lots of ideas I would like to explore in more detail in the future.*
- *Described some of the practices we observed to staff in my institution more directly involved in those parts of employability.*
- *No not really, my work on employability started in 2013 so I had already covered a lot of ground before I came to the workshops. The GECCO workshops were useful in helping me think about the relevance of my work.*

And only one simply responded "No".

Worst Things

There were aspects of GECCO that were not liked. Some were concerned with local arrangements, travel and the website, but the majority (30%) were focussed on the commitment that the work required.

- *The homework was challenging to fit around the day job. Whilst not onerous in the task, finding the time was the issue*
- *Homework was quite demanding on time working in a busy role*
- *The preparation and homework for each session*
- *Facilitating attendance and homework as part of my schedule*
- *Quite a lot of commitment with the workshops and homework.*
- *Fitting in homework round academic commitments*

One participant was keen for the intervention to be more substantial:

- *It was, or seemed to be, short lived.*

And this theme was continued in responses to the question "*if there was one thing i could change about GECCO it would be ...*" where 8 of the 18 responses were concerned to extend the workshops, in scope or scale. Firstly, there was a group of who simply wanted more:

- *That it could continue!*
- *I liked the more regular monthly meetings of a previous Disciplinary Commons I attended rather than fewer more spread out meetings. [The normal Disciplinary Commons model has 9 meetings over the course of an academic year]*

Secondly, there were participants who wanted GECCO to encompass a more extended engagement:

- *It would have been interesting to expand the workshops and move from showcasing something we currently do to devising some new kind of initiative or intervention*

- *Establishing a community of practice that extends beyond the GECCO project.*
- *There were some in the group that had excellent practice to share and some in search of excellent practice. I wonder if this could be recognised in some way.*
- *Action plan at general and institution specific level emanating from the final report?*
- *Finding ways to involve more staff from each institution for these events so that more staff are aware of how they might use the service design tools and approaches of the workshops in their own work more often to develop better approaches more regularly.*
- *Introduce case studies/more participant led discussion around experiences*

Summary

This data supports that the *Disciplinary Commons* approach for this constituency, in this format, is effective for examining and sharing employability practices. The evaluation also raises questions as to whether the opportunities it affords could be extended to encompass additional practices and/or a wider range of staff.

Appendix: Evaluation Questionnaire

20 Questions about GECCO

This is a survey to evaluate the GECCO series of workshops.

We're not only interested in your responses to our questions, but also more generally in your experience of the workshops. So please don't hesitate to add comments as appropriate, even if we haven't asked about something specifically.

1. How did you find out about GECCO?
2. Which series did you attend?(London, Manchester, Edinburgh)
3. If you attended more than one session was this (Trivial -> Challenging, 5 point likert)
4. The level of material was (Way over my head -> Too Simple, 5 point likert)
5. I found the material (Relevant to my needs -> Way off beam, 5 point likert)
6. The workshop sessions needed more (lectures -> individual/group work, 5 point likert)
7. Between the workshops the homework was (too trivial -> too onerous, 5 point likert)
8. Where 1 is "I completely disagree" and 5 is "I totally agree", please indicate your experience of identifying your showcase and constructing your poster (you may, of course, subdivide and annotate these sections with additional observations).
 - I found it easy to identify a practice to showcase
 - I found it easy to put my practice into the showcase format
 - I had enough support to create the poster
 - I got benefit from peer review
9. For your cross-institutional visit did you (do it/not do it/"cheat")
10. Did the visit help you complete the "context" section of your showcase?
11. Did you get any other value or benefit from the visit?
12. If there's anything you want to comment on in respect of the cross-institutional visits, say it here
13. I discussed GECCO work with others in my institution, not involved in the workshops (Yes -> absolutely not, 5 point likert)
14. I discussed GECCO work with GECCO participants outside of the workshops and visits (I did -> I didn't, 5 point likert)
15. Did you make any changes to your practice (or plan to in the future) as a result of attending GECCO (either an idea developed through the work you did, or ideas you adapted from somewhere else)?
16. If you didn't ... attend all the sessions ... complete a poster ... complete a peer-review ... visit another institution ... please let us know what stopped you - and if there was anything we could have done to ameliorate that.
17. For me, the best thing about GECCO was
18. For me, the worst thing about GECCO was
19. For me, the most valuable thing about GECCO was
20. If there was one thing I could change about GECCO, it would be