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TEACHING ECOLOGY IN THE COST OF LIVING CRISIS



How can we adapt teaching during a cost of living crisis to ensure no one is left behind? Here, the Teaching and Learning Special Interest Group identify the challenges unique to ecology and the adaptations we can make to become better educators.

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In the last two years UK food prices have risen by 27%, gas and electricity prices increased by 37% and 17% respectively in 2022, and have not returned to past levels, with knock-on effects for transport and accommodation costs. People most affected are those who spend more of their income on essentials, which explains why more than 90% of higher education students report that they are somewhat or very worried about these rising costs. The value of student loans available rose by 2.3% for 2022-23, but with inflation rates over 10% at times, loan value has not kept pace in real terms.

There are challenges for all students, but some are specific to ecology. Over 30% of students are not attending course-related events, which for ecology likely includes fieldtrips, to save money. About 45% of UK PhD students work over 30 hours a week, because despite a 10% increase in UKRI stipends in 2022-23 and a further increase to £18,622 from October 2023, the cost of living crisis makes this amount untenable for many. International students often have restricted work hours, and students with disabilities face additional challenges and costs, in addition to growing financial insecurity faced by most PhD students in the UK. For post-graduate ecology students, increased costs may limit field opportunities and research scope also, compounding time lost to paid work.

At the BES Annual Meeting 2023 in Belfast, we held a workshop to discuss the cost of living crisis and how this is impacting the teaching of ecology in higher education. PhD students, ecology lecturers, teachers and other interested members of the Society identified issues we are facing as a community, and discussed three areas for solutions.

CURRENT ISSUES FOR ECOLOGY STUDENTS AND LECTURERS

Issues facing ecology undergraduate students

- Expense of field courses, field kit and clothing
- Inability to take up voluntary roles due to the need to earn money leading to concern about career prospects
- High energy costs while studying at home
- High commuting costs
- Less time for study due to the need to earn money
- Less time for social activities leading to not making friends easily with classmates
- Feelings of inequality (those students with additional support e.g. parents, can cope better)

Issues facing ecology PhD students

- Limited ability to top-up stipend due to capped working hours
- Need to balance paid teaching with PhD study
- Cost of living too high in some areas (therefore not relocating and studying remotely)

Issues facing ecology lecturers

- Reduced attendance by students on campus and difficulty scheduling teaching hours
- High cost of living impacting on staff recruitment in some parts of the UK
- Reduced sign-up for residential and international field trips
- Reduction in demonstrator budgets and fewer opportunities to pay PhD students
- Increased mental health concerns for students
- Reduced subscriptions to journal databases by some universities

HOW MIGHT WE ADAPT TO HELP OUR STUDENTS?

The issues raised are complex and intersecting, but here we present three areas where small changes might make big differences to our students.

Reduce fieldwork costs

Fieldwork is an integral part of ecology teaching that enhances undergraduate students' knowledge of the subject. However, it can be costly and time consuming. Therefore providing a range of options on a sliding scale (overseas>residential>local>campus) could ensure all students can access at least one trip. While it is important to make any associated costs clear and transparent, finding ways to subsidise fieldwork and/or allowing monthly payments could help improve attendance. Reconsideration of the 'essential' items on the kit list might remove some barriers to attendance and could be supported with an institutional set of shared field kit for loan. Fieldwork costs can be reduced by booking directly and through joint bookings with other groups. Finally, a sector approach to maintain provision could be to work towards listing ecology fieldwork as 'essential' in the [QAA benchmark statement](#) for Biosciences (as it is for geography).

Understand and plan for financial inequality

There are often institutional funds available to support students in hardship but, further than this, ensuring that visa costs are covered and stipends/expenses are paid rapidly can help to reduce times of financial shortfall. Ecology careers (in particular conservation) can often require experience in the voluntary sector. Making this expectation transparent can support students to gather relevant experience during their studies to avoid the need for unpaid work before entering the job market. It is also important that we pay students for any work done within our universities. Discounting voluntary work entirely when selecting applicants for jobs and PhD positions would help level the playing field and would, in time, erode this expectation altogether. Finally, if we recognise that higher education for many is impossible without term-time jobs for long hours, what does a 'good' timetable look like for our financially vulnerable students? While such changes may not be in your control, understanding our students' attendance patterns and behaviours will help us to be better educators.

Don't forget PhD students in cost of living conversations

The input from this group was very insightful during the workshop, with some feeling they are 'hidden' in some universities' plans. Promptly paying post-graduate demonstrators is the least we can do and championing the need to keep these roles is important (this additional money is being used for essentials, not extras). Finally, some PhD students reported that the high cost of housing in some cities was preventing them from relocating closer to their institution. Being very clear about the expectations for relocation and being on-campus will allow applicants to make good choices (one had relocated at great expense only to find a largely work-from-home culture when they got there).

HOW MIGHT WE ADAPT TO HELP OUR COLLEAGUES AND OURSELVES?

While students were the primary focus of our workshop, the cost of living crisis is having large impacts on staff and institutions, with significant financial pressures within universities and combining with other recent changes to make our jobs harder. While UK universities often collaborate for research, a culture of competition for students, along with significant bureaucratic barriers, has discouraged educational collaboration. At the beginning of the workshop, organiser Nick Worsfold proposed that a more collaborative approach to teaching could be more cost-effective. What would a more collaborative higher education sector in ecology look like?

Revisiting the three areas identified, fieldtrips co-run by multiple institutions could help reduce costs. Sharing best practice amongst teachers, such as through the Enhancing Fieldwork Learning Showcase, can help highlight and find solutions for inequalities efficiently. Not forgetting PhD students, can we make more use of co-supervision across institutions, to reduce project costs, offer different physical spaces and more employment opportunities? We can look to existing cross-institutional initiatives such as eduroam, SCONUL and degree provision partnerships as models. New initiatives, while driven by the cost of living crisis, could facilitate broader conversations for the benefit of all learners and teachers. ✨



TEACHING AND LEARNING GROUP

Please contact us at the Teaching and Learning Special Interest Group at BESLearning@britishecologicalsociety.org if you have any interest in taking forward any of these ideas, in particular around establishing new collaborations (however informal).

The Teaching and Learning Special Interest Group held a workshop at the BES Annual Meeting in Belfast in December 2023, to discuss the cost of living crisis and how this is impacting the teaching of ecology in higher education. We would like to thank all the participants of the workshop for their insights and contributions.