

Alumni Newsletter

Summer 2022



Welcome to the Durham Geography alumni newsletter. This is another wonderful opportunity to engage with our alumni and to tell you about our exciting research initiatives, educational developments and how the Department continues to transform lives. And, as always, we are enjoying hearing from many of you about how being at Durham Geography helped your careers.

This newsletter comes at a time when we are still dealing with some uncertainties, but also embracing some very exciting opportunities. The external context is forever shifting, and next academic year will bring increasing national and international competition, continuing uncertainties concerning the impacts of Brexit on research funding and collaboration, and continuing government scrutiny of Higher Education and its funding model. The University also has the exciting prospect of the full return of staff and students to campus, the new Vice Chancellor's strategy refresh, and the implementation of new Health & Wellbeing and Digital Strategies. One of the main concerns of Durham Geography is to ensure that we continue to foster an inclusive environment in which all of our students can thrive. We are excited about the roll-out this year of our field kit bursaries, which will help students from low income households purchase essential items for fieldwork such as coats, footwear, and rucksacks. We are also developing a climate change policy to ensure that our fieldtrips, research, and other activities are environmentally sustainable.

We greatly appreciate the growing number of you who are supporting us in our work with employment talks to our undergraduates, with online profiles to give our current and future students a feel for the amazing things a Durham Geography degree makes possible, and with all of the other forms of help that you contribute. Many thanks.



Professor Cheryl McEwan
Head of Department

What's In This Edition?

- The Year Ahead
- REF 2021 Results
- Queen's Jubilee Honours list
- Institute of Hazard, Risk and Resilience
- History of the Department
- Alumni Career Talks
- Alumni Lecture Series
- Stay in Touch

The Year Ahead

Greetings from Durham as we wind up the 2021/22 academic year. This has been the most challenging year that I can remember since I started as a lecturer – a combination of large numbers of students, complex teaching arrangements, Covid outbreaks that affected both staff and students, and several periods of industrial action for good measure. It has certainly not been boring!



*Professor Alex Densmore
Deputy Head of Department
and Alumni Lead*

Looking back

We started the year wondering just what a Covid-era university education would look like as the pandemic continued to evolve. The university took more than a thousand more first-year undergraduates than planned in 21/22, of whom about one hundred came to Geography. Those large numbers, combined with ongoing social distancing restrictions, meant that some of our first-year modules simply couldn't be taught in person, as we did not have a lecture theatre large enough to hold all of the first-year students; even in the best of circumstances, there's no way we could squeeze 360 students into the Appleby. Our other modules were run as hybrids, with some students present in person and others joining via Zoom. The teaching staff very quickly learned that running such a hybrid session well is like patting your head and rubbing your belly at the same time – it's pretty easy to do one or the other, but doing both at once is uniquely challenging. I'm exceptionally proud of the way that Geography staff adapted to this new way of teaching, and even prouder of the way that Geography students engaged and made the most of the new opportunities that came along.

The rise of the omicron variant in January saw us briefly go back to fully online teaching, but since that time there has been a slow but steady return to more typical teaching and learning. Pressure on our lecture rooms and study spaces has gradually eased as social distancing restrictions have been lifted and room capacity limits have been removed. Most notably, the Easter break saw a resumption of field teaching for the first time since March 2020. Level 2 students went to the Lake District and Skye, while Level 3 students ventured further afield: Norway, Berlin, and Jerusalem. By and large, these trips came off without a hitch, with only minor disruption due to Covid. For both staff and students, the trips were truly a breath of fresh air, and a reminder of some of the best aspects of a Geography degree: seeing the world through new eyes, working as a team, meeting new challenges, and drawing upon all parts of the degree programme to put learning into practice.

Back to normal?

For next year, Durham has committed to a full resumption of in-person teaching, with online-only learning available only as a last resort for those who are unable to join at the start of the year (for example, students who are waiting on visa applications). With the return of A-level exams, we are also anticipating getting back to our more usual student intake, with a target of c. 250 first-year students. For teaching staff, this will be a very welcome return to a more normal year. Except that things won't quite be back to normal. Online assessment and online exams are here to stay – the benefits to both staff and students well outweigh the disadvantages. And many modules have used the pandemic to develop new ways of engaging with students – for example, taking a 'flipped classroom' approach where most of the material is delivered via pre-recorded lectures, and time in the classroom is used for discussions, exercises, or other more interactive in-person activities rather than going through a Powerpoint file. I would say that we have come through the pandemic with a more varied curriculum that challenges students in a wider range of ways, and that allows them to engage with the material on their own terms.

We will also be joined by a number of new staff in the autumn, including two new permanent members of staff in physical geography (Caroline Clason and Helen Mackay) and four new 2-year lecturers across both human and physical geography. Together these new appointments will strengthen the department across a range of areas, including urban geography, climate change, and biogeochemistry, and bring us back up to our full complement of staff. We look forward to welcoming them to the department.

Staying in touch

The next talk in our alumni lecture series is coming up in November, when Professor Louise Amoore will talk about the hidden and not-so-hidden ways that algorithms shape our day-to-day lives. Please keep an eye on our social media outlets for full details about this and other activities. We always love to hear from you, and you can get in touch either through the website or by emailing gg-alumni@durham.ac.uk. Many thanks as always for all of your contributions to the Department!

REF 2021 Results

As some of you will be aware, the UK government periodically looks at the quality of academic research across universities through an exercise known as the Research Excellence Framework, or REF. Every six or seven years, universities are asked to submit their best work to a set of disciplinary panels, which then grade the quality of the research within each department. The panels look at research outputs (such as journal articles or books), examples of the impact of research outside of academia, and the environment that nurtures or supports research within those departments. The results provide a measure of research prowess, for sure, but they also have a more pragmatic benefit. The grades determine how much money flows to universities through a mechanism known as 'quality-related' or QR income – importantly, this is recurrent income that is not dependent upon winning research grants, or attracting large numbers of students.

I am delighted to report that the Department was jointly top-rated in the most recent REF2021 exercise. We tied with Bristol Geography for the top spot, with 60% of our work judged to be in the top (4*) category. This includes over half of our submitted outputs judged to be 4*, again tied with Bristol for the highest proportion in the UK. In addition, we were one of only two Geography departments in the country (the other being Oxford) to be awarded a perfect 4* grade for our research environment.

While these results are focused on our achievements in research, there is a clear link to education through our research-led teaching. They further underline the fact – which you all already know – that Durham Geography remains one of the strongest Geography departments in the world.

You can learn more about the REF and browse the full REF2021 results at <https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/>.



History of the Department

We spent three years creating a written history of the Department, reflecting the diversity of intellectual themes that we have worked on (and often pioneered) and the range of people who have passed through the Department over the years. The work was led by Professor Ian Simmons – very well known to many of you – who compiled and gathered not only his own experiences and memories, but those of many other past members or staff and students. We are very grateful for all the contributions made to help create this history.

If you have not already taken the opportunity to look at this work, please do explore the document via the following link:

<https://www.durham.ac.uk/departments/academic/geography/alumni/the-department-through-time/department-history/>



Queen's Jubilee Honours List

We were delighted to see the award of OBE to:

Mr Richard M. Walker OBE - Geography, St Aidan's College, 2001 - For services to Business and to the Environment

Richard Walker is Managing Director of Iceland Supermarkets and author of *The Green Grocer* published in 2021. He has consistently used his high-profile position to champion environmental issues, including plastic pollution and deforestation linked to palm oil. He is chair of the environmental campaign group Surfers Against Sewage, and has also made a number of interventions recently concerning the cost of living.



Institute of Hazard, Risk and Resilience (IHRR)

The Institute of Hazard, Risk and Resilience (IHRR) is a world-leading research institute in hazard, risk and resilience-based at Durham University. The institute supports innovative research and training for use in policy and practice, collaborating directly with communities, NGOs and governments. Their commitment is to work with and learn from the widest possible range of stakeholders living with hazard and risk – empowering people, fostering resilience, and improving lives, both now and in the future.

FACE-UP (Factors affecting childhood Exposures to Urban Particulates) - an IHRR project

Today's children are tomorrow's adults. The FACE-UP project will reduce the exposure of urban children to air pollution, a major risk factor for a range of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) that are hindering sustainable development in LMICs. It is critical that we develop culturally-appropriate interventions to reduce their lifetime vulnerability to NCDs. This challenge demands an ambitious, interdisciplinary study to develop and evaluate contextually-driven, ethical, exposure reduction interventions for urban children, which can be implemented at personal, household and policy levels, both locally and globally. The project has now commenced following delays caused by Covid-19.



Institute of Hazard, Risk and Resilience (IHRR) presents the annual conference: Before and After: Building Resilience to Manage Disasters and Save Lives

In October 2022, the Institute of Hazard, Risk and Resilience (IHRR) is hosting its Annual Conference. This year's theme tackles the vital issue of what governments and institutions need to do before and after disasters. What more should be done in the planning process to build capacity and resilience? What more can be improved in the response to disasters that will help to ensure the safety and wellbeing of those affected?

This conference will bring together a range of perspectives from across disciplines to address multiple hazards, their associated risks and discuss how to plan for a resilient future. It will consider multiple forms of resilience building – including hazard mapping, spatial planning, early warning systems and policy change – as well as opportunities to improve the initial emergency response and subsequent rebuilding of communities and infrastructure.

IHRR will welcome two keynote speakers to address these issues from the intersection of their own research and experience in the field. The conference will also invite traditional research presentations and will feature lightning talks.

To register for the event: (Webinar Registration - Zoom)
https://durhamuniversity.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_AdWUz9SHqQksTc07wtpA

A full programme will be circulated closer to the time. Meanwhile, please save the date: Thursday 13th October 2022.

For further information on either of these items, please contact the IHRR: ihrr.admin@durham.ac.uk

Work Placement Geography Degree Programme

It was great to see some of our students graduate in 2022 from our new 'Geography with Work Placement' degree programme (B.Sc or B.A.).

This new degree programme allows our undergraduates to pause their academic study at the end of their second year to take up a paid work placement for a minimum of 40 weeks, before returning to Durham to complete their final year of study. Despite the pandemic, we have seen a major growth in the number of students availing themselves of this opportunity and we currently have 15 students out on placement, with 14 having secured placements for next academic year.

These placements enable students to gain a wide variety of transferable skills for employment, expand their networks, understand different organisational cultures and environments, apply knowledge from their degree programme, and earn money! Furthermore, it is not uncommon for employers to use their placement schemes as a pipeline for securing talent for their graduate schemes and several of our students re-enter their final year with a graduate role already secured.

Recent placements highlight the diversity of roles where Geographers are needed, including work at the Home Office, the Environment Agency, Unilever, Siemens, the Office for National Statistics, the Field Studies Council, the UK House of Commons, various water companies and renewable energy placements, and even L'Oreal!

If you work at a company or organisation and would like to explore whether you might be able to host a work placement student, please get in touch. We spoke to Will Wardle, a Human Geographer who has been working at the International Council on Mining and Metals...



Name:

Will Wardle

Degree Title:

Geography (B.A.) with Work Placement Year.

Placement Company:

The International Council on Mining and Metals

What's your role with ICMM?

My role involves working across the different ICMM projects including Climate Change, Mineral Resource Governance, the Circular Economy, and Nature (biodiversity). Depending on what is happening within these projects at the time my day to day could involve anything from writing briefing notes, organising meetings, attending conferences or even presenting on ICMM's work. It's a great placement to get exposure to lots of different fields and different organisations, for instance I've worked with members from sustainability consultancies, human rights NGOs and even occasionally the UN.

What's been the highlight of the placement so far?

Helping with the release of the ICMM net-zero climate commitments. It felt great to be working in such a topical area and very fulfilling to know the work I was doing was helping to push for action on the climate change.

In what ways do you think your placement has benefitted your future employability?

The placement has been a great opportunity to gain exposure to a range of different fields and teams. It has been my first experience of working life and has taught me a range of different skills in the workplace from communication, organisation and the confidence to speak to people from a range of different roles and experiences. I also think it's been a great opportunity to create a network of peers within the sustainability industry and will hopefully provide me with the experience required to gain a graduate role post university.

What are the links between your placement role and your degree programme (both in terms of subject knowledge and skills)?

My placement has had strong links to my degree so far in both the knowledge and skills I have used. Every day I draw upon my degree knowledge of climate change, geopolitics and more whilst also using the skills of teamwork and communication I've gained during fieldwork trips and group coursework. I have also used the critical skills taught to me in my degree to understand the complex landscape of sustainability, policy and multi-stakeholder collaboration.

How do you feel like you are making an impact on placement?

It's great to be involved in large projects that are making a long-term global impact. Whether that be on climate change or human rights the policy and frameworks I have been involved in creating or publicising go far beyond any kind of impact I ever imagined I would be able to make on my placement year.

Alumni Career Talks

Our Alumni Career Talks allow graduates of the Department to come back and speak to current students and show them what they can do with their Geography degree. They also allow our alumni to show students how they have used their experiences at Durham to shape and direct their careers.

The talks are hugely beneficial to our students, who get so much direction and positivity from listening to the achievements of our alumni. But we need your help to make them happen. Please get in touch with us (gg-alumni@durham.ac.uk) if you would like to be involved. We run these talks three times per year, as long as we have enough speakers.

In the Autumn we will be returning to our face-to-face events in Durham, but for those who cannot get to Durham the possibility of a live Zoom feed to the assembled students is also an option.

You could also get involved by pre-recording your experiences on video and we can then show this to students at one of our talks as part of the event. This is a great way to get involved even if you cannot make it on the day due to commitments or perhaps time differences around the globe.



Alumni Lecture Series

Our Alumni Lecture Series gives our current academic staff the opportunity to showcase their research to you and let you know of the exciting work being done in the Department.

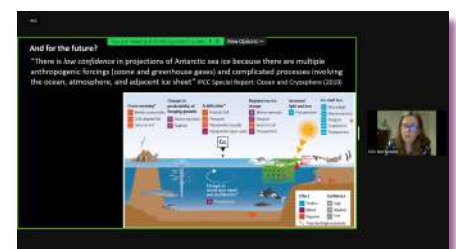
In 2021 we were delighted to host talks from **Dr Noam Lesham**, **Professor Erin McClymont** and **Dr Simon Engelhart**, and their talks are available to watch via our website if you missed them.

The next talks scheduled in for the series are:

- November 2022: **Professor Louise Amoore** on how algorithms shape our lives.
- March 2023: **Professor Peter Talling** on the longest sediment flows on Earth, which connect major rivers efficiently to the deep sea
- November 2023: **Professor Danny Donoghue** on forest monitoring and climate change

The talks last approximately 1 hour with time for questions and discussion and will be delivered online.

Find our more: <https://www.durham.ac.uk/departments/academic/geography/alumni/alumni-lecture-series/>



Stay in touch

We love hearing from our alumni and there are many ways you can get involved. Please get in touch with our alumni team (gg-alumni@durham.ac.uk) to find out more about how you can continue to be involved in the Department:

- **Alumni Careers Talks** – tell us how has your Geography degree has helped your career! Come back to the Department (whether in person or virtually) and speak to our students about your experiences.
- **Alumni Lecture Series** – a series of online events giving an opportunity to hear one of our world renowned Durham academics speak about their research.
- **Student Employability Mentoring** – individual mentoring for students who need career advice.



- **Internships and Placements** – make students aware of placements or other opportunities within your organisation.
- **Research and Projects** – get students involved in specific projects to make use of their skills and help them develop new ones.
- **Apprenticeships** – let students know about apprentice places or sponsorship of apprentice places within your organisation.
- **Alumni profiles** – answer a few questions about your time at the Geography Department and where your degree has taken you in your career, and join our other alumni in the profile section of our website. This can be in written form, or why not create a short video of yourself and give us a tour of your work place?
- **Reminiscing** – do you have any old stories or anecdotes and even some old photographs that you would like to share and that we can include on our website and social media?

Contact Details

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Please let us know if you would prefer not to receive any further mailings from us.