

Portfolio Integrated International Projectwork - UGent (BE)

A research expedition across geographies and cultures

Official course title: Integrated International Projectwork

Course summary (max 200 words)

The course of the Integrated International Projectwork (*Geïntegreerd Internationaal Projectwerk* - GIP) is a compulsory and pivotal course in the MSc of Geography and Geomatics. It brings together the different domains (physical geography, landscape research, social and economic geography, as well as geomatics) in an integrative, research-based learning experience. The course builds on previously acquired knowledge and skills while fostering new and advanced research skills. It aims to enhance students' scientific and intellectual competencies in geography through critical literature reviews, research design, fieldwork and scientific analysis and reporting. Students design their own research projects addressing a well-defined problem. During a multi-day international fieldwork, they apply various field techniques for data collection, scientific analysis, and interpretation within the studied region. The project promotes the integration of knowledge, skills, and methods from geography and geomatics. Students work collaboratively in an interdisciplinary and international context, enhancing their teamwork and communication abilities and their entrepreneurial skills. Outcomes are shared through a clear, fluent, and structured oral presentation and a written scientific report in English.



Above all, the course is experienced as an academic expedition – an opportunity to explore diverse geographies and cultures – and is often regarded by students as a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Involved lecturers

The involved lecturers form the Support team that consists of:

- Lecturer-in-charge (team leader and contact person): Prof. Veerle Van Eetvelde, Department of Geography, Ghent University, veerle.vaneetvelde@ugent.be
- Co-lecturers: Dr. Maite Dewinter, MSc. Lars De Sloover, MSc. Seppe De Wit, Department of Geography, Ghent University
- Co-lecturer: prof. Andreas Aagaard Christensen, Roskilde University (Denmark), Department of People and Technology and UGent guest professor at the Department of Geography
- Administrative and practical support: MSc. Sofie De Winter, office manager of the Department of Geography

Profile of the lecturers involved and tasks of the Support team:

- The lecturers in the support team combine the interdisciplinary competencies and skills of the Department of Geography. All lecturers have distinctive backgrounds of geographical subdisciplines, as depicted with the white pins in the figure, which enables the team to support and mentor the students in the different aspects of their research project.
- The individual profile of each member combines teaching and research (Veerle is the Programme Committee Chair / Teacher and research group coordinator; Maite is the main students' tutor & postdoctoral staff member; Lars is the departmental research coordinator & PhD fellow; Seppe is a teaching assistant & PhD fellow)
- The team combines staff members with different years of experience in teaching and research, ranging from professor to post-doc researcher, PhD fellows and 2nd years MSc students that have joined in the past five years.
- The main tasks of the lectures in the support team are to facilitate and support the learning process of the students, as explained on the following pages. The final competencies, as formulated in the course specifications, form the main framework of the course, the calendar for the different teaching activities (in preparation for, during and after the fieldwork) is set, but the students are co-designing the content and topics of the project works they will perform in the course.
- The Office manager, Sofie, takes care of major aspects of the organisation (for example, the bookings) and guides students in the practical organisation and daily logistics essential to the stay abroad. She supports students during fieldwork in managing day-to-day tasks (cooking, grocery shopping, ...), fostering autonomy and responsibility.

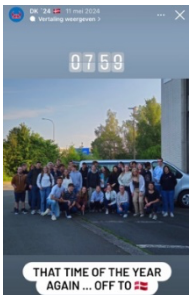


Content of portfolio

All the information in this portfolio can be downloaded here:

<https://downloadsgeografiegeomatica.ugent.be>.

Looking back – where are we coming from?



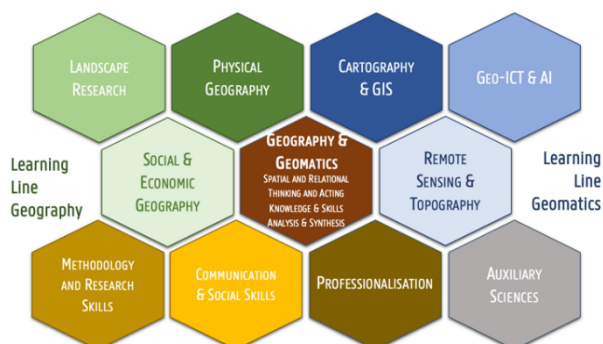
This course was introduced in the MSc in Geography & Geomatics starting from AY 2020-2021, following a major reform of the study program. The previous MSc program included a geographical excursion to Portugal, in collaboration with the University of Lisbon, during which some of the course components were tested before the COVID-19 pandemic. In AY 2020-2021, the first organisation of the GIP course as a renewed course concept was planned in Denmark. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the fieldwork was rescheduled for August, and we opted to travel with minibuses instead of taking a plane. This transportation choice reduced the CO2 emissions and shaped the entire program format, fostering greater entrepreneurial attitudes among students and giving them increased responsibility and ownership of their learning experience.

Course description

Transdisciplinarity

Situation of the course in the curriculum of the MSc Geography & Geomatics

The course is compulsory in the 1st Master and integrates the learning lines that are gradually building up and forming the fundamentals of the BSc. and MSc. programs. In this course, students are challenged to combine the different theories & concepts as well as skills & methodologies they have obtained in the other courses, which leads to the development of a transdisciplinary understanding of geography.



Geography is intrinsically transdisciplinary and has linkages with other disciplines such as ecology, geology, computer sciences, sociology, planning, economics, history, and archaeology, among others. Students get courses related to these disciplines and integrate that knowledge into the projects of this course.

> See the vision of the BSc and MSc in Geography & Geomatics:

<https://www.geography.ugent.be/education>

> See the complete study program:

<https://studiekiezer.ugent.be/2024/master-of-science-in-geography-and-geomatics>

Research oriented teaching

Course specifications

The general course specifications can be found here: <https://studiekiezer.ugent.be/2024/studiefiche/en/C004173>

Here, we emphasise the final competencies to illustrate that the course is research-oriented and challenge-based:

- 1/ Have a thorough knowledge of advanced/specialised geographic methods (including mapping, map analysis, landscape analysis, statistical data analysis, conducting polls and surveys (drawing up, taking and processing), field recordings and measurements, laboratory analyses, graphic representation of results, modelling) and be able to apply these correctly in a research context.
- 2/ Have an insight into the possibilities and limitations of the various techniques.
- 3/ Be competent in consulting professional geographic literature and be able to judge its relevance, taking a critical scientific attitude.
- 4/ Have developed their analytical and synthesising skills and are able to independently formulate new geographic problems in their full complexity and to analyse and solve them by selecting and applying the most suitable scientific method.
- 5/ Be capable of analysing the phenomena studied on different spatial scales and combining the insights gained on those different scales.
- 6/ Be proficient in presenting the results of their own scientific research in writing, presenting a well-founded and scientifically justified account, either in a personal report or in a group report.
- 7/ Give a fluent and well-structured oral presentation of the results, using suitable communication techniques.
- 8/ Collaborate in an interdisciplinary and international context

Challenge-based education

Course concept and program

The course comprises four phases, each of which leading to the scientific, intellectual and professional competencies, as well as competencies in collaboration, communication and social responsibility

1/ General preparation before the fieldwork – co-designing the content

Students are introduced to the concept of the course as well as the region where the project will be executed. They indicate their topics of interest, which later lead to the definition of research themes and the composition of the project group. On average, 25 to 30 students are participating, divided into 5 to 7 project groups.

2/ Specific preparation before the fieldwork – diving into the research topics

During the weekly working seminar, students prepare the project work. They present their progress through short flash presentations to receive feedback from the lecturers. Every group develops an action plan with concrete steps to be executed in the field. The progress is monitored on an MS Teams site.

3/ The international research trip – international and intercultural real-life experience in

The highlight of the course is the 9-day trip to Denmark, where the groups work in their case study areas within the geopark of Odsherred. Students become acquainted with the diverse geographies and cultures through the support of colleagues from Danish universities. After collecting the field data, students analyse it and bring everything together into a presentation. They present their findings to colleagues

from the collaborating universities and other actors, as well as to colleagues, friends, and family back in Belgium (the presentations are streamed). Before driving back to Belgium, the expedition ends with a two-day visit to Copenhagen.

4/ Follow up after the fieldwork – synthesising the research competencies

The final results and conclusions are synthesised in a concise and complete scientific report. The reports are assembled into a portfolio that forms the basis for future project work in subsequent editions.

The details of the course concept and program can be consulted on the download page: <https://downloadsgeografiegeomatica.ugent.be>.



Projects are tackling challenges related to climate change, renewable energy, nature conservation, sustainable and inclusive mobility, heritage, tourism and recreation, rural settlement development, agricultural transitions, and others. Check the project portfolios for a complete overview.

Students' involvement

Planning and design of the course in Belgium

During the first part of the course (comprising three sessions in the first semester and ten in the second semester), students co-design the course. They define their own research topic and develop the research plan, providing input on the locations they want to visit in the field and taking the initiative for activities that stimulate the group process (such as a quiz, a bingo, playlists on Spotify, etc.) on their initiative. This enhances their leadership skills.

During the preparation and the fieldwork, one member of each group participates in the captain's meeting to discuss specific organisational aspects together with the other groups and teachers. The project groups delegate a new captain every time, so all students have the opportunity to take the lead and develop their leadership skills.



During the field work in Denmark

Once the group arrives in Odsherred, the students must organise the fieldwork autonomously, for example, divide the cars to drive to the field sites. We are staying in a self-catering accommodation in Udsigten, and living all together (students and lecturers) stimulates the group process. The students also have to prepare the meals themselves in small cooking teams. Grocery shopping for a group of 30 people within a budget or ensuring dinner is served at 19:00 is challenging, but also fun and contributes to the group spirit. A WhatsApp group is set up to share announcements and experiences.



Follow-up in Belgium

When the group returns to Belgium, students finalise their outcomes and participate in a peer assessment of their assignments. They are also invited to evaluate the course, and this year to participate in a survey (see below).

Students' evaluation

Official course feedback

Every third year, there is an official evaluation of the course coordinated by Ghent University. Two reports are available for this course (AY 2020-2021, AY 2022-2023). Students who have completed the course are invited to fill out the feedback form; participation is not compulsory. The dimensions 'Learning effect', 'Active learning', 'Exercises/practicals', 'Course material' and 'Evaluation' are scored > 3.8/5 for every participating year. Students particularly evaluated the learning effect (4.3 and 4.4/5) and active learning (4.7 and 4.2/5) as very high. The reports of this evaluation can be consulted on <https://downloadsgeografiegeomatica.ugent.be>.

Survey

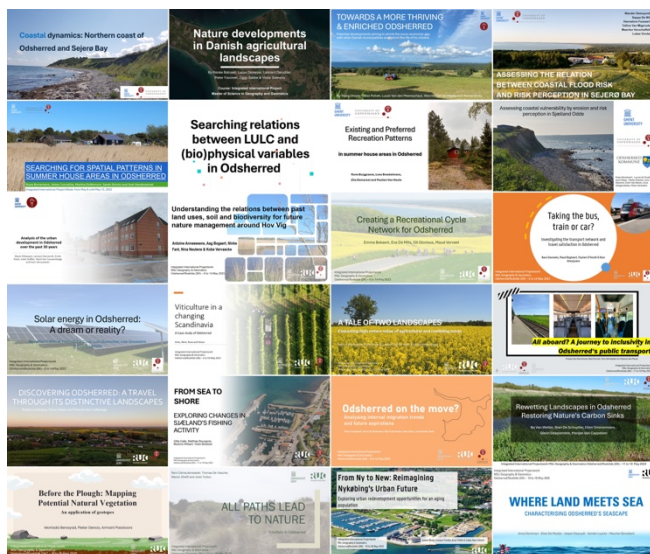
Following the 5th edition of the course, we collected feedback from students who had participated in the previous five editions. We created a short survey to identify the keywords students use to describe the course and to detect the research, communication, and entrepreneurial skills students identified as developed during the course. They were asked to characterise the course in six statements. Additionally, there were open-ended questions; the outcomes are summarised in the word clouds below. The complete survey results can be accessed via this link: <https://downloadsgeografiegeomatica.ugent.be>.

working time together

copenhagen field stopped cream sunset professors denmark night entire trip many personal classroom barbecue around week evenings watching day wonderful dashed water moment fellow different students able environment work research will ice great peers moments traditional going seeing graduated swimming best made designer team scholar home fieldwork evening late lot hostel free completed law cousins discovering academic cha familiar beautiful laugh admission project group presentations danish together

Versality

The scientific outcomes of the students are presented using a variety of communication skills. They are challenged to pitch their project concisely and clearly to different people (course lecturers, guest lecturers, actors). They present the results during a seminar at Roskilde University. The session is considered a conference session, with an introduction, a chair, a precise timing, and time for Q&A from the audience. We also invite colleagues, friends and family to join in online and to interact digitally. The setting of the auditorium and the varied and unfamiliar audience push the students out of their comfort zone, but lead to excellent and professional presentations. The mosaic below illustrates the different presentations over the past five years.



The reports of the project works are collected in a project portfolio at the end of each year. Together with a selection of some of the students' final presentations (across different years), they can be consulted on the download page <https://downloads.geografiegeomatica.ugent.be>. They are also included in the academic bibliography of Ghent University (see: <https://biblio.ugent.be/>) and can be found under the collection in this link: <https://biblio.ugent.be/list/ybw7wPqQwbF5PALB0zBBS0kx10obL>.

Collaboration with external stakeholders

come together: students apply, deepen, and integrate them. As such, GIP serves as a crucial course in which students demonstrate that they are ready for their master's thesis, internship, and – in the next phase – the professional field.

Intercultural and international learning

We intensively collaborate with two Danish universities:

- Roskilde University (RUC): Prof. Andreas Aagaard Christensen gives an online lecture in the preparatory phase (see course description) and mentors the students' projects before and during the fieldwork by giving them the Danish context. He is supported by his colleagues, e.g. MSc. Isabella Bugge Nielsen and MSc. Esbern Holmes during the analysis day at RUC. For the analysis of the data and the preparation of the final presentations, we work in a collaboration room at RUC. The final presentations take place in a big auditorium and are attended by RUC colleagues and other peers of the students.
- Copenhagen University – KU: Prof. Henrik Verjre is leading the field trip in Odsherred and Copenhagen. Other colleagues are involved, depending on the project's themes (e.g., Prof. Anton Stahl Olfasson, Dr Berit Charlotte Kaae).



Over the past five years, different actors outside academia and research institutions have been involved in the course.

- ENLIGHT Teaching & Learning Award 2025 - Nomination UGent

interviewed by students to better understand their vision and activities. They support students with specific materials related to tourism, outdoor recreation, ... They are already engaged for the next edition to organise a real outdoor experience for the students.

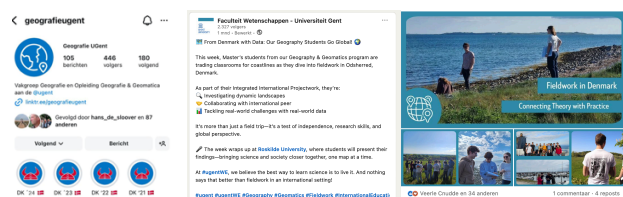
- **The municipality of Odsherred:** different colleagues working in the municipality have supported the students with information about the national and local planning instruments, measures for flood protection, renewable energy production, nature management, ... Students had online interviews with them before the stay in Denmark or visited the office.
- **Inhabitants** have been interviewed in multiple projects and participated in a variety of surveys the students developed (e.g. in the projects about friluftsliv, inclusive mobility, travel behaviour, economic activities, use of the summerhouses, recreational activities)
- **Farmers and specific farmer associations** have been interviewed as part of a project related to land allocation and nature conservation.
- **Nature managers** have been introducing students to specific areas to get specific insights into the nature management plans.
- **Local merchants and entrepreneurs** have been visited by students, such as the managers of vineyards, to understand the factors that influence viticulture in the region.
- **Fishers and merchants of the harbours** have been interviewed, focusing on the influence of climate change on fishing activities.
- Sites of **renewable energy** have been visited by students focusing on the opportunities to increase renewable energy in the municipality.
- People from **Flextrafik** (Movia) have been interviewed as part of a project related to inclusive mobility.

Students are challenged to approach the different actors in English, which is working very well, as many Danish residents also understand and speak English. There is therefore no language barrier when conducting fieldwork or collaborating with various stakeholders.



Reaching out online

Each year, we share our activities on Instagram through the Geography Department's profile (@geografieuvent) with *stories* that can be viewed afterwards. We co-create this content together with the students, ensuring that their perspectives and experiences are prominently featured. Additionally, we have even been recognised on the LinkedIn page of our Faculty of Sciences.



Replicability

The concept of the course of the Integrated International Projectwork has already been used as inspiration for another course in the MSc in Urbanism and Spatial Planning. This was linked with a BIP (Blended Intensive Program) in coordination with IST University of Lisbon and in collaboration with the Polytechnic University of Turin and the KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm. This year, the students explored the future development of the current airport in Lisbon.

(see the portfolio: <https://online.fliphtml5.com/oidho/ffmd/#p=1>)

The outcomes of the course (course description, presentations and papers) are shared on the download page as well as on the biblio database of Ghent University in order to make them accessible for everyone.

Also, colleagues outside academia (for example, the Danish national parks, such as Nationaal Park Skjoldungernes Land) are interested in collaborating in future editions and using the concept as inspiration for new initiatives.

Looking forward – where are we going?

Geographers are eager to explore and understand the world. That is the underlying mission of the course. Together with the students, we want to be overwhelmed by landscapes and cultures we did not know. We are curious to grasp the patterns and processes in a specific geographical case area, tackling current societal and environmental challenges.

The next edition of the course is already in development, and new contacts have been made in Denmark to explore the possibilities and linkages further. Future destinations and collaborations are under consideration, with possibilities of exploring new locations (in other countries), expanding existing partnerships, and involving additional colleagues from the department to ensure continuity. The aim is to keep the program dynamic and adaptable.

However, always keeping in mind the learning process of the students, we support them in becoming excellent researchers in geography and geomatics, and provide them with a format to build the sweetest memories of their education. Because that is what they remember:

Never get rid of this course!

By far the greatest part of my academic journey

A truly great experience that has opened my eyes

The best course with a lot of beautiful and unforgettable moments

This trip was a lifetime experience! It was a great combination of working academically, together with a group of tight-knit friends in a very relaxed atmosphere!

Have a look at more quotes of the students in the survey results:

<https://downloads.geografiegeomatica.ugent.be>.

