

# Geography in the United Kingdom

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## GEOGRAPHY IN SCHOOL EDUCATION

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A useful litmus test of the state of geography in formal education in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales is the examination results in recent years. The picture of declining interest in geography, as seen in the numbers opting to study it post 14, is worrying but there are some encouraging new initiatives by Government agencies and subject bodies that may help to stabilise the trend over the next five years or so. Almost all pupils are required to study geography and history to the age of 14. For wider overviews of geography in school education the reader is referred to Rawling (2002) and Walford (2002).

### GEOGRAPHY STUDY, AGES 14 TO 16

The General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) is the examination taken by the majority of pupils in England, Northern Ireland and Wales during their last two years of compulsory education when aged between 14 and 16. Over the past fifteen years the government has changed the designation of subjects between compulsory and optional status on several occasions for those aged 14 to 16.

In the early 1990s, a large compulsory core curriculum was introduced, including mathematics, English, science, a modern foreign language, design and technology, information and communications technology, religious education and physical education. With little curriculum time left for optional subjects, those that

were excluded from the compulsory core, including geography and history, were in strong competition for students.

The impact of this change has been combined with other factors such as an increasing interest among students in 'modern' options including media studies, and the relatively poor overall standards of teaching geography for those aged 11 to 14, as described later. The overall effect has been a steady decline in numbers studying geography at age 14 to 16. The number of candidates taking GCSE geography in 1996 was 302,298, the number in 2003 was 240,310, the lowest number ever since GCSEs were introduced. Over the last two years alone numbers have fallen by 8.25%, which amounts to nearly 21,000 students (Figure 1). In comparison, history, starting from a lower base, has seen much less of a decline in numbers.

Nevertheless, geography has just maintained its position at 7<sup>th</sup> place when ranking subjects by the number of entries, with 4.1% of the total GCSE entries being in geography in 2003. It is still the most popular non-core GCSE subject, but the margin with other optional subjects is reducing.

More recently, in 2003, the government has reduced the compulsory core by making the study of a modern foreign language and design and technology optional, at the same time as an increasing number of optional vocational courses are being introduced. It is too early to see any impact of these changes.

The Scottish Standard Grade certification is not directly comparable to GCSEs that are taken in England, Northern Ireland and Wales. They are, however, of a very similar level and also geography is an optional component, so a brief look at their results may throw light on the position of geography in Scotland. The total entries for all the Standard

Grades fell by 7.51% from 490,412 in 2002 to 453,561 in 2003. Geography lies in a group of subjects with similar levels of uptake, including biology, chemistry, history, art & design and computing all of which have seen small changes in the past two years. The number of entrants to geography in 2003 was 21,319, down by 2.83% from 2002.

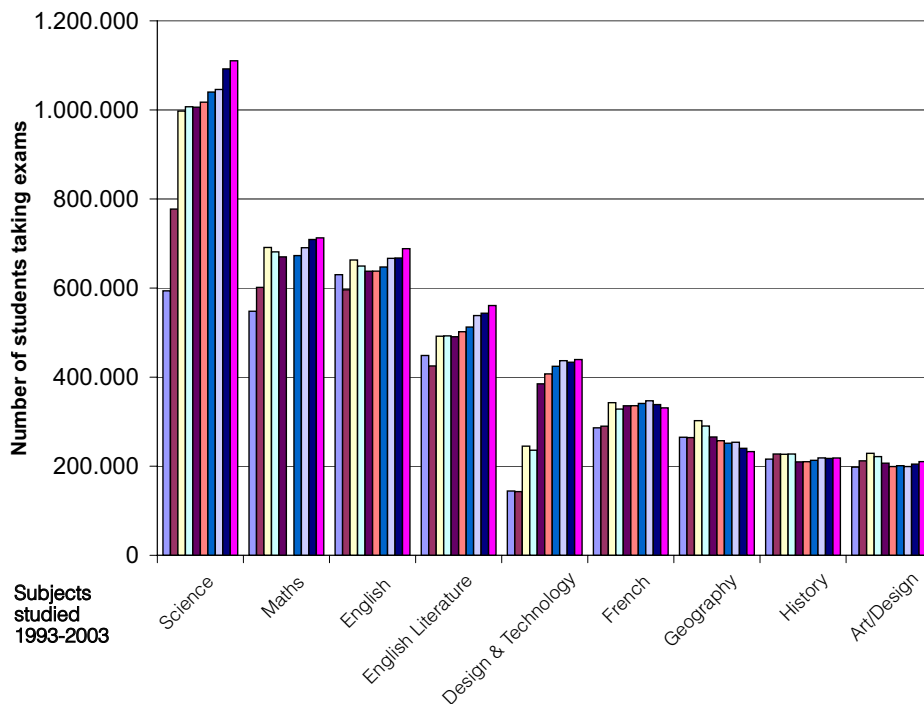


Figure 1. Entry numbers, 1993-2003, for the 2003 top ten GCSE subjects.

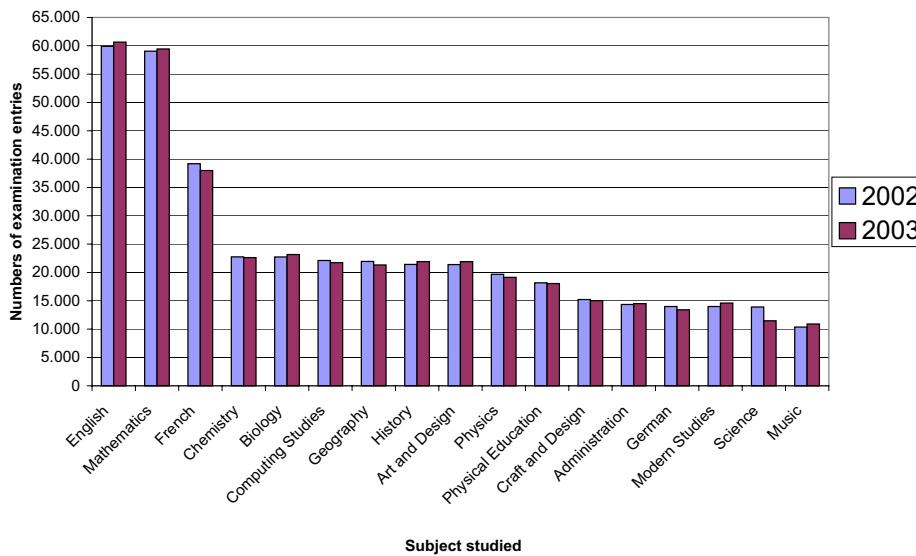


Figure 2. Entry numbers, 2002 and 2003, for the top ten Scottish Standard Grade subjects.

#### GEOGRAPHY STUDY, AGES 16 TO 18

Traditionally the majority of students at school who chose to stay on to study between the ages of 16 and 18 took two-year courses in optional academic subjects (Advanced 'A'levels) or in an increasing number of vocational options. The Government Curriculum 2000 reforms introduced an intermediate level termed the Advanced Subsidiary (AS) award, taken after the first year<sup>(1)</sup>. Generally students were expected to follow AS level courses, usually in up to four subjects, of which generally three subjects are taken on to A level. The recent introduction of this change makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions about impact.

While absolute numbers of entries for AS level have risen in total between 2001 and 2003, geography uptake has fallen at AS level when expressed as the proportion of total courses studied. Indeed, between 2002 and 2003, geography was one of the few subjects showing an actual decline (1,678; Figure 3) in numbers of people studying it at AS level compared with the overall national rise in entrants of

3.6%. In contrast, subjects relatively 'new' to the school curriculum, such as media studies and psychology, have shown remarkable increases in popularity. The decrease in numbers studying geography is, however, not surprising given the reductions in those opting to study it at age 14 to 16. The top nine subjects have stayed the same over the past 3 years with more reshuffling taking place below this. Geography managed to remain 11<sup>th</sup> in AS level popularity in 2003. Of those studying AS level geography, 89% continued the final year to A level (Figure 4). While in 2003 the total subject entries for A level were up by 7%, the number of geography entries increased by 1,387 compared with 2002, to 35,749, which is a 4% increase. Taken overall then, geography fell from 4.9% of total entries in 2002 to 4.8% of total entries in 2003, and it remained ranked ninth in popularity. The percentage converting from GCSE in 2001 to be awarded a full A level in 2003 was 14.1%.

The Scottish Higher awards are most comparable with the new AS levels in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, though direct comparisons need to be

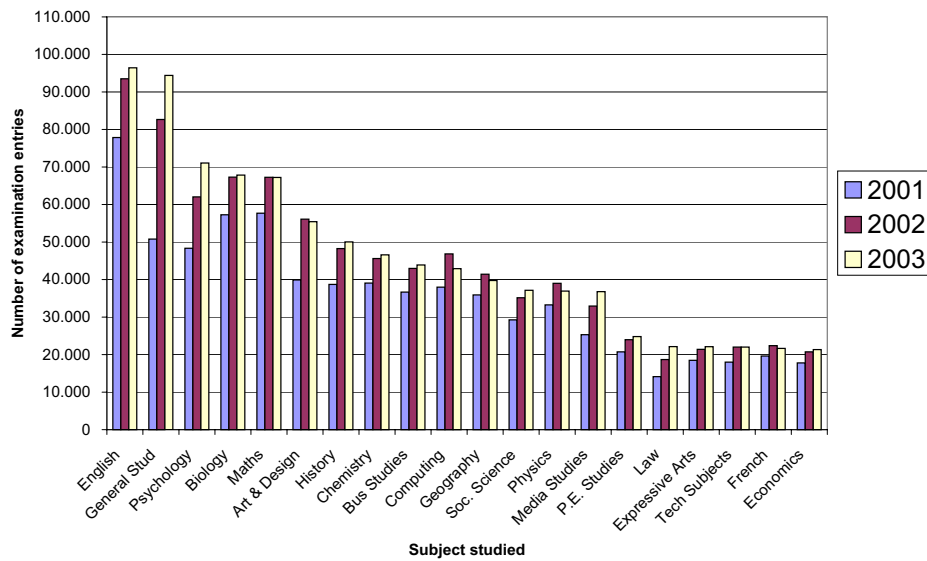


Figure 3. Entry numbers, 2001-2003, for the top twenty AS level subjects.

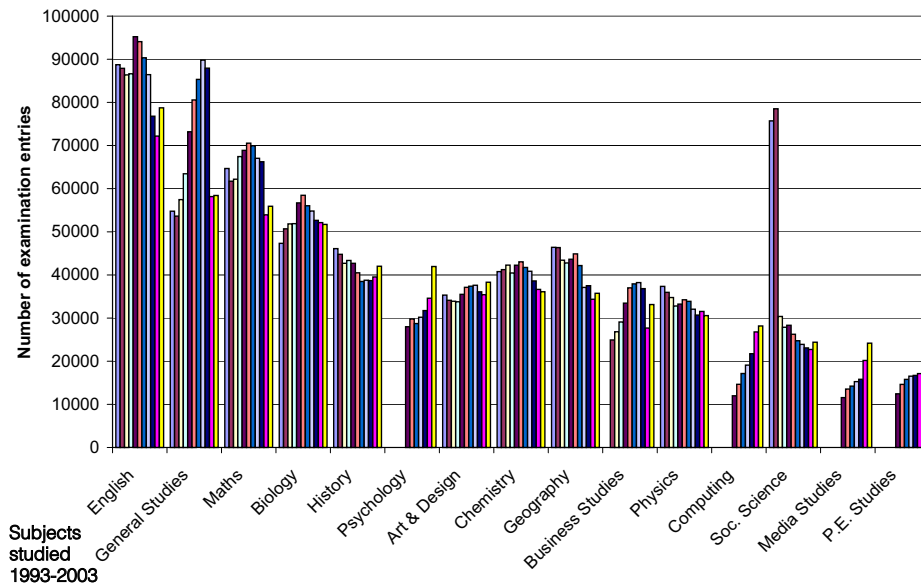


Figure 4. Entry numbers, 1993-2003, for the top fifteen A level subjects.

treated with caution. The total entries increased between 2002 and 2003 by 2,973 (equivalent to 1.8%) to 166,795. However, geography entrants increased

by only 1.2%, to 7,806 (Figure 5). The Scottish Advanced Higher grade is most closely comparable to A levels, though as with the other Scottish qualifica-

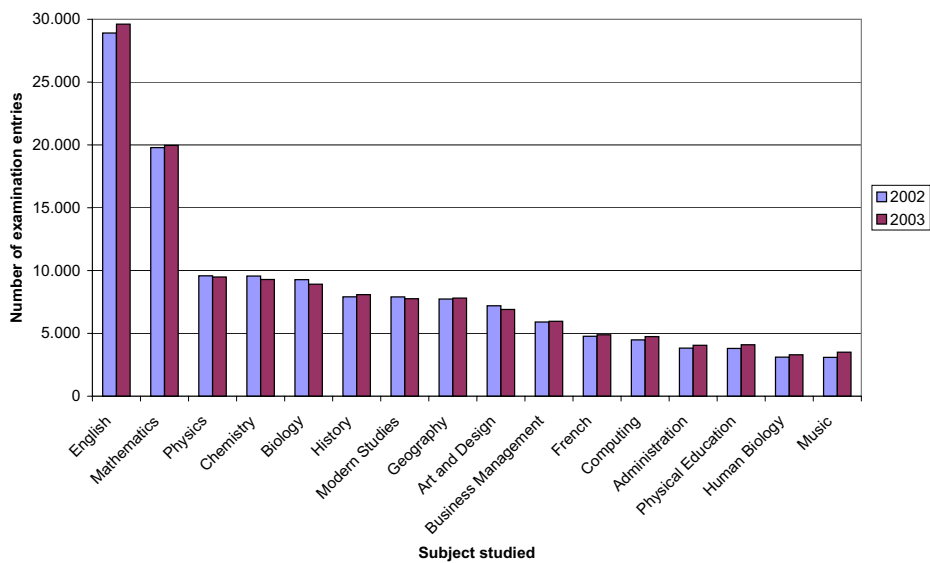


Figure 5. Entry numbers, 2002 and 2003, for the 2003 top fifteen Scottish Higher grade subjects.

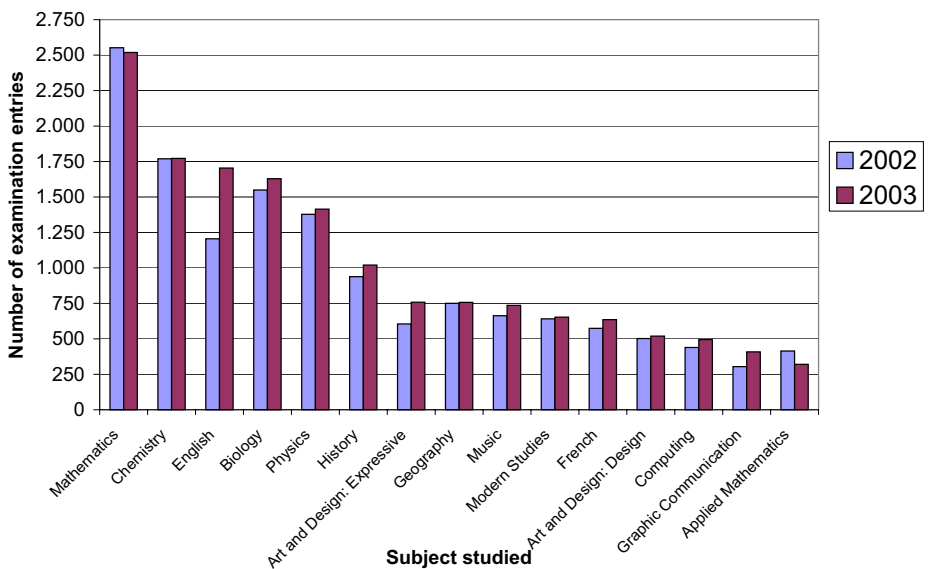


Figure 6. Entry numbers, 2002 and 2003, for the 2003 top fifteen Scottish Advanced Higher subjects.

tions, not directly so. Geography entrants at this level increased to 757 in 2003, up 1.1% on 2002 (Figure 6). The largest relative increases were in the more recently introduced subjects such as administration (300%) and psychology (175%). The subjects falling by the greatest amount were classical studies (-23.5%) and religious studies (-10.3%).

When making UK-wide comparisons of geography uptake for ages 14 to 18, four trends stand out. First, that uptake of geography at all secondary school stages post 14 has fallen relative to the total number of entries, but the standards achieved have been rising overall. Second, history has been less affected by falling numbers and increasingly tends to outperform geography in recent years in terms of the numbers of students opting to study it. Thirdly, geography still holds its place within a broad second tier of subjects after English, mathematics and science/biology. Lastly, subjects that are perceived as contemporary and relatively new in schools, such as media studies, business studies and psychology, have increased in popularity substantially.

#### TEACHER TRAINING, RECRUITMENT AND TEACHING QUALITY

Most people would agree that the quality and enthusiasm of teaching in school is one of the most important elements in maintaining the health of the subject; so too is an adequate supply of specialist teachers. From 1999 geography joined science, mathematics and a number of other subjects as a recognised 'teacher shortage subject'. Efforts by the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) to increase recruitment of graduates into teaching were assisted by a TTA-funded project managed by the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) to raise awareness among geography graduates of teaching as a career.

There have been improvements, and applications and registrations for post-graduate certificate of education (PGCE) courses appear to have increased and stabilised. In England, for instance, the provisional registrations to initial teacher

training courses specialising in geography in England in 2003/04 were 1,010. There has been a year-on-year increase in registrations since 1999 according to the Teacher Training Agency (Initial Teacher Trainee Numbers Census, Teacher Training Agency 2002/03). This is encouraging in view of the fact that trainees in the core compulsory subjects with shortages – maths, science, modern languages, design and technology and ICT – were entitled to 'golden hello' payments worth approximately Euros 6,000 after successfully completing their induction. No such advantages were extended to geography trainees; while history never experienced a teacher training shortage. The shortage reflects the high levels of employability among geography graduates who are trained in a wide range of key skills.

These figures must be seen in light of the general increase in trainees as a whole. In 2003, there was a record 40,000 people beginning initial teacher training in England, 50 per cent more than five years before. This increase owes much to a combination of marketing, improved pay scales and professional identity, and less buoyant economic conditions in the UK at the time.

Despite the satisfactory quantity of applicants wanting to become geography teachers, there appears to be issues surrounding the quality of geography teaching in some schools. The last major study on the discipline in secondary schools by the Government's schools standards body, the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) found that there continued to be more unsatisfactory teaching in geography than most other subjects (Secondary Subject Reports, OFSTED, 2001). Common weaknesses, according to OFSTED, included a narrow range of teaching approaches and over reliance on a single text book or photocopied worksheets. The deployment of teachers who were not specialists in geography was, according to the standards body, a key reason for the underachievement of many pupils at Key Stage 3 in the National Curriculum (the 'lower secondary school' stage of the English

and Welsh system for ages 11 to 14). Standards in primary schools (ages 5-11) were worse, with OFSTED finding that teaching was only good in 40% of schools visited and that insufficient time and resources were being allocated to geography in most primary schools (Primary Subject Reports, OFSTED 2001). While the subject is compulsory, with recommended teaching time of about an hour a week, it is suggested that a combination of the Government's emphasis on literacy and numeracy for the past four years, together with very limited training in geography and history within most primary teacher training courses, is the cause.

#### NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN GEOGRAPHY IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND

Recently there have been a number of initiatives to promote the geography in schools in England and to raise standards in teaching and learning.

The new Humanities Specialist Schools announced in February 2002, and coming onstream from September 2004, offer an opportunity to lead whole-school improvement focusing on the humanities subjects. Schools can apply to become specialist humanities colleges with a choice of one major specialism from geography, history and English. Those opting for geography as the major specialism may call themselves 'Geography Colleges'. It is hoped that the geography colleges will help to raise standards by engaging young people through understanding the importance of their place and role in the world, and that the schools will build on their distinctiveness and strengths to the benefit of all pupils in the school and in neighbouring partner schools. Although only a small proportion of schools will have a geography specialism, the Government is expecting that over 75% of all secondary schools in England will be specialist by 2006. Sadly, the humanities were introduced by the Government into the Specialist Schools initiative late on in the programme, after all the other key subject areas, and only after significant lobbying by the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) and others, including the Geographical Association.

The current Secretary of State for Education and Skills, Charles Clarke MP, has found a new enthusiasm for subject specialism and expertise, outlined in a consultation from the Department for Education and Skills in summer 2003 (Subject Specialism, DfES 2003). Mr Clarke wants subject specialism to improve teaching and learning, raise standards and provide the basis for the professional development of teachers and support staff. The DfES are also increasingly recognising the important role of subject associations, such as the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) and the Geographical Association (GA), in supporting discipline-based education at school and university. Thus, there is greatly improved dialogue and the possibility of limited funding for projects to support the teaching and learning of geography. In delivering these projects the RGS-IBG and the GA are increasingly working together.

One of the most frequently heard criticisms of geography within secondary school is the extent of repetition and lack of progression. This can be caused in many ways, one of which is almost certainly the use of non-specialist teachers relying on one or two standard text books for teaching. Another possible cause lies in the inertia within the examination specifications provided by the Awarding Bodies. With the aim of countering the latter and helping to revitalise geography, a new GCSE specification for England, Wales and Northern Ireland is currently being piloted. Called 'Geography 21', the content aims to be more relevant and stimulating for twenty first century citizens. One of the motivations for the course was the perception that the existing courses were too traditional and not reflective of changes in Geographical theory, issues and technologies. In a crowded curriculum, geography must constantly develop to be attractive to students.

The new GCSE is underpinned by five concepts – uneven development, globalisation, sustainability, futures and interdependence – which are woven throughout the course.

The pilot varies from other current GCSEs by including a greater variety of assessment strategies and creating increased teacher and students choices in exemplification and learning styles. It offers plenty of opportunity of engaging with the geographical dimensions that can contribute to an increased understanding of citizenship, environmental issues and global interconnectedness, including the European dimension. In July 2004, the 18 participating pilot schools will gather at the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) as part of joint project with the RGS-IBG, the GA, and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority to review the progress, share their experiences and prepare for the second year of the pilot. In September 2004, a further 31 schools will be joining the pilot, and evaluation for the project set for 2006. If it is deemed a success, many more schools will be able to adopt the GCSE and benefit from the new modules and approaches to teaching. New developments cannot pass without mentioning the power of the Internet and the increasing number of resources available to teachers in ready to use formats including teaching notes, worksheets, data and interpretation. Examples include the RGS-IBG 'Geography in the News' website ([www.geographyinthenews.rgs.org](http://www.geographyinthenews.rgs.org)) for teachers of 14-19 age students; the 'Unlocking the Archives' website ([www.unlockingthearchives.rgs.org](http://www.unlockingthearchives.rgs.org)) with resources for geography, citizenship and history; and the Staffordshire learning net ([www.sln.org.uk](http://www.sln.org.uk)) and the Geographical Association's 'Valuing Places' project ([www.geography.org.uk](http://www.geography.org.uk)) as well as a number of teacher-developed sites. There is scope for much more in the way of digital resources that encourage the use of new technologies, such as GIS, in schools.

#### FIELDWORK AND 'OUT-OF-CLASSROOM LEARNING'

In 2003 and 2004 there have been a number of threats to the status of fieldwork and so-called 'out-of-classroom' learning, which can range from anything from a language trip to France, to a geography field trip to areas of urban regeneration. In

2003 a geography teacher was jailed for the manslaughter of a 10-year-old child swept away by a sudden flood in a Lake District stream. Partly in response to this, the second biggest teachers union, The National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers, advised its members against participating in school trips in February 2004.

This announcement was another contributor to the pressure to reduce fieldwork. Along with the fear of accidents and litigation, other barriers include a lack of flexibility in the curriculum, costs of providing cover for teachers on field visits, low status of out-of-classroom teaching, and also the financial costs for pupils involved. For geography the consequences are potentially serious. Not only is fieldwork statutorily part of the geography curriculum, but it is often one of the most enjoyable aspects for students and a way of really bringing the subject alive. In response to the decline in popularity of school fieldwork in some sectors, the Society hosted a one-day conference in December 2003 organised by the Field Studies Council - an educational charity promoting environmental understanding. The consensus at the event was that fieldwork and out-of-classroom learning are an essential part of a geographical (and biological) education that must be defended in an increasingly risk averse society.

The conference also launched a campaign called 'Real World Learning' which aims to gain tangible support for out-of-classroom activities in the education system in the run up to the next national Government elections (scheduled for 2005). With support from the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) and the Geographical Association, the campaign is being led by a wide range of environmental ngos promoting learning outside of the classroom, including the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the Wildlife and Wetland Trust, the Field Studies Council, and others. The campaign calls for the inclusion of out-of-classroom learning in every school inspection by the Government's official assessment body, the Office for

Standards in Education. It also calls for dialogue with teacher training organisations and teaching unions to ensure that

teachers have the training, skills and confidence to provide out-of-classroom learning.

## GEOGRAPHY IN UK UNIVERSITIES

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### RESEARCH ASSESSMENT

Every four to five years, the quality of research in UK universities is assessed by a structured UK-wide process of peer review across all subject areas: the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). The main purpose of the RAE is to enable the UK higher education funding bodies to distribute public funds for research selectively to Higher Education Institutions on the basis of quality. Institutions who come out best in the peer review receive a larger proportion of the available grant. The Government's stated aim in pursuing this policy is to protect and develop the infrastructure for the top level of research in the UK and hence, they argue, the UK research competitiveness in the world. Around Euros 7.5 billion of research funds were distributed in response to the results of the last RAE in 2001. The next round is expected in 2008 much later than usual owing to some fundamental reforms to the Assessment Exercise.

In the last RAE, the panel assessing geography reported positively about the health of the discipline in their overview report (Report of the geography Panel, 2001 RAE), although when the outcomes were compared across different disciplines some felt that the geography panel had been harsher in their judgements than some other panels. With so much funding riding on the outcomes, inter-panel comparability has been, and continues to be, a major issue. The panel consisted of 11 members whose research expertise covered the major areas of the discipline, and was further supported by a sub-panel of research users and a group of non-UK advisers.

The panel received submissions from 62 geography departments or units of researchers, out of the 87 departments or

units that at that time taught at least one geography programme in Higher Education. Comparisons with the previous assessment period are difficult, but there was a real increase in research income per active researcher and the numbers of departments in the top three grades - 4, 5 and 5\* - had increased. Departments graded 1 to 3 in England and Wales were not eligible for research funding from the Funding Councils after the last round, although some attract serious levels of contract-based research funding from other sources. In the intervening period there had also been substantial investment in infrastructure with 21 submissions recording expansion or refurbishment of their space, 28 referring to new laboratories and 39 to major investments in specialist research equipment.

The group also found extensive interdisciplinary research in both human and physical geography. They reported that:

'Geographical contributions increasingly shape the agendas of cognate disciplines in the humanities, social and environmental sciences. One indicator is the increasing number of papers by geographers in leading journals of other disciplines. Similarly, there are encouraging signs of attempts to integrate research between distinct areas of human and physical geography, and between human and physical geography. Within human geography, there is substantial engagement with governance and policy processes, growth in theoretical sophistication linked to attempts to spatialise social theory, and innovative methodological achievements ranging from numerical, longitudinal modelling and GIS to novel participant observation techniques and the analysis of qualitative evi-

dence. Less welcome is the continuing decline, outside of historical geography, in the publication of research monographs.' (Report of the Geography Panel, 2001 RAE).

The panel was also positive about the state of physical geography. They particularly highlighted Quaternary Science as a UK strength, especially in the field of luminescence. At the time of their report in 2001, they also singled out fluvial and climatic studies, the use of geomorphological and Quaternary evidence to interpret geophysical phenomena, and new research into atmosphere-ocean and atmosphere-ecosystem interactions. They noted an influx of expertise from other disciplines in technically demanding areas, although this development was variable (Report of the Geography Panel, 2001 RAE).

The process of successive research assessment and the differentiation of funding that has resulted, combined with changes to student recruitment and the breadth of staff needed to deliver the benchmark standard, as described later, has led to some amalgamations and closures of departments and to some restructuring of groups of 'cognate' departments as 'schools' within HE Institutions. The net loss since the last RAE in 2001, has been the closure of some 6 units or departments, most of which had fewer than six staff.

#### FUNDING OF RESEARCH IN UNIVERSITIES

In 2003 the Government published a controversial White Paper – a draft legislation document – called the Future of Higher Education that proposed fundamental changes to the UK's university system of funding. The White Paper was aimed primarily at England. Higher Education in Scotland is a matter for the Scottish Funding Councils, advised by the Scottish Parliament, and they have taken a softer and more inclusive stance to funding. Much of the controversy in the White Paper was based around the proposed changes to undergraduate tuition fees.

However, within the academic community there was a proposed commitment towards further concentrations of research funding. The White Paper was welcomed for recognising the investment backlog in teaching and research facilities and the celebration of the past successes of UK universities that rank only second to the US in many international measures. A Euros 1.9 billion increase in research expenditure for 2005-06 announced before the White Paper was an important step in closing the funding gap.

However, the geography community, and many others, had major concerns about the increase in the selectivity of support for research. Research funding in the UK is possibly the most concentrated in the world, even more so than the US (The Role of Selectivity and the Characteristics of Excellence, Higher Education Policy Unit, University of Leeds, May, 2000). The White Paper failed to give clear evidence on how further concentration would benefit research or scholarship.

Outstanding geographical research in the UK is conducted in a diversity of departments. For example, the Flood Hazard Research Centre at the department at Middlesex University undertakes internationally recognised work to improve policy making and implementation in the water management field and it won Queen's Anniversary Prizes in 1998 and 2003 (RAE 4/01: 2001 Research Assessment Exercise; The Outcome Research Assessment Exercise, 2001). This department was amongst a group that had funding cut in 2003. The many 4-rated geography departments in the UK (35% were rated 4 in the last Research Assessment Exercise) are an important bedrock and training ground for UK geographical research. (The ratings range from 1 to 5\* in the English seven-point scale.) Despite the many concerns voiced from all quarters, including a campaign led by the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) that brought together fifteen of the top learned societies from across the breadth of disciplines arguing for the status quo to be retained, funding was still cut entirely for Grade 3 departments and partially for

Grade 4s, albeit by slightly less than was originally proposed.

A new system of assessing research, and thus also the Government money allocated to research departments through the four regional funding councils, has been announced for 2008 after a fundamental review of the system. The next Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) aims to simplify the current 18-year-old system by moving away from a one-size-fits-all approach and reducing bureaucracy for universities. The results of the exercise will be expressed as quality profiles of research in each department, rather than using the current seven-point grading system. The Government and Funding Councils were concerned that with the trend of increasing numbers of departments being graded 5 and 5\* the rating scale could no longer provide the degree of discrimination needed for a continuing policy of selective funding. The RAE is clearly here to stay in one form or another in the UK, and while it has its supporters there remain many in the community who feel that it has had a divisive effect that has mitigated against inter-departmental and research collaboration, and that has increased pressure on individuals to an unacceptable degree.

The next exercise will determine the annual distribution of more than Euros 12 billion for research in UK universities over six years from 2009. The results will be critical to the core research capacity and research infrastructure of many geography university departments, especially those with high technology equipment needs across both human and physical geography.

#### STUDENT DEMAND, LEARNING AND TEACHING IN UK UNIVERSITIES

Geography continues to be a popular course at UK universities with, at any one time, over 15,000 individuals studying for single honours geography degrees (BA and BSc), with many more studying joint courses or taking single module options. Through the 1990s and since, the undergraduate intake has continued to rise. A questionnaire survey by the RGS-IBG in

2001 revealed that in the face of greater competition for students (and the Government supported teaching income they bring with them) over 50% of responding departments were accepting students who had not studied geography GCSE or A level at school. Furthermore, the expansion during the 1990s of some of the larger and older departments tended to be at the cost of some of the smaller and newer university departments. A wide range of marketing strategies is now employed by departments to attract students, and there is a greater focus on local students as student debt encourages more students to live at home and to train locally.

Figures published in April 2004 showed that applications to full-time undergraduate courses in geography had declined for the first time in many years in 2003. The figures were published by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) - the central organisation that processes applications for full-time undergraduate courses at UK universities and colleges. Despite the fact that numbers for applicants as a whole are up by 3.1%, the combined (and unhelpful) recording of Physical Geography (BSc geography courses) and the Environmental Sciences applicants declined by 1.9% to 17,612 while the applicants for BA Geography were down by 5.4% to 16,199. The numbers of applicants for geography (BA and BSc) and Environmental Science and Studies taken together ranked a healthy 17<sup>th</sup> out of 180 recognised university disciplines.

Assessments of the quality of teaching within Higher Education Institutions take place throughout the UK. Although there is a single, UK-wide independent body overseeing the process, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), the way that teaching is assessed varies throughout the devolved regions of the UK. For instance, a new approach to assessment is being developed in Scotland, called 'enhancement-led institutional review', and will be implemented in 2003/04.

The only available overview of the quality of geography teaching in Higher

Education was completed in England and Northern Ireland fifteen years ago (QO11/95 Subject Overview Report – Geography, Higher Education Funding Council for England Quality Assessment of Geography 1994-95). Although now seriously out of date, at the time it gave a useful insight. The report found that the subject was attractive to students and is taught by well-qualified, enthusiastic, caring and professional staff. Of the 78 providers at the time of geography programmes in England and Northern Ireland, including six which combine Geography and Environmental Studies, 42 were visited of which 25 (32 per cent of the total providers) were assessed as excellent. All of the remainder except one was assessed as satisfactory.

According to the assessment, geography was characterised by a wide diversity of provision; students had much choice, ranging from highly specialised courses offering a relatively narrow coverage in great depth to those offering considerable breadth of study. In addition, there had been a growing commitment to providing students with transferable skills related to subsequent employment. At the time, links with employers had not been well developed in most cases, but a number of projects relating to work-based study, have since made inroads into this area.

The assessment concluded that the quality of teaching in geography was very good. Some 43 per cent of classes observed were graded excellent, 54 per cent satisfactory and only 3 per cent unsatisfactory. In half of the institutions visited, there were no unsatisfactory geography classes. There was a good range of teaching approaches in geography, including lectures, laboratory classes, small group sessions and fieldwork. However, the study did criticise geography departments for not making enough effort to widen access to include students from ethnic minorities and families with no experience of university education, in spite of institutional mission statements which stress this objective. With the Government emphasis on access to higher education over the past few years, it is likely that advances have since been

made in this area too, although no data is available with which to test that.

As part of the Quality Assurance process, the QAA introduced the concept of a 'Benchmark Statement' for all disciplines in 1999. The Geography Benchmark Statement was developed by a peer panel of geographers from Higher Education, and co-ordinated by the RGS-IBG. It sets out in broad terms the aims of an honours geography programme in terms of knowledge and understanding; student skills, abilities and attributes; processes and contexts of learning; assessment; and standards and levels of achievement. These broad statements now inform the design of geography programmes and, to some degree, the external examining process. Following a review over the past two years, the quality assurance process is moving away from department by department, subject-based assessment, to a lighter touch approach based on HE Institutional procedures aided by sampling of selected departments.

The final major development in teaching and learning was introduced five years ago by the Higher Education Funding Council in the form of the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) that had discipline-based Subject Centres for groups of cognate disciplines. The Geography, Earth Science and Environmental Science (GEES) community came together for the first time under the leadership of the RGS-IBG, and with the involvement and partnership of the Learned Societies and Heads of Departments Fora in HE for all three disciplines, to define and bid for the GEES subject centre. The bid was successful and after open tender, Plymouth University was appointed to manage the GEES Subject Centre, [www.gees.ac.uk](http://www.gees.ac.uk) It is recognised as being one of the leading centres, building on the strength and interest, especially among the geography community, in the development of teaching and learning in higher education. As a result of recent re-structuring, the Subject Centres now come under the umbrella of the new HE Academy.

## PUBLIC & POLICY ENGAGEMENT WITH GEOGRAPHY

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The space for this article permits only brief mention of the position and standing of geography in public and policy arenas in the UK. It is fair to say that the public perception of many subjects, geography included, often lingers on from experiences many years previously at school. Geography has long since ceased to be about 'chaps and maps' and public opinion is starting to turn, albeit slowly.

A number of factors are contributing to that change; three examples will be given. In terms of practical application, the Ordnance Survey (OS), the UK Mapping Agency, activities are a good place to start. Ordnance Survey has co-coordinated a Pan-Government Agreement on Geographical Information Systems (GIS) for all departments and agencies. The OS seeks to encourage the use of digital mapping data as a key public-sector decision-making tool and there are over 170 public organizations that have signed the agreement, ranging from the big-spending bodies such as the Department of Health to more specialist agencies such as Welsh Cancer Intelligence & Surveillance Unit. The Agreement seeks to encourage the use of GIS and an understanding of how geography can be the common platform that unites disparate datasets, opening the way to greater efficiency and increased effectiveness in meeting performance targets in public bodies.

In terms of wider public understanding through the media profile of the discipline, the RGS-IBG has, for example, been increasingly successful in obtaining press coverage for the Society's Annual

International conference. In September 2003, there were 43 articles in the national broadsheet newspapers. This is the largest number ever and included front page articles and editorials. More recently, the launch of the Society's ten million Euros project to open its Archives and Collections to public users in June 2004 has generated a range of positive press coverage about geography and its current role as a discipline, co-ordinated by the Society's Public Affairs Unit.

Lastly, the RGS-IBG targets policy makers with the contribution that geography can make to social, economic and environmental policy through a small number of specialist discussion meetings, part of the Environment and Society Forum, that bring together the business, research, non-governmental and policy-making communities within a neutral and respected setting. The forums aim to demonstrate how geographical research and applications contribute to the understanding (and solution) of key social, economic and environmental challenges facing the UK and the wider world. For instance, in 2003 there were meetings on governance and sustainability, planning, and post-war reconstruction. Activities such as this are complemented in raising awareness of geography among the policy community by universities gaining substantial applied research contracts and managing outsourced government research. One of the most recent examples is the award of the contract for the government's Rural Evidence Research Centre to the Department of Geography at Birkbeck College London.

## THE SUPPORTING SOCIETIES

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Geography in the UK is fortunate to have a number of supporting subject bodies who are increasingly working together for the benefit of the discipline. These bodies, while all strongly independent and independently funded, keep close links to the

various Government agencies and to their other stakeholders in HE, schools and the wider world. Typically they are educational charities that also have members whose subscriptions help to support the organisation.

The Learned Society for Geography, the Royal Geographical Society merged with the Institute of British Geographers in 1995 to form the largest single body in the UK (14,000 members) and a major UK voice for geography in research and higher education ([www.rgs.org](http://www.rgs.org)). The Annual International Conference, 23 specialist research groups and 3 scholarly journals all contribute to HE geography. It also provides strong support through continuing professional development (CPD), advice and web-based resources for geography teachers and students in secondary education, and for other areas including health and safety in field science and expeditions, in wider public understanding, and in public policy and advocacy. It holds over 2 million items in its collections, and has a regional programme and a grants programme. In 2001 the RGS-IBG introduced the professional qualification of 'Chartered Geographer' to recognise the importance of geography in the professional workplace, nationally and internationally.

The Geographical Association ([www.geography.org.uk](http://www.geography.org.uk)) supports the teaching of geography in England, focused at primary and secondary school level, with three specialist journals, publi-

cations, an annual conference and associated CPD activities, a large programme of lectures based around regional groups, and web-based information and resources. With headquarters in Sheffield, it has approximately 10,000 members. Its sister body in Scotland that supports teachers with a journal, CPD and teaching resources is the Scottish Association of Geography Teachers ([www.sagt.org.uk](http://www.sagt.org.uk)) which has 700 members.

The Royal Scottish Geographical Society ([www.rsgs.org.uk](http://www.rsgs.org.uk)), with a membership of 2,500, focuses its activities on supporting research through its scholarly journal and small research grants and on widening the public understanding of geography in Scotland through an extensive programme of regional popular lectures in all the major cities. It also supports young people from Scotland undertaking expeditions.

The forum for sharing information and contact between the subject bodies, subject personnel in Government education agencies, and the English, Welsh and Scottish Heads of Geography in Higher Education Committees as a whole is provided by the Council for British Geography. This is chaired in rotation by the RGS-IBG and the GA.

## CONCLUSION

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The UK has been institutionally involved in the development of geography since the formation in 1830 of the Geographical Society of London, later re-named the Royal Geographical Society and, since 1995 named the Royal Geographical Society (with The Institute of British Geographers) – RGS-IBG. The RGS-IBG is now one of a number of sister bodies in the UK, including the Geographical Association, that together support and promote geography across the breadth of research, education, expeditions, public understanding, public policy and business.

As in most countries, the fortunes of geography as a discipline have shifted over time. In general, despite quite radical

changes to education policy in recent years – and the prospect of more changes to come – geography has fared reasonably well. It has retained an essential compulsory position in the national curriculum to age 14 and thereafter it is still, despite recent decline in numbers, one of the most popular options at school post 14, and widely studied in higher education. Widening access to developments in teaching and learning methods are being supported in higher education largely through the GEES Subject Centre for Teaching and Learning, and at school level through a wide range of face to face and online continuing professional development activity undertaken by the RGS-IBG and the GA, and by private businesses.

However there are a number of serious challenges to be faced at all levels in the system if the recent decline in the study of geography is to be stemmed and reversed. Some welcome new initiatives are already in place. At primary school level we need to move on from an overpowering focus on literacy and numeracy, to the detriment of geography and history, and to support primary teachers in developing their geography skills. At secondary level there is the challenge of reducing the level of non-specialist teaching of geography during the compulsory years, together with the need for a modernised curriculum, greater use of new technologies, and more high quality

resources. A buoyant uptake of geography in school is needed to sustain geography in higher education, where the UK has always been strong. The RGS-IBG, with other stakeholders, continues to monitor and campaign for the funding for geography teaching in HE, which has so far been successful. The outcome of the revisions to the RAE exercise is awaited and in particular any further suggestions of concentrations in research funding will be monitored and almost certainly acted upon by the community. Finally, the relevance of geography to the wider public and to policy will undoubtedly form key elements in the next RGS-IBG strategy, 2005-2010, building on current activities.

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(1) The AS and A level examinations are part of the National Qualification Framework, which also includes Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education (AVCE), Advanced Subsidiary Vocational Certificate of Education (ASVCE), General National

Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) at Foundation and Intermediate levels, Part One GVQ, and the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). More information about the Framework can be found on <http://www.qca.org.uk/nq/framework/>

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**ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY**  
*WITH THE INSTITUTE OF BRITISH GEOGRAPHERS*



The Royal Geographical Society (with The Institute of British Geographers) is the learned society and professional body representing geography and geographers. It was founded in 1830 and has been one of the most active of the learned societies ever since. It was pivotal in establishing geography as a teaching and research discipline in British universities,

and has played a key role in geographical and environmental education ever since. Today the Society is a leading world centre for geographical learning - supporting education, teaching, research and scientific expeditions, as well as promoting public understanding and enjoyment of geography.