

Learning to be human and the English Baccalaureate

Geography and history: evidence from the Geographical Association

John Hopkin, President (2010-11) & David Lambert, Chief Executive

1. Introduction

1.1 **The Geographical Association** strongly supports the introduction of the EBac. It is a simple and highly cost-effective mechanism that encourages schools to ensure a broad and balanced educational curriculum for all. Following the renaming of the former department for ‘children schools and families’, and a White Paper that unashamedly prizes teaching, we are pleased to see a Department for Education committed to promoting deeper educational values. The EBac has the potential to do this.

1.2 This paper is focussed on a single issue: the place of a ‘humanities’ subject in the EBac. The Geographical Association believes the government has made the correct judgement on this: that students choose either geography or history (or, presumably in some cases, both). This paper shows why this is so.

2. The Key Question

2.1 We are concerned to re-affirm the value of a broad general education for all.

2.2 Despite unprecedented investments in the nation’s education infrastructure there is mounting evidence that developments do not cohere under a strong overall sense of purpose¹. If we ask the key question:

“What counts as an educated young person in this day and age?”

it is impossible to imagine a defensible answer that did not include geographical and historical knowledge and understanding. This is true whether that young person is 5, 11, 14 or 16 years old. And yet these subjects have become increasingly marginalised in schools and in some cases have become almost non-existent. The potential social, cultural and economic costs resulting from this imbalance are potentially enormous. The requirement for geography or history to make up the EBac is not only a benefit in itself, but will strengthen these subjects in the curriculum in KS3. The positive backwash should also be felt in the primary school curriculum.

3. Why the geography and history are important

¹ We acknowledge the work of the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training for England and Wales (www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk)

3.1 Geography and history are the ‘world subjects’. These subjects help us develop knowledge and understanding of the world, our place in it, and what it means to be a human being. Through studying these subjects we develop knowledge, understanding and skills that enable us to understand and illuminate our common humanity and our relationships – not only with each other but with the environmental resources on which life depends. By thinking geographically and historically about the past and the present we are better equipped to imagine our possible futures.

Geography underpins a lifelong ‘conversation’ about the earth as the home of humankind. It is not a narrow academic subject for the few. It is fundamental to everyone.

- Geography fascinates and inspires: geographical investigation both satisfies and nourishes curiosity about the earth and the diversity on human life it supports
- Geography deepens understanding: many contemporary challenges – climate change, food security, energy choices – cannot be understood without a geographical knowledge
- Thinking and decision-making with geographical knowledge and perspective helps us to live our lives as informed citizens, aware of our own local communities in a global setting
- Geography relies on a wide skills base. Using maps and images of people and places, numerical data and statistics, the written word as well as graphical modes of communication and getting to grips with the geographic information systems that underpin our lives: all this is known to make ‘geographers’ skilful and employable².

Edited from GA’s 2009 Manifesto *A Different View* (www.geography.org.uk/adifferentview)

3.2 In summary, history and geography contributes to all young people acquiring world knowledge and understanding, to become more rounded and more capable as individuals in society. In an

² Richard Waite, Managing Director of the UK’s leading Geographic Information Systems (GIS) provider ESRI UK, has said: "Business leaders across the UK are telling us that they need more employees who can help them maximise key technologies such as GIS but who also understand their business needs in these tough economic times. It’s clear from the survey that businesses can do more to help them achieve their top priorities but they need the right people to help them do that. Studying geography and learning how to utilise geographic information gives new employees many of the key skills that businesses are crying out for. As an industry it’s our job to encourage more people to take up a geography-based career so that businesses and society as a whole can benefit." <http://www.esriuk.com/aboutesriuk/pressreleases.asp?pid=647>

increasingly challenging and unpredictable world young people need this grounding in what Michael Young³ calls ‘powerful knowledge’ on which to base resilience, imagination and social understanding.

3.3 As Simon Jenkins once put it:

*“Without geography’s instruction, we are in every sense lost – random robots who can only read and count ... Like the suppression of history, the suppression of geography has been a conspiracy against the true education of the human mind, against scepticism and the exercise of the imagination”.*⁴

3.4 The panel above indicates a range of more specific educational purposes served by geography. The discipline nurtures the development of young people’s capability⁵ by developing:

- Deep descriptive ‘world knowledge’
- An understanding of how people, places and environments in the world relate to each other
- Propensity and disposition to think critically about alternative social, economic and environmental futures.

3.5 The third of these points especially requires skilful teaching, using strategies that emphasise the application of geographical understanding, often in realistic decision-making contexts. Young people are thus provided with opportunities to acquire, develop and apply a range of key ideas and principles, and ultimately to make judgments about particular issues or themes through ‘thinking geographically’. This is most effective in young people with sufficient maturity and prior learning, as found in ‘key stage four’ (14–16 years).

³ Young M (2008) *Bringing Knowledge Back In*, Routledge. Young describes powerful knowledge as “the knowledge across the sciences, social sciences and humanities that offers young people the best opportunities there are for making sense of the world they have been born into and for participating in debates about its future”.

⁴ *Guardian* 16/11/07, p 36

⁵ See Lambert D (2011) ‘Reframing school geography: towards a capability approach’ in Butt G (2011) *Geography, Education and the Future*, Continuum Press

4. Contemporary causes for concern: the EBac meets the challenge

4.1 In an unbalanced school curriculum, dominated by the language and mechanisms of performance management, geography and history have suffered in recent years. The self-evident importance of historical and geographical knowledge has been taken for granted and, by default, has been seriously undervalued. In a small number of schools it has been almost totally forgotten. The difficulties school face in maintaining a balanced curriculum for all can be identified as follows:

- The relentless focus on literacy and numeracy at all key stages, the impact of which has been magnified in recent years through the inspection regime and league tables. This results in rigid curriculum hierarchies in schools.
- The increasing curriculum demands on schools, for example, to provide more time for cookery and sport, to include a range of cross curricular ‘dimensions’ and to develop vocational courses at 14–19, put immense pressure on curriculum time. This is partly because they have been introduced incrementally without a strong overall sense of purpose. There is sometimes a lack of ‘total curriculum’ thinking, which is when the humanities can become marginalised.
- The loss of faith by some in the ability of so-called ‘traditional’ subjects adequately to meet the needs of young people. In part, this reflects a belief that subjects are losing ‘relevance’ for the twenty-first century, and that in the modern age knowledge quickly becomes out of date. This is a mistaken view of knowledge and based on very restricted view of the subject disciplines. However, it has been reinforced in recent years by a sustained focus on teachers’ pedagogic skills and overly technical definitions of ‘high quality teaching’: teachers in our subjects rarely get the opportunity to enrich *and develop* their subject knowledge.
- Encouraged by central agencies and national bodies, some schools have introduced skills-based programmes based on integrated studies, especially in key stage three. This is most unfortunate, for it is usually history and geography that are lost to the curriculum with such experimentation. Often taught by non-specialists, there is evidence over many years showing how difficult it is for teachers to provide such programmes with sufficient challenge and interest for the students. In some cases, there are students who go through their entire secondary education with very little high quality study of either geography or history: this should be a cause for immense concern to policy makers.
- The immense pressure on schools to improve results – particularly on those secondary schools in the most challenging circumstances – leads to traditional GCSE subjects often losing out to vocational programmes which are seen as easier to achieve and offering more ‘value’ for the school. This results in a loss of opportunity for young people, especially in more deprived

urban areas, to study history and geography at GCSE level. It should be noted that this almost certainly is perceived to limit career opportunities to these young people. Furthermore, the Russell Group of universities have stated clearly⁶ that avoidance of academically rigorous subject disciplines is a disadvantage when it comes to gaining access to the best universities.

4.2 To summarise, we can use Professor Alison Wolf's words⁷:

“Our preoccupation with education as an engine of growth has not only narrowed the way we think about social policy. It has narrowed – dismally and progressively – our vision of education itself.”

5. What do pupils want?

5.1 IpsosMori research for the Geographical Association to discover the views of 11–14 year olds found that the vast majority (93%) think it is at least ‘fairly important’ to learn about issues affecting peoples’ lives in different parts of the world, with half believing this is ‘very important’. Over 90% think it is important to learn about where things like food, energy and water come from, and to learn about how their world may change in the future. Unsurprisingly, pupils identified geography as the main subject for learning about these things. Yet the same research found that two-thirds of them think not enough time in school is spent learning about the wider world.

5.2 Placing geography unambiguously as a part of the EBac is likely to serve students’ natural and healthy interest in deepening their knowledge and understanding of the world.

6. Geography and history and the EBac

6.1 Drawing from the previous sections, the case for requiring a ‘humanities’ subject in the EBac is very strong, and we think incontrovertible. We would for example, emphasise the following points:

- It encourages a greater number of young people to study the strong disciplines of history or geography to GCSE level, and thus to complete the ‘compulsory years’ of schooling with a broadly based education.
- Geography and history complement modern foreign languages in creating an outward looking curriculum in an increasingly connected and competitive world.
- A broad educational platform is a good thing in itself, but success in history or geography also helps students gain access to, and prepare for, higher education.

⁶ <http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/russell-group-latest-news/137-2011/4746-new-guidance-on-post16-study-choices/>

⁷ Wolf, A. 2002. *Does Education Matter? Myths About Education And Economic Growth*, London: Penguin Press,

- Securing the status of geography and history in key stage four also helps support the development of these subjects at key stage three – and bring an end to the trend to undermine subject disciplinary knowledge and rigour in the early secondary years with ‘learning how to learn’.

7. What about other subjects?

7.1 Here we address a question that has gained widespread currency. Is it an injustice to limit the ‘humanities’ component of the EBac to *only* geography or history?

7.2 The Geographical Association sees some danger in *prescription* as a guarantor of any subject’s position in the curriculum. If government insists that any single subject matters to the extent that it is protected by law, then there are potential negative backwash effects: for example, that subject community may itself be less inclined to think about its justification in a rapidly changing world, or about what constitutes high quality teaching and learning in that discipline. Compulsion in any case is, in the final analysis, a relatively weak argument, since it appears to grant status by restricting freedoms. Subject disciplines such as geography should not become like medieval guilds, defending restrictive practices.

7.3 Our argument is therefore not for compulsion. It is not to see geography (or history) as a state-endorsed end in itself. Our belief is that history and geography are of great *educational* value to all young people, and no matter where they go to school they should have both the opportunity and sufficient time to learn about people, society and environment. The ‘world subjects’ are the critical resources for young, engaged people living in a representative democracy and a rapidly changing world. It is disgraceful that some young people, often in urban working-class settings⁸, are denied access to them. The Geographical Association’s argument is for a general education for all, consisting of the knowledge, skills and values essential to understanding how individuals and societies relate to each other and with the natural world. This is an extrinsic, rather than intrinsic justification for the teaching of geography and history.

7.4 The attraction of the EBac is that it stops short of prescription and compulsion. But it strongly reaffirms the notion of a general education. However, the question still remains: why not include a longer list of options under ‘humanities’?

⁸ Location, location: geography’s rural divide; *Times Educational Supplement*, 3/10/2010 <http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=> . Also, see Weeden P and Lambert D (2010) Unequal access, *Teaching Geography*, 35, 2, p74-75

7.5 The first, and main reason, is that to widen the choice of ‘humanities’ (for example to include citizenship, business education, or even media studies) would be to dilute the simple powerful message that EBac promotes – for a broad based general education, without which studying business or the media is impaired.

7.6 The second is to recognise the significance of geography and history as ‘big ideas’ in themselves. This counters the often heard criticism that such subjects are 19th century creations and are therefore unsuited to the 21st century. The ambition of geography has been with us since the ancient Greeks and before: to write and account for the world and our place in it is no more nineteenth century than writing itself. The disciplines have of course evolved through time and the school subject has also evolved to reflect changing understandings and techniques.

8. Why geography *or* history? Why not both?

8.1 It has been a longstanding tension in English schools that although geography and history have often both been considered ‘essential’ they are commonly placed in opposition to each when it comes to ‘options time’ – when children select their examination subjects. And yet these are complementary subjects, best studied together.

8.2 In the past attempts have been made to square this circle by introducing integrated studies of the humanities. In terms of increasing access, this is a ‘worst solution’, and therefore is no solution at all. In integrated schemes the quality of the teaching has often been found to be poor, the selection of content lacking rigour and the level of intellectual challenge diluted.

8.3 *Thus, the Geographical Association, along with the Better History Group is ready to propose a radical solution.* As above, this will not be to make either subject compulsory in key stage 4, but to enable the study of both subjects possible within current 14–16 structures. Without going into precise detail here, we think it will be possible and desirable for the long term success of the EBac to enable 14 year olds to choose one of the following routes, any of which would satisfy EBac criteria:

- Hi: Full History GCSE (a history major)
- Gg: Full Geography GCSE (a geography major)
- Gg-Hi: A joint geography and history GCSE (geography and history minor)

As well as satisfying the conditions for the EBac, any of these routes can lead to Advanced level study in history or geography or both.

8.4 *A key enabling point in the joint Gg-Hi proposal is that Year 9 of the national curriculum is specified.* In effect, all students will study, in year nine, a history module and a geography module. Performance in these modules can be used as a measure to help students judge whether to opt to ‘major’ in history or geography in the EBac, or to ‘minor’ in both. An additional benefit of this scheme is that it would

considerably strengthen history and geography in KS3. The year nine modules are proposed to be *Parliament and Democracy* (history) and *People and Environment* (geography).

9. Recommendations

- 9.1 In the context of the 'humanity' component, the EBac is retained in its current shape with students choosing geography or history.
- 9.2 The **Geographical Association** and the **Better History Group** be asked to provide details about a proposed geography and history *joint* GCSE (which would increase the appeal of geography and history and thus may be very popular with Headteachers)
- 9.3 Careful account should be taken about the implications of the EBac on teacher supply numbers. There is already a shortage of subject specialist geography teachers in schools, and yet the amount of geography and history teaching is likely to increase substantially.
- 9.4 Headteachers be alerted to the need to strengthen subject-based CPD for geography and history staff, for example, by encouraging subject association membership and participation in activities and courses aimed at improving teachers' subject knowledge

Contact: The Geographical Association (GA) is the leading subject association for geography teachers. Contact via Mr Ricky Buck at rbuck@geography.org.uk. The Geographical Association is found at www.geography.org.uk