



Qualifications and  
Curriculum Authority

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# Geography

*2004/5 annual report on curriculum and assessment*

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This report is based on the activities to investigate curriculum, assessment and qualifications issues in geography

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## Background

QCA has a remit to keep the curriculum under review and advise the Secretary of State on curriculum and assessment matters. To do this effectively, QCA has a programme of monitoring and evaluation to ensure that advice is soundly based and development work is informed by practical experience.

The monitoring and evaluation programme draws on a broad bank of evidence.

Detailed quantitative evidence is provided by the QCA Monitoring Curriculum and Assessment (MCA) project. This yields statistical data through questionnaire responses from representative samples of schools and foundation stage settings. Evidence also comes from specific enquiries undertaken by QCA and other national agencies, including the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) and the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). QCA phase and subject teams also undertake desk research into published research and reports, including international work.

This systematically gathered pool of evidence is complemented by intelligence drawn directly from practitioners and other key players through conferences, seminars, focus groups and other less formal communications. QCA advisers also visit settings, schools and colleges to speak with individual teachers and learners.

QCA phase and subject teams synthesise this rich and varied evidence to build pictures of current practice. All of this monitoring information is linked to common areas of enquiry and focused questions, which are described in the Appendix. Many of the documents referred to can be found on the respective organisation's website. Please see the Appendix for a list of website addresses.

The following report draws together QCA's findings in geography.

## **The state of the 4–19 geography curriculum and qualifications in 2004/5**

2004/5 has been a year in which some significant developments at national level have opened up new possibilities for school geography. This development was articulated by David Bell, HM Chief Inspector of Schools, Ofsted:

There is a need to ensure that geography is a subject which reflects the changing landscape and issues of the twenty-first century. Geography should have a leading role to play in preparing young people to face their responsibilities and develop a critical understanding of the rapidly changing world in which they live. ('The value and importance of geography', *Primary Geographer*, spring 2005)

The establishment of the Secretary of State's Geography Focus Group, the involvement of geography in the QCA Futures Project, the launching of the first humanities specialist schools and the continuing success of the GCSE pilot course are all providing a higher profile for geography and a more secure base from which to undertake the curriculum reviews required in 2005/6. In addition, the maintenance of the Geography Development Fund (GDF) from the DfES has been crucial to the success of support and development activities.

The Secretary of State's Geography Focus Group was set up in autumn 2004 in direct response to increasing concern about geography's status and health in the curriculum and subsequent campaigning by the subject associations. The Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers (RGS-IBG) has taken the lead in managing the group, in close consultation with the Geographical Association (GA), Ofsted and QCA. The group has met three times in 2004/5, most recently under the chairmanship of Lord Adonis in July 2005. Membership is drawn from business, geography-related professions, academics and teachers, and the group's purpose is to explore how geography can maximise its potential in schools and to set out a strategy for the future. Six sub-groups of the main group have worked over the summer period, and as a result a draft national action plan was prepared and presented back to the minister in autumn 2005.

The QCA Futures Project was launched in autumn 2004 to rethink the aims, purposes and future direction of the curriculum. The Geography Futures Seminar (February 2005)

allowed the subject community to make progress in outlining geography's distinctive contribution to the school curriculum.

The possibility of schools taking on humanities specialist status became a reality in 2004, and there are about 50 schools with geography as a lead or subsidiary subject for the 2005/6 year. Specialist status brings extra funding, support from the Specialist Schools and Academic Trust (SSAT) and a renewed stimulus to curriculum development and outreach.

The GCSE geography pilot course completed its second full year in schools in 2004/5 and continues to encourage teachers and students, acting as a stimulus for renewed curriculum development activity and to provide lessons to inform the future changes at GCSE and A level. The supporting programme managed by the GA is crucial to the success of the pilot. Lessons learnt from the pilot were used at a joint awarding body/QCA meeting exploring the future shape and direction of the GCSE, and this work will feed into the 14–19 review in 2005/6.

Effective partnerships between QCA, subject associations, DfES, Ofsted and the other national agencies continue to support both existing and new developments. Of particular mention in 2004/5 is the increasing level of web-based support via subject association websites and the QCA's *Innovating with geography* website, now providing a range of guidance, exemplar material, professional development activities and useful links. The GA and the RGS-IBG are also involved in running research and development projects, many benefiting from GDF support (such as the GA's pilot GCSE and the RGS-IBG school–community–higher education links project).

These developments are undoubtedly changing the culture and conditions for school geography, and evidence from both Ofsted and QCA shows that, in individual schools at all levels, there is geography of the highest quality (good practice in some primary schools has been referred to as 'a curriculum jewel'). Nevertheless it will take time for this to be translated more widely into appropriate changes to the curriculum, classroom practice and professional development. Meanwhile the state of geography 4–14 continues to cause concern. The quality of teaching and progress made in geography at key stages 1, 2 and 3 continues to be rated poorly in comparison with other subjects (Ofsted 2005 annual report). In too many cases, schools lack curriculum time, specialist staff and appropriate resources to provide a high-quality geography experience. A

vicious circle of decline sets in, with senior managers failing to recognise the potential of the subject in this beleaguered state and so not providing support for much-needed change and development. Opportunities for 4–5 year olds are also being missed, because practitioners show lack of awareness of what geography is and how its approaches can enrich the more holistic foundation stage curriculum.

In the 14–19 curriculum, geography remains a significant optional subject (ranked eighth and ninth in number of candidates for GCSE and A level, respectively), with high entries for GCSE and A level in 2005 (provisional figures of 216,756 for GCSE and 32,831 for A level) and high standards of achievement. However, in both cases the entry figures are significantly lower than those for 2004 (down by 4.9 per cent at GCSE and by 4 per cent at A level), confirming the marked downward trend in evidence at both levels since the mid-1990s. Overall, GCSE entries have declined by 29.3 per cent since 1996, and A level entries have declined by 26.8 per cent since 1998. Although many factors affect declining numbers, there is now sufficient evidence of the negative effect of tired and dated content in existing specifications on the one hand and of the positive effect of the GCSE pilot innovations on the other to make 14–19 curriculum renewal a priority.

Geography continues to be a popular honours course in 81 departments in British universities, and their graduates remain highly employable. Geographical research is well regarded, and the subject has a high profile in teaching and learning initiatives. Nevertheless, the number of applications to full-time undergraduate courses in geography continues to fall slowly, a decline first noted in 2004. Academic geographers have begun to debate key issues about the presentation of their subject, looking at areas such as the diversity of research foci, the poor public image and the gap between physical and human geography; the state of school geography is increasingly being added to this list.

After four years of growth in initial teacher training numbers, 2004 saw the announcement of cuts in secondary geography entry. This may partially reflect the decline in A level figures. On the other hand, quality of course provision and of trainees remains high, according to Ofsted. More worrying is the situation in primary teacher training, where the small amount of time spent on geography by trainees is now assuming greater significance, given the poor state of primary geography. Similarly, the continuing issue of non-specialist teachers finding difficulties in implementing geography

across key stages 1, 2 and 3 threatens to undermine attempts to improve school geography.

Overall, the 2004/5 report reveals that geography is at a crucial point in its development. The opportunities provided by the current curriculum reviews should be seized to build on all the development and networking undertaken in 2004/5 and ensure that the subject is set on the more secure footing it needs in order to fulfil its potential in the curriculum.

## Summary of key findings

### Foundation stage

Good-quality geographical experiences are being provided for some 4–5 year olds as part of the ‘knowledge and understanding of the world’ strand, even if this is not always recognised by practitioners. However, further opportunities are being missed because many practitioners do not know what geography is or how its contribution can be developed.

The 9-point foundation stage profile is considered to be too time consuming, of limited value in planning for progression and not well phrased to support geographical learning.

### Key stages 1 and 2

Poor-quality teaching and learning and low achievement continue to dominate geography in many schools at key stages 1 and 2. These problems are a direct result of the lack of status afforded geography in the school curriculum and the resultant shortage of time, subject specialist staff, funding and professional development opportunities.

Support initiatives established by QCA (the *Innovating with geography* website), some local authorities (such as Hampshire) and the subject associations (GA’s *Geography from square 1*, on [www.geography.org.uk](http://www.geography.org.uk)) show that major improvements can be made to the quality and standards in geographical education at key stages 1 and 2.

Geography can become a strong subject and a contributor to literacy, numeracy, ICT, citizenship and PSHE.

The lack of adequate geography-specific initial teacher training and professional development available to early years and primary teachers is considered a direct cause of the low quality and poor performance identified for geography 4–11 years. Some relatively small-scale actions – such as making geography a required component of primary training (with recommended contact time), or providing annual training for primary teachers – could have a major positive impact on this situation.

### Key stage 3

There is great variation in the geographical experiences received by key stage 3 pupils. At its best, the subject provides a lively introduction to the world and is a major contributor to whole-school initiatives. In too many schools, however, geography lacks

rigour and fails to motivate young people. It is one of the worst performing subjects at key stage 3, according to Ofsted.

Poor quality in key stage 3 is directly related to inadequate time, poor curriculum planning and the overuse of non-specialist teachers. Their use is often a reflection of geography's low status in the school curriculum.

The national secondary strategy has provided new opportunities for a focus on the preparation of teaching in some schools but has not raised the profile of geography. Overall, the strategy's impact has been constrained by its failure to ground its work in existing practice and to integrate its approaches with the national curriculum.

Assessment remains a major issue in key stage 3 geography, with pupils being over-assessed to meet schools' requirements for frequent reporting of levels. This focus on summative assessment has been detrimental to high-quality assessment for learning.

### **14–19 curriculum and qualifications**

Although pupils achieve high standards in GCSE and A level geography, the decline in entries has now reached a serious level. There are signs that it is beginning to affect the status and quality of the subject in schools, the flow of students into higher education and, potentially, the level of geographical understanding in the nation as a whole.

Major improvements can be made to 14–19 geography by ensuring that examination specifications are updated, school-based curriculum planning is reinstated and high-quality specialist professional development is made available.

The experience of developing the pilot geography GCSE shows how the subject can be regenerated in schools to the direct benefit of pupils, schools and society. Further development funding is urgently needed to ensure that the pilot is successfully evaluated and extended and the lessons fed into the 14–19 review process.

### **Fieldwork**

Much geography fieldwork is of high quality, is popular with pupils and makes a major contribution to education at all levels. Geography may be seen as a potential leader in the Government's drive to promote out-of-classroom learning. Many schools, however,

need help in addressing the constraints of curriculum time, staff development, health and safety issues and budgets that together threaten to diminish this contribution.

### **QCA support websites**

QCA websites are found to be useful by the relatively small percentage of schools that use them. Overall, many potentially valuable support and development materials remain unknown or unused. QCA needs to invest more resources into targeted dissemination and linked professional development.

## Foundation stage

The findings of a focused study revealed that foundation stage teachers predominantly plan through themes and topics, rather than discrete subjects. Teachers involved in the study were aware of the benefits of teaching 'knowledge and understanding of the world', and much work had a strong geography slant even if it was not recognised as such. Teachers do not find this teaching strand straightforward to implement, and the geographical elements covered depend very much on the topic being taught at the time. Opportunities to cover geographical knowledge and skills in other areas of learning were also exploited by some teachers.

Recent trainees have often not had the opportunity to learn or observe the full range of subjects, and geography is one of the weak areas. Those trainee teachers with an early years specialism who took part in the focused study frequently required prompting in order to identify opportunities for geographical learning.

The MCA reported that nearly 40 per cent of all the 748 foundation stage settings and schools surveyed believed that 'sense of place' was one of the three most difficult early learning goals to use. The 9-point foundation stage profile is seen to be of limited value in planning for progression, and for 81 per cent of the teachers interviewed any continuity with key stage 1 was purely incidental. Geographical learning opportunities are not considered well supported by the profile, and the process of completing it is generally regarded as unnecessarily time consuming. These findings are supported by an Ofsted study (*Transition from the reception year to year 1*, 2004), which found that a majority of teachers did not find the profile useful and were unclear about its purpose.

Over 40 per cent of key stage 1 schools surveyed by the MCA experience difficulties planning for children's transition between foundation stage and year 1. Although the national strategies have provided support for progression and continuity in English and mathematics, the Ofsted report on transition notes that 'schools give less attention, however, to curricular continuity in the foundation subjects'. The comments of the focused study respondents confirmed this, several suggesting that the key stage 1 curriculum should be more like that of the foundation stage, a view also taken by 77.8 per cent of respondents to the MCA.

## Key stages 1 and 2

The related issues of poor-quality teaching and learning and low achievement continue to dominate geography at key stages 1 and 2. The Ofsted 2005 primary geography report confirms this picture, stating that ‘there is less that is good [quality] than in any other subject and the gap continues to widen’. Monitoring suggests that the problems are a direct result of the lack of status afforded to geography in the school curriculum and the corresponding shortfall in time allocation, subject specialist staff, professional development opportunities and funding.

The MCA, with 677 responding schools, revealed that geography, along with D&T, art and design and music, is barely meeting recommended time allocations and is particularly likely to fall below recommendations in years 1, 2 and 6. Evidence from schools and teacher training institutions suggests that geography subject leaders are often young staff, inadequately qualified in geography, who are given little support or time to plan geographical work. In these cases, there is a heavy reliance on off-the-shelf materials that are rarely adapted to meet pupils’ needs. According to the MCA, the geography scheme of work is one of the most frequently used – in 84 per cent of the schools. In many schools, the turnover of geography coordinators is high as they move on to other positions.

One-third of MCA respondents mentioned the desirability of improving subject knowledge to help them interpret the foundation programme of study. Lack of familiarity with geographical concepts and skills is particularly likely to cause difficulty. Similarly many schools lack the specialist expertise to assess progress adequately. The MCA notes that a third of schools do not track progress in the foundation subjects because they lack expertise or are concentrating on the core subjects. In these circumstances, low expectations are not surprising.

Ofsted evidence for geography concurs with all these findings: ‘low achievement is closely associated with teachers’ fragile subject knowledge, insufficiently high expectations and weak planning’ and ‘the leadership and management of geography compare unfavourably with all other subjects’.

And David Bell added, ‘Geography rarely features as a priority in primary school development plans and many schools lack the specific resources needed to deliver an

effective teaching programme' ('The value and importance of geography', *Primary geographer*, spring 2005).

The lack of adequate subject-specific training received by trainee teachers is a major contributory factor to this situation. According to the research, 47 per cent of primary PGCE trainees receive only 9–12 hours of contact time for geography, and fewer than 50 per cent of primary PGCE programmes provide units that are fully taught by geographers with primary experience. The problem is exacerbated by the lack of good geography practice available in foundation and primary settings for trainees to observe.

Despite the overall poor picture, examples of good and excellent practice can be found. QCA's primary seminar this year involved 11 schools in Hampshire, a local authority where a geography specialist adviser provides strong support. Although schools suffer from many of the same disadvantages of time and funding, there are local authority support meetings, including cluster meetings, local authority-run courses and primary–secondary pyramid group meetings. The local authority adviser works with teachers in the schools, maintains email contact and provides a local authority website giving access to subject association and QCA developments. The support that geography coordinators are now able to offer, through the development of new and relevant schemes of work and assessment, is enabling geography to become more rigorous, more attractive to pupils and more able to contribute to wider school initiatives, such as literacy, ICT and citizenship. The subsequent higher profile given to geography is resulting in greater recognition in school development plans. A relatively high percentage of the Hampshire respondents (42 per cent at key stage 1 and 62 per cent at key stage 2) felt that the position of geography in their schools had improved over the previous year.

Well-focused professional development initiatives should, therefore, result in significant improvements to geographical learning and school standards overall. Throughout 2004/5 a number of national initiatives have focused on addressing the situation. A major portion of the 2004/5 GDF has been used to fund GA primary initiatives, and this will be followed up in 2005/6 with the development of a 'primary quality mark'. The annual Ofsted geography conference in 2004 focused on professional development for over 100 primary teachers. Also, primary teachers will be involved in the 2005 Ofsted conference focusing on fieldwork and outdoor education through geography. Such

activities need to become more widely available if the critical state of primary geography is to be changed.

## Key stage 3

As evidenced by the high quality of material provided for the QCA *Innovating with geography* website, it is clear that some schools are able to take advantage of the national curriculum's flexibility and to provide lively and innovative curriculum experiences to engage key stage 3 pupils. The GA curriculum projects ('Valuing places', 'Why argue?', 'Where will we live?') are also providing stimulus to creative development for some teachers. However, the 2004/5 monitoring evidence reveals that, overall, key stage 3 geography still shows many of the problems apparent in recent years – particularly inadequate curriculum planning, lack of subject specialists deployed at this key stage, declining opportunities for fieldwork and inappropriate assessment strategies. Not surprisingly, as in previous years this situation continues to result in poorly motivated pupils and relatively low standards of achievement, compared with other subjects. The Ofsted 2005 report notes that although improvements are noticeable in secondary geography, overall 'there remain fundamental problems in key stage 3 geography' and that 'achievement is higher in exam classes, particularly post-16, sometimes reflecting a relative neglect of teaching and the curriculum in key stage 3'.

According to the MCA (representing 300 completed questionnaires) 73.3 per cent of schools reported that geography had an average or below average status compared with other subjects, particularly the core subjects. The teachers at the secondary seminar confirmed this view. Most schools tend to reserve their subject specialists to teach at key stage 4 and post-16, leaving non-specialist staff to teach in key stage 3, the point at which geography departments need to captivate pupils' interest and enthusiasm for geography. Evidence from the MCA and the secondary monitoring seminar revealed that only about 50 per cent of the key stage 3 teachers were subject specialists and that the majority of the non-specialists taught in year 7 (82.2 per cent of those responding). The proportion of non-specialists declined in years 8 and 9, and specialists predominated in 14–19 teaching.

Although time allocated to geography at key stage 3 has not changed significantly in the majority of schools in the last year, curriculum time is still a major issue. According to the MCA, lack of departmental time for planning and preparation is the second biggest

problem schools face in implementing the key stage 3 programme of study. Secondary seminar attendees echoed this concern: 60 per cent referred to it as the main reason for difficulties. Lack of planning time leaves little space for innovation and often leads to schemes of work simply being taken off the shelf and used year after year with few changes, which is frustrating for both teachers and pupils.

Although the geography national curriculum is generally accepted as an adequate basis for the curriculum at key stage 3, 62.6 per cent of MCA respondents experienced difficulties in meeting requirements. The areas most frequently mentioned were fieldwork, ICT and overseas studies. Fieldwork was the subject of a focused study in 2004/5 (see Appendix), with largely similar issues being revealed across all levels of the secondary curriculum. At key stage 3, health and safety, the cost of fieldwork (and of supply cover for geography staff) and the lack of curriculum time are the most significant factors limiting the use of fieldwork in schools. Where fieldwork is flourishing, there is usually strong senior management support. However, in many schools, as Ofsted states in its 2005 annual report, key stage 3 fieldwork is ignored, even in those schools where practice remains good post-14. The need to reinvigorate fieldwork has assumed greater priority with the publication of the House of Commons select committee report on outdoor education published in February 2005.

Access to ICT equipment remains a problem at key stage 3 (and is the main problem, according to the MCA), with lack of hardware and software still having an impact on teaching. Although basic access is improving, very few of the newer technologies are available. Use of digital projectors and interactive whiteboards has increased recently, however, and this has added a positive new dimension to teaching geography in some schools.

The national secondary strategy has provided new opportunities for schools and subject departments to focus on improving teaching preparation, and since 2003 geography has benefited from the emphasis on foundation subjects. Ninety-five per cent of schools represented at the secondary seminar and 93.4 per cent of the schools responding to the MCA had been involved in the strategy to some extent. More schools have chosen to be involved in the 'assessment for learning' rather than other strands (46 per cent of seminar schools). Few schools had made any use of the 'literacy and learning' or the 'leading in learning' strands, and a third of the seminar schools were completely unaware of them. The majority attending the secondary monitoring seminar and 29 per

cent of the MCA respondents felt that involvement in the strategy was a positive development. However, many noted that it had not benefited geography in terms of curriculum time or raising the profile of the subject. Many of the teachers felt that the opportunities had been greeted enthusiastically to begin with but had not been capitalised on in the long run. For example, some of the teaching strategies such as starters and plenaries had been bolted on rather than embedded into good curriculum practice. Further integration with the existing programme of study and schemes of work would have been helpful.

There has been little change in the attitudes towards key stage 3 assessment. Schools use levels to report pupils' attainment far more than the statutory end of key stage requirement demands. According to the MCA, 96.7 per cent of schools set additional reporting requirements. Over one-third of schools ascribe levels to pupils' work at the end of years 7 and 8, and for 86.3 per cent of these this is a school requirement rather than a departmental decision. In addition, about half of all schools give a level at the end of every term. The most frequently mentioned additional use of levels was to mark individual pieces of work (70.6 per cent of MCA responses), teachers seeing this as a necessity in order to meet school demands for evidence of measurable progress. The most popular assessment strategy used by all year groups are tasks and tests set at the end of a unit of work (about 90 per cent schools did this for each year group).

Although the seminar teachers accepted that the level descriptions were meant to be employed only at the end of year 9, they were now being used for finer assessment tasks and in this respect were seen as unhelpful, vague and potentially demotivating for pupils. More than 50 per cent of seminar schools and 46.9 per cent of MCA respondents noted that they had trouble using the level descriptions. Subdividing the levels in an attempt to identify clearer progression is common practice. This creates a great deal of work for teachers and further complicates assessment processes. Many teachers rely on commercially produced software to allocate levels. More official guidance would be well received, as long as the approaches were given clear support from senior managers.

Overall, the QCA 2004/5 monitoring findings confirm the conclusions reached in previous years by QCA and Ofsted that urgent action is needed to transform key stage 3 geography and ensure a sounder base for building high-quality geography at 14–19.

This is recognised in the recent 14–19 White Paper, where key stage 3 geography merits a separate mention.

## 14–19

A focused study confirmed that within the context of a competitive, relatively open ‘market’ at 14 and 16, geography has been one of the most popular non-core subjects at both GCSE and A level for many years. However, there has been a downward trend in the number of students choosing to study the subject over the last 10 years.

To explore the background to these trends, information was gathered from the secondary seminar with 25 teachers in Shropshire; a focused study of pupils’ choice at 14–19 undertaken by Paul Weeden of the University of Birmingham; the MCA survey; and discussions with subject associations, awarding bodies and teacher trainers. The summer 2005 examination results provide recent data, revealing the continuing decline of entries at GCSE (down by 4.9 per cent), A level (down 4 per cent) and AEA (down 4.5 per cent), with geography in the top five subjects registering decreases for GCSE and A level.

The focused study showed that entries in any school fluctuate over time (between zero per cent and 80 per cent in some schools studied), and this may be disguised in local authority statistics. One of the two local authorities studied had experienced a downward trend in geography numbers over the past five years, but a third of schools within it had increased geography numbers over the same period. At the secondary monitoring seminar, although a third of schools noted an increase in numbers, a third reported a decrease and a third reported static entries.

Evidence suggests that geography is now in competition with a growing range of optional subjects, which is affecting the number of pupils choosing to study it. Many of the heads of geography questioned at the secondary seminar indicated that they had little, if any, input to the option choice structures. Appearance in fewer option columns results in fewer pupils choosing geography. For many pupils, vocational subjects can seem more appropriate to their future working life, and some courses, such as leisure and tourism, may even be taught by geographers, so resulting in competition for staff as well as pupils.

According to the MCA, the most common reasons given for declining pupil numbers at 14 and 16 were the wider choice of subjects available and changes to schools’ option structures. Conversely, the most often quoted reason for an increase in numbers was

the successful marketing of the subject. Schools that were able to publicise good exam results, the expertise of their staff and the employment possibilities linked to geography were able to 'sell' the subject and reported increases in numbers.

Many pupils dislike the tendency for GCSE and A level courses to repeat topics from key stage 3 or to focus on work that seems boring and irrelevant to their lives. Nevertheless, it was the quality of teaching and learning that was more important to them than content. Pupils disliked lack of variety in teaching approaches or the feeling that they were not making progress. Although little research has been done on the impact of individual teachers, it is clear that this is also an extremely important factor in pupils' choice of subject. Perceptions of the subject appear to be important. There are some indications that geography is perceived as being relatively 'hard' because of the quantity of work involved and the requirement to think and express opinions. However, these factors also appeal to many students.

Geography results at GCSE and A level compare favourably with those for other core and foundation subjects. In 2005, 59 per cent of pupils achieved A\*–C grades at GCSE, compared with an average for all other subjects of 56 per cent. This may suggest an entry cohort weighted towards higher achievers, thereby negating previous anecdotal evidence that geography is perceived as an easy subject. Indeed, evidence from the 14–19 focused study suggests that geography is more successful in more academic schools. Interestingly, evidence suggests that the subject also appears to attract more boys than girls, although it is the girls who achieve the better results.

Evidence from the MCA and seminar teachers shows that the more traditional thematic GCSE specifications (such as AQA's 'A' specification) are still the most popular – a finding that seems to conflict with pupils' desire for new content. Seminar teachers explained that continuity and consistency of results was a dominant consideration, given the emphasis on league tables. Until there was a well-tried route to new content and approaches, they preferred to stick with safe specifications that were well resourced and that guaranteed results. Some were watching the pilot GCSE with interest.

The main current concern about GCSE geography is the lack of curriculum time to cover content-heavy specifications. The MCA confirmed this, finding that 44.2 per cent of respondents mentioned lack of curriculum time as a problem and 32.6 per cent referred to shortage of planning time.

According to the MCA, the reasons teachers gave for choice of specification are similar to those in previous years, with the level of awarding body support, the relevance of geography topics, the focus on issues and the structure of assessment making the biggest impact on choices. Edexcel B, a former project specification with an emphasis on issues and enquiry-based learning, was the most popular with this group of teachers (38.4 per cent of respondents).

The pressure on both staff and students caused by the coursework requirements was a common feature in all discussions about 14–19 geography. Coursework does not equate with fieldwork. Teachers remain convinced of the crucial role and wider value of fieldwork. The MCA showed that the amount of fieldwork provided is greatest in years 10 and 12, with teachers referring to staff time, curriculum time, health and safety factors and budgets as the main constraints on offering more. The Fieldwork Studies Council's focused study revealed that high-quality fieldwork was seen as a positive factor in raising status and recruitment.

The focused study of pupils' choice at 14–19 concluded that those departments that were most successful in increasing pupil numbers offered specifications and/or approaches to learning that allowed topical and relevant content to be covered and provided good-quality fieldwork experiences. These are all factors that a review of the geography criteria 14–19 should consider.

### **The GCSE geography pilot**

A new geography GCSE is undergoing pilot trials in schools. In addition to direct feedback from the pilot schools, the awarding body (OCR) and the subject community, evaluation and monitoring of the pilot GCSE in 2004/5 has included:

- a desk-based study of the extent to which the OCR pilot documentation meets the demands of the original remit, and
- a series of Ofsted visits to selected pilot schools throughout the 2004/5 year and continuing into 2005/6.

All pilot schools and teachers continue to be enthusiastic, referring to the excitement of accessing new approaches to the subject and offering more active approaches to learning. Teachers particularly like the flexibility of the full course, which is now even more apparent as the optional units have become available since autumn 2004. At a recent teachers' support day run by the GA and RGS-IBG (June 2005), the greater

opportunity for curriculum development was seen by teachers to be the main positive feature of the new course. The feature identified as most problematic, on that day, was the lack of clarity about the standards required for optional unit assessment, an issue that is being dealt with through improved assessment criteria and moderation procedures. As far as pupils are concerned, the evidence is that this course is seen as more stimulating and more relevant to their lives. A number of pilot centres that originally began the course with one group have now drawn in the full geography cohort, partly because of pressure from pupils.

The content of the pilot course provides access to some new areas of geography, particularly in the areas of cultural, social and economic geography. Discussions with a wide group of academic geographers have revealed strong support for this initiative – particularly in relation to the better marketing of the subject and the focus on key ideas. Geographers in higher education have expressed a wish to be kept informed about developments, as updating 14–19 geography will have implications for first-year degree studies, particularly in relation to the place of physical geography, the selection of appropriate topics and progression in active enquiry work.

The new style of teaching and learning promoted by the pilot has been welcomed by most but is recognised as involving new approaches and a certain amount of risk for teachers and pupils. The provisional findings from Ofsted inspections suggest that some schools are struggling to deal with the changes on their own and require even more professional support than the GA can currently provide. Given that the pilot schools have embarked on a major curriculum development project, this was to be expected. The activities of the GA and the RGS-IBG, partly funded by the DfES GDF, have been crucial in this respect, providing coordination, materials, dedicated sections of websites and some professional development meetings. However, this support must be set on a more secure footing if the pilot GCSE is to fulfil its potential to motivate young people, raise standards and improve the geographical education of the nation.

This year is the first in which a full set of GCSE results from the pilot is available. The first pilot cohort of 18 centres completed the full requirements by submitting optional unit assessments, and pupils of the second cohort (26 centres) sat the core themes examination paper. Although the exam papers have been well received and the results for 2004 and 2005 have fitted predictions, the schools have raised issues to do with the language level and the need to balance innovation with access for foundation

candidates. An important point is the need to ensure that the innovative focus of the content and approach is maintained as the exam papers move into a third and fourth year. A full evaluation of performance in the optional units has yet to be undertaken.

The desk study of OCR documentation, while generally finding a good match between the remit and the eventual specification/papers, highlighted the importance of ensuring:

- that exam papers and assessment tasks continue to promote active learning and new geography, and
- that curriculum development support for teachers is strengthened.

These two are effectively the main controls on the quality of the pilot.

In 2005/6, further Ofsted inspections will take place, leading to a report, and the final OCR evaluation will be received at QCA. Decisions will be made about the possibilities of extending the pilot and eventually opening it up nationally with the new GCSEs in 2008. Some features of the new course (the strong conceptual base, the newer content, more active learning styles, teacher assessment) can directly influence the new geography GCSE and A/AS level criteria. However, beyond this, the development and operation of the pilot GCSE has highlighted important general lessons to feed into the 14–19 review, for example:

- the need to establish ways of drawing more effectively and frequently on the expertise of subject and educational communities to inform curriculum review and change
- the need to re-establish systems of support and professional development for teachers so that school-based curriculum development can flourish even within necessary national frameworks and regulations.

## **Inclusion**

Geography is seen by foundation and primary teachers as an excellent subject for addressing pupils' diverse learning needs, because of the range of content, the real-world contexts that can be experienced through fieldwork and the many practical and creative skills that are encouraged alongside intellectual ones. In particular, it is seen as a subject that can motivate boys and that presents stimulating challenges for pupils with learning difficulties. The primary seminar teachers were adamant that opportunities for fieldwork must be protected and extended, and they suggested that the Government's commitment to outdoor learning might be directed to this end.

At secondary level, evidence suggests that awareness of the requirements of the inclusion statement is improving. Overall, pupils with learning and behavioural difficulties as well as those perceived as 'gifted and talented' are the best catered for: around half of the secondary seminar schools and nearly 80 per cent of the MCA respondents adapted the geography curriculum to make clearly differentiated provision for these pupils.

Most schools use a variety of methods to make activities accessible for non-statemented special needs pupils – especially through the use of a teaching assistant – by amending the activities or by amending the outcomes expected. Providing clear frameworks for pupils to work with, good-quality resources and clear exemplification were also seen as helpful.

## Evaluation of QCA support and guidance

In general, use of the QCA websites, now the main format for support and guidance, appears to have improved only marginally since last year. Lack of time and a preference for reading guidance on paper remain the main reasons for not using QCA websites.

The MCA shows that the most popular sites in primary schools are the QCA homepage (used by 83.5 per cent of schools) and the geography scheme of work website (79.6 per cent). However, many other sites – both general, such as QCA's *Assessment for learning* ([www.qca.org.uk/afl](http://www.qca.org.uk/afl)), *Guidance on teaching the gifted and talented* ([www.nc.uk.net/gt](http://www.nc.uk.net/gt)) and *National curriculum online* ([www.nc.uk.net](http://www.nc.uk.net)), and subject specific, such as the creativity and geography sections of *National curriculum in action* ([www.ncaction.org.uk](http://www.ncaction.org.uk)) were either unknown or known and not used. Of the 11 teachers at the primary seminar, about a third had used the geography section of *National curriculum in action* and found it very useful, and about a third claimed to know of it but to have had no time to use it. Teachers felt the sheer volume of web-based material available to be overwhelming.

At secondary level the awareness of QCA support and guidance websites is growing. The most useful site is the scheme of work website: 53.7 per cent of MCA respondents and 50 per cent of seminar teachers make use of this. Other highly used sites were *National curriculum online*, the QCA geography home page, *National curriculum in action* and, to some extent, the *Innovating with geography* website. The fact that the QCA geography home page guides the user to links to a number of other sites was praised and seen as helping to combat the perceived problem of overprovision.

There are still a number of teachers who access none of the sites, either because of a lack of familiarity or because of problems with ICT access; and some sites, such as *Respect for all* and the *Creativity* site, remain virtually unknown. Surprisingly, given the publicity and high acclaim it has received, the *Education for sustainable development* site was used by only a small number of teachers.

Both primary and secondary teachers felt that targeted mailings (particularly hardcopy batch mailing) and focused INSET using website materials would be the best ways for QCA to reach teachers.

## Key recommendations

### Primary schools

Geography is in a critical state in primary schools, where the low status, lack of subject expertise, poor opportunities for professional development and inadequate resources are resulting in poor-quality teaching and learning, fragmented coverage of the national curriculum and low achievement.

#### *Recommendations:*

- Work with Ofsted and the subject associations to utilise existing materials and good practice in providing continuing professional development in primary geography.
- Make the case for continuing GDF support for primary geography initiatives, particularly the primary 'quality mark'.
- All agencies should try to ensure that senior managers understand the need for a broad, balanced curriculum and the contribution that geography can make.

### Key stage 3

There are problems of inadequate curriculum planning and poor-quality teaching and learning at key stage 3. A combination of relatively low status in many secondary schools and a high proportion of non-specialist teachers is resulting in poorly planned curricula and missed opportunities to inspire and challenge pupils.

#### *Recommendations:*

- Ensure that the key stage 3 review results in a clear framework for geography, highlighting the key concepts and skills and giving guidance on a selection of content and curriculum planning.
- Work with other organisations – such as Ofsted, the national secondary strategy, the SSAT, the Training and Development Agency for Schools and subject associations – to make key stage 3 a focus for high-quality professional development at local, regional and national levels, making clear how existing initiatives work together (such as the *Innovating with geography* website, national curriculum documentation, SSAT support, and strategy advice).

## **Fieldwork**

Opportunities for high-quality fieldwork to be experienced by pupils are declining. According to RGS-IBG evidence in 2005 to the Select Committee on Science and Technology, 'Fieldwork and outdoor education are not just add-on; they are absolutely core for geography and for young people's learning in general.'

The year 2004/5 shows unequivocally that concerns about health and safety, curriculum time, staff time and expertise, and budget constraints are combining to reduce the amount and effectiveness of fieldwork offered in schools.

### *Recommendations:*

- Ensure that an entitlement to fieldwork and outdoor learning is written into all national geography frameworks for geography.
- Work with subject associations, Ofsted, SSAT and the national secondary strategy to provide high-quality professional development and support materials for fieldwork at all stages.

## **The pilot geography GCSE**

There is a limited level of support for the pilot geography GCSE and related curriculum development. The pilot GCSE has provided a major breakthrough in making new and relevant content accessible to young people, stimulating the creativity of teachers and providing teaching and learning that is more appropriate to the 21st century. Without additional support, these contributions may be jeopardised.

### *Recommendations*

- Ensure that lessons from the pilot are fed both into geography 14–19 developments and into the wider 14–19 context. Work with subject associations to promote dialogue between schools and higher education about new geography content and the school–university transition.
- Establish secure funding for curriculum support for the geography pilot from 2005 through to 2008.

## **GCSE and A level specifications**

There is a need to renew and update the geography specifications at both these levels and to ensure that the QCA subject criteria for 14–19 qualifications provide a sound conceptual base and allow for necessary curriculum change in the future.

### *Recommendations:*

- Ensure that the new subject criteria are facilitating documents, leading to a high level of subject scholarship in teaching and learning, rather than being constraints on change.
- Continue discussions with the subject community over a more appropriate conceptual base for subject criteria and minimum content and skill requirements, and consider ways in which to ensure that new specifications draw on the best practice and recent developments in the subject.

## **Professional development**

Currently, there is a lack of geography-specific professional development for teachers at all levels. Inadequate subject expertise limits teachers' abilities to use curriculum flexibility, to be innovative with the subject and to make teaching and learning rigorous and challenging for young people.

### *Recommendations:*

- Ensure that the key stage 3 review is undertaken, with a view to reinstating school-based curriculum development that would include a minimal national framework for all subjects and clear possibilities for creativity.
- Ensure that the QCA Futures Project gives consideration to the role of teachers as curriculum developers in the future curriculum and to the network of support and innovation that this will require.
- Work with subject associations, DfES, SSAT and the national secondary strategy to establish high-quality professional development opportunities for geography at regional and local levels, and ensure that these build on existing materials, websites and agencies.

## Appendix: Sources and methodologies

Geography monitoring in 2004/5 has focused on gathering information about the general health and well-being of the subject across the full 4–19 range. The full programme ranged across both primary and secondary geography and had three focal points:

- fieldwork in the secondary curriculum
- geography in the foundation stage
- geography and students' choices.

Investigations also addressed the quality and impact of QCA resources, particularly those available online.

The main sources of monitoring information in 2004/5 have been the following:

- a survey (by questionnaire and interview) of 25 secondary schools in Shropshire
- a survey (by questionnaire and interview) of 11 primary schools in Hampshire
- a focused study, by Paul Weedon, examining why students choose or don't choose to do geography – the study used national and school level data to identify the overall pattern of entries for geography and the differences between schools in three different local authorities
- a focused study, by Kathleen Alcock, exploring teaching of geography in the foundation stage – the study was sourced from desk-based research combined with information gained from interviews with foundation stage practitioners and experts, and it looked at what priority has been given to teaching the 'knowledge and understanding of the world' strand, to what extent the 'stepping stones' and early learning goals provide curriculum continuity with geography at key stage 1, and how effective the 9-point scale of the foundation stage has been in helping teachers plan for children's progression in geography
- a focused study that investigated the key issues influencing the variation in fieldwork provision, the potential benefits believed to accrue to pupils, and the problems and constraints that may prevent schools from offering a full fieldwork programme – the study cites a small number of case study investigations to look at the provision of fieldwork in secondary schools 11–19 (key stages 3 and 4, post-16)
- valuing the impact of the GCSE geography pilot on the planning, teaching and assessment of geography in eight pilot schools
- a seminar for initial teacher trainers – this was attended by 19 teacher training professionals to discuss the major issues facing primary and secondary geography

- information gained from QCA's MCA project, which included questionnaire data from 677 primary schools (key stage 1 and 2) and 300 completed questionnaires for secondary schools (key stage 3 and 4).

In addition, valuable information and views were obtained from the following:

- QCA's active participation in the Geography Focus Group, which was set up by the Secretary of State in autumn 2004 in direct response to increasing concern about geography's status and health in the curriculum. The group has met three times in 2004/5, most recently under the chairmanship of Lord Adonis in July 2005. The purpose of the group and its six sub-groups is to explore how geography can maximise its potential in schools and to set out a strategy for the future
- termly meetings with the subject associations – the GA, the RGS-IBG, the Council of British Geography (COBRIG), the Humanities Association (HA), the National Association of Humanities Advisers (NAHA) and the Association for Geographic Information (AGI)
- informal liaison and discussion with subject colleagues through attendance at and contributions to conferences, seminars and meetings (including GA and RGS-IBG annual conferences, the RGS-IBG annual teachers' day, SfE national conferences for heads of geography, meetings of COBRIG, the university department of education tutors' annual conference) and numerous smaller and more specific events (such as higher education study group of RGS-IBG events, sustainable development education panel activities, local authority conferences and events, and GCSE pilot support conferences)
- QCA's involvement in national initiatives, meetings of the humanities panel of the Specialist Schools Advisory Trust, meetings with national partners (Ofsted, the national secondary strategy, the national primary strategy)
- findings from the QCA Geography Futures Seminar (February 2005) and subsequent follow-up work. The geography subject community identified and began to outline geography's distinctive contribution to the whole school curriculum.

### **Websites**

Many of the documents referred to can be found on the respective organisations' website. The websites of the most commonly quoted organisations are:

QCA: [www.qca.org.uk](http://www.qca.org.uk)

Geographical Association: [www.geography.org.uk](http://www.geography.org.uk)

*National curriculum in action:* [www.ncaction.org.uk](http://www.ncaction.org.uk)

*National curriculum online:* [www.nc.uk.net](http://www.nc.uk.net)

Ofsted: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)

Royal Geographical Society: [www.rgs.org](http://www.rgs.org)