

'One of humanity's big ideas'¹: why school geography matters

The Geographical Association would like to enlist your support to re-affirm the value of a broad general education for all. The key question is: 'What counts as an educated young person in this day and age?'²

It is impossible to imagine a defensible answer that did not include geographical knowledge and understanding. This is true whether that young person is 5, 11, 14 or 19 years old. And yet, geography, and other 'world' subjects like history, have been marginalised in schools and, in some cases, have become almost non-existent.

Why is geography important?

Geographical study helps us develop powerful knowledge, understanding and skills. This enables us to grasp our common humanity and our relationships – with each other and the environmental resources on which life depends. By thinking geographically 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 a fundamental idea of relevance to everyone.

- Geography **fascinates and inspires**: geographical investigation both satisfies and nourishes curiosity.
- Geography **deepens understanding**: many contemporary challenges – climate change, food security, energy choices – cannot be understood without a geographical perspective.
- Thinking and decision-making with geography help us to **live our lives as knowledgeable citizens**, aware of our own local communities in a global setting.
- Geographical enquiry **develops skills**: using maps and images of people and place, processing numerical data, using graphical forms of communication as well as words and getting to grips with the geographic information systems that underpin our lives ... all these things make geographers skillful and employable.

Source: *A different view: a manifesto from the Geographical Association* (www.geography.org.uk/adifferentview).

Geography helps young people to become more world-aware and outward-looking. Geography helps make more rounded and more capable individuals. In an increasingly challenging and

unpredictable world, young people need geographical (world) perspectives on which to base resilience, imagination and social understanding. In short, we believe **geographical understanding is an essential attribute of an educated person.**

A question of balance

In recent years, geography and other subjects outside 'the core' have suffered. The self-evident importance of geographical knowledge 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:

- In some schools, the relentless focus on literacy and numeracy has resulted in rigid curriculum hierarchies. This has constrained the opportunities for professional development – and even career development – in subjects outside the core.
- The increasing demands on schools, including citizenship education, personal, social and health education, enterprise education and vocational courses at 14–19, put immense pressure on curriculum time.
- There has been a loss of faith by some commentators in the ability of so-called 'traditional' subjects to adequately meet the needs of young people. In part, this reflects a belief that subjects are losing 'relevance' for the 21st century, and that in the modern age knowledge quickly becomes out of date. This is a mistaken view of knowledge – which is not the same as 'information' – and one based on very restricted understanding of the subject disciplines. It has been reinforced in recent years by a sustained focus on teachers' classroom skills and overly technical definitions of 'high quality teaching'. Thus, for example, geography teachers are rarely given the opportunity to enrich, deepen and develop their subject knowledge.

- Contemporary professional rhetoric has shifted from 'teaching' to 'learning'. Under its thrall, some schools have introduced skills-based or competency-based programmes based on integrated studies. By definition these courses are taught by non-specialists. There is evidence over many years that shows how difficult it is for teachers to provide such programmes with sufficient challenge and interest for the students. Unfortunately, it is usually geography and history that are lost in an integrated curriculum.
- Research by the Historical Association³ reveals that 35% of academies and 20% of comprehensives report an overall decrease in teaching time for history at key stage 3. There is little reason to doubt that the situation for geography is likely to be similar. Moreover, many schools are condensing the National Curriculum at key stage 3 into two years instead of three. For most young people this is the only time in their education where they will receive specialist teaching in all subjects.
- The immense pressure on schools to improve results – particularly in 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' (CVA) for the school. In some schools – especially in more deprived urban areas – young people are locked into pathways decided by the school, resulting in a loss of opportunity to study geography at GCSE level. This limits career prospects, as well as narrowing the educational experience.

As Professor Alison Wolfe puts it: *'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.'*⁴





Inequality of access

The cumulative effect of the pressure on geography at key stages 3 and 4 is that many students are leaving school with worrying gaps in their knowledge and understanding, but also in their qualifications.

Recent research by the University of Birmingham⁵ shows that the highest percentage of geography GCSE entries are in the shire counties, and the lowest in Inner London boroughs, metropolitan boroughs and towns. Within comprehensive schools, geography entries tend to be larger in the highest performing schools (mainly suburban and rural) and smaller (even non-existent) in lower-performing schools (mainly inner city).

We believe that geography is of great value to all young people. However, the system seems to position it as of relevance only to 'academic' or more advantaged students. This is to be regretted. We believe that all students, no matter where they go to school, should have both the opportunity and sufficient time to learn about people, society and the environment.

What do students want?

Recent research with young people supports the case for strengthening the entitlement for high quality geography teaching for all students.

- Ipsos Mori research for the Geographical Association found that the vast majority (93%) of 11–14-year-olds 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 food, energy and water

come from, and to learn about how their world may change in the future.

Unsurprisingly, students 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.⁶

- Recent NFER research into the shape of the curriculum showed that students want a curriculum which is even more relevant to current issues, and to life after school. In key stages 2 and 3 they want variety and breadth in the curriculum; at key stage 4 they want choice.⁷
- We believe young people want to be well taught. They like to understand why they are being asked to learn something. Subject specialists, sufficiently secure in their own knowledge, understanding and enthusiasm, are more likely to be able to impart this convincingly, and to encourage students to pursue the questions and issues that intrigue them.

The Training and Development Agency (TDA) supports this view of the curriculum: 'Pupils across all ages agreed that "having an excellent knowledge of the subject they are teaching" was the most important quality for an effective teacher'.⁸

Notes

1. from Bonnett, A. (2007) *What is Geography?* London: Sage.
2. We acknowledge the work of the Nuffield Review of 14–19 Education and Training for England and Wales (www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk)
3. Historical Association (2009) *History Faces Extinction in English School*. Available online at www.history.org.uk/news/news_415.html (last accessed 15 February 2010).

4. Wolfe, A. (2002) *Does Education Matter?* London: Penguin, p. 254.
5. Weeden, P. (2009) *Inequalities in Curriculum Access at Age 14–16: A case study of geography*. PhD thesis (work in progress), University of Birmingham.
6. see www.geography.org.uk/download/GA_MC_PR_ADifferentView.pdf (last accessed 15 February 2010).
7. Lord, P. *What Young People Want from the Curriculum*. NFER/QCA. Available online at www.qcda.gov.uk/libraryAssets/media/NCAsummary.pdf (last accessed 29 July 2010).
8. www.tda.gov.uk/about/newsletter/nov2007/qualityandstandards.aspx (last accessed 15 February 2010).

Context

The Geographical Association (GA) is the leading subject association for teachers of geography. It works with over 6000 members in primary and secondary schools, sixth-form colleges, and further and higher education to 'further geographical knowledge and understanding through education'.

A short visit to our website (www.geography.org.uk) shows the activity profile of the GA.

Authors

This document was written by John Hopkin, GA President 2010–11, and Professor David Lambert, GA Chief Executive. We are grateful for materials and advice from Dr Richard Harris and the Historical Association.

Feedback

If you have any comment on matters raised by this document email rbuck@geography.org.uk, with 'Geography matters' in the subject line.

