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The future of geography in English universities

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The future of geography in English universities

Abstract

Geography in England is one of many university subjects that will be significantly restructured - with almost immediate effect - because of powerful external drivers altering research and teaching. In this commentary I want to speculate on the likely changes ahead, and to consider how university-based geographers in England might respond to them. Given the considerable international influence that geographers in England exert within the wider subject, this commentary ought to interest those working in other countries. Notwithstanding the perils of futurology, I consider some possible scenarios in the midst of a formative moment for higher education in the UK's largest country.

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The future of Geography in English universities

Geography in England is, one of many university subjects, that will be significantly restructured – with almost immediate effect – because of powerful external drivers altering research and teaching. In this commentary I want to speculate on the likely changes ahead, and to consider how university-based geographers in England might respond to them. Given the considerable international influence that geographers in England exert within the wider subject, this commentary ought to interest those working in other countries. Notwithstanding the perils of futurology, I consider some possible scenarios in the midst of a formative moment for higher education in the UK's largest country.

English university geography: three external drivers of change

The first of the three external pressures is the very poor state of Britain's public finances. In late 2010, the Chancellor, George Osborne, announced a massive cut in central government funding for British universities, amounting to an average of more than 70% for teaching, over the next five years or so. Research budgets have also been trimmed, meaning that the successor to the national Research Assessment Exercise (the Research Evaluation Framework [REF]) will, overall, see universities competing for pieces of a shrinking pie. This said, research income for science, technology, engineering and medicine (so-called STEM subjects) is likely to be relatively protected. However, the arts, humanities and social sciences will – it seems – increasingly have to fend for themselves as the level of 'guaranteed' public support shrinks prodigiously. The national research councils in these areas will have far less to allocate.

Secondly, in light of the need to reduce public spending, it was almost inevitable that the coalition government would accept some of the Browne Review recommendations (Browne *et al* 2010). This review, published in late 2010, presented far reaching proposals for the reform of university funding. It prompted the coalition government to recently raise the annual undergraduate fee baseline to £6000, going up to £9000 in 'exceptional circumstances'. It did so despite students across the country protesting on the streets in their tens of thousands. Central government will cover the fee costs per student upfront, in return for later repayment post graduation (depending on income earnings). The switch in the source of the income, with the lion's share now coming from undergraduates for

many degree subjects, will surely have significant effects on the character of universities and their constituent schools and departments. It marks the end of the period when bachelors students have paid 'top up' fees, since the new fees will be far more than a mere 'addition' to central government funding for degree teaching.

Finally, the third driver of change to universities in England is the National Student Survey (NSS). It yields a quantitative metric of a graduate's 'satisfaction' with their chosen degree in their chosen higher education institution. The NSS is now five years old, but only in the last two – it seems to me – has it assumed a central role in the governance of degree programmes in England and elsewhere. It is likely to be extended to taught masters degrees. The Survey scores are now appearing in various high profile university league tables and are, for this reason, increasingly capturing the attention of university vice-chancellors, presidents and deans. The NSS is set to have a far greater effect on student recruitment, the relative standing of a university's subjects, and a university's overall reputation than the 1990s regime of Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA) ever did.

In light of the two other external drivers, both of which the NSS predates, the Survey is likely to assume even greater importance. After all, if prospective degree students (with rights akin to consumers) want to gauge the relationship between fees charged by a university and the quality of the education they think they will receive, they need 'information'.

The effects of change 1: a stock-take of university geography in England today

What will be the fate of geography in English universities? The starting point is an understanding of the state of English university geography in 2011.² There are around 140 higher education institutions in England, ranging from world famous research universities to more regional organizations focussed on education and training. Together, they currently educate just over 1 million students, around a quarter of which graduate with bachelors degrees each year. Of the 140 English institutions, over 80 offer single or joint-honours degrees in geography – though not all have a separate department or school of geography. In Britain as a whole, there were

²The figures below are taken from the website of HESA, the Higher Education Statistics Agency. I also draw from the report of the 2008 RAE sub-panel on Geography and Environmental Studies. I realise that it is, in practice, impossible to talk about 'the discipline' and its future in abstraction from the fine details of how each geography school, department or division fits and sits within its specific faculty and university. In this sense, a key premise of this paper is open to challenge: namely, the premise that we can look at the future changes to English universities from the perspective of a *discipline* rather than myriad separate and competing institutions.

approximately 22500 students taking a degree in geography in 2008-09, of which 19500 were full time undergraduates. This last figure compares favourably with mathematics (22600), economics (23600), physics (11000) and biology (19000). It translates into something like 15000 full time geography undergraduates being educated in English universities specifically. They are taught by around 1000 academics, though the staff-student ratio varies considerably according to institution (varying from 1:5 to 1:>20).

The largest geography degree programmes, and the ones that attract the academically best qualified students, tend – almost exclusively – to be in highly research intensive departments. The latter, as has happened across British higher education, have responded to the pressure of periodic RAEs for over 25 years. Most of their staff are ‘research active’, and devote considerable amounts of time to grant writing, fieldwork, data analysis, theorising and all the rest. These leading geography departments, as is common elsewhere in the world, lie in a range of faculties depending on the institution – usually on one or other side of the physical science/social science, humanities and arts divide. In keeping with its historical origins, English university geography focuses almost equally on the natural environment and the material and imaginative environments of people – though, except in teaching, rarely on the intricate relationships and feedbacks between nature and humanity combined.³

Despite its research strength – as detailed in the report of the 2008 RAE sub-panel for Geography and Environmental Studies – English (and British) university geography is largely reliant on teaching income and a steady supply of new bachelors students to sustain it. On average, something like 60% of a geography department’s income comes from students, either from government or through fees. Of this income, most of it comes from undergraduates rather than taught masters or PhD students. This is especially true in ‘middle’ and ‘lower’ tier research-led departments, even more so in those that do not enter many or any staff into the RAE (now called the REF, and which will occur in 2014). The good news is that the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers), along with the Heads of British Geography departments, successfully lobbied to get physical geography recognised as a part-STEM subject for research funding. If the new government honours this recent agreement then it will place a floor – albeit thin for many departments – under declining research income

³The publications submitted by UK geography departments to the 2008 RAE suggest a relatively even balance in the volume of research undertaken by human and physical geographers.

from the Higher Education Funding Council and most of the national research councils.

The overall reduction in central government research funding – which may especially hurt the arts, humanities and social sciences (including human geography) – means that individual geography departments will, in future, be competing for a share of a smaller post-REF pie. This will further emphasise the importance of student fee income, and of teaching activities in many departments. For others, REF and research grant success will be absolutely critical.

The effects of change 2: what might happen to university geography in English universities in the future?

Will prospective undergraduates be willing to pay £6000 or more per annum to take a degree in geography – even up to £9000 in ‘exceptional cases’? To put that question in context, consider that the average yearly student fee charge for public universities in the US, Japan and South Korea is currently quite a bit less than this. Consider too that American geography – which scarcely exists in private colleges – is, relatively speaking, much smaller than it is in Britain. Yet official statistics indicate that US taxpayers still spend more on their universities as a proportion of GDP than Britain now does, and the post-Browne arrangements will see the private (student) contribution to higher education in England outstrip that of many OECD countries. Let’s assume the ‘worse case’ scenario of sharply increased average fees across numerous universities. The question I posed then has three basic answers.

First: it depends on what other disciplines do and how they package and price themselves. When I say ‘they’ I don’t mean to imply there will be a common or universal fee for subject X, Y or Z charged by all English universities. Instead, average national fees will vary per subject and, more relevant here, is the variable fees per institution. We can do little or nothing to alter this in a direct sense. Second: it depends on the kind of geography being taught at GCSE and A level, the two main pre-university gateway stages for prospective university students in England. Third: it depends on how university geographers, aided by their professional bodies (notably, the RGS-IBG), choose to package, teach and price honours degrees.

Each separate university and its senior managers will in large part, dictate the pricing side of this – but the packaging and teaching is very much in our hands. Underlying all three things are student assessments of the costs and benefits of a geography degree relative to their other options, in the broadest sense of both ‘costs’ and ‘benefits’. Understanding the nature of ‘market demand’ for

geography is clearly important. But it's even better if one can shape the market – indeed, in a sense, create and maintain it. This is only possible if you are pro-active and ensure that geography gives students an education that they come – through the very process of being educated – to value highly. We need to remember too that students will only come to university to read for a geography degree if they've first been inspired by their geography teachers – teachers who often present a very different sort of geography to that most university academics teach.

As things stand, most university geographers in England (and elsewhere in Britain) have little or no understanding of GCSE and A level geography. We simply hope that the high numbers of students taking the subject in the 14-16 and 16-18 age cohorts will continue to hold-up. But they may not. We further hope that, when university fees rise well above the current £3290 per annum in many institutions, the same number of students will continue to see the value of doing a geography degree post-A level. But, again, they may not. The new government is currently reviewing pre-university education in the round. It released its first educational White Paper, 'The importance of teaching' (Department of Education, 2010) just after the Browne Review was published. It is ambitious and wide-ranging in its recommendations, and GCSEs, A levels and teacher training all stand to be affected, among many other important things. This review process needs university researchers and teachers to be engaged with it.

What of our current degree programmes? The NSS, for all its manifest flaws as a measurement tool, suggests that a great many geography graduates are 'highly satisfied' with their educational experience. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) – a British government data collection body – also reports that geography graduates secure 'good' or 'very good' jobs, and that they secure these jobs quite quickly once they've left university. The Higher Education Careers Services Unit concurs in its latest 'graduate destination survey' (HECSU, 2010). In light of these measures, many geography departments are clearly 'delivering' for students. Perhaps all that is required, when fees rise significantly for many degrees, is a bit more polish in the recruitment brochures, web materials and on student open days – not least because sometimes sceptical parents still think geography equates to map reading and memorising facts about the earth (that is, they can't see how it makes their children 'employable'). Once through the door, future students will – like present day ones – benefit from more of what we currently teach, and from the (apparently) effective ways in which we presently teach it.

There is, however, a counter-view. The scenario just described may apply only to a handful of geography departments, typically those that are research-led, based in well-established universities with high reputational capital, and which attract the children of middle class parents who can afford the 'luxury' of an apparently non-vocational degree experience.⁴ Even then, these students could well expect more contact time with academic staff (as opposed to graduate students and post-doctoral fellows), more small group teaching, a very well organised and well justified curriculum, more labs, more practicals, exotic and memorable field experiences, and so on. These expectations could also well extend to students in other geography schools and departments in the newer and smaller universities. In addition, the latter students – perhaps coming from a wider range of income and socio-cultural backgrounds – could well expect their geography degree to downplay 'academic' issues in favour of 'skills development' and 'practical knowledge'.

In effect, 'market segmentation' – which currently exists anyway – would create newly revised and further tailored geography degree programmes, depending on the institution. Even in the 'leading' universities like Oxford and Cambridge, more time may be devoted by 'core staff' to undergraduate teaching and ancillary activities and far less to research. This would come as a major culture shock for many, acculturated as we are to 'performing' for successive RAEs and to the idea that peer esteem derives mainly from being a 'successful' researcher, thinker, grant winner and author. Pedagogic publications could, relatedly, take on a heightened importance in career progression. Indeed, the quality of these publications could, on average, increase and involve the considered use of multi-media far more than they currently do.

In sum, if – as seems certain – fees for geography degrees in England do increase appreciably from 2012, it is very possible that (i) overall student numbers will decline, (ii) degree programmes may have to be reformed, significantly in some cases, and (iii) more staff time may be devoted to preparing, delivering and supporting teaching with consequences for sabbatical provision.

Making the future of university geography in England

What, if anything, should we be doing given the uncertain future we face in English university geography? Thinking ahead, different

⁴That is, geography departments in so-called Russell Group institutions whose leaders have, in the main, been supportive of the fee cap rising significantly – though they rightly have a strong desire to widen access to students from non-conventional and poorer backgrounds. Similar noises have been made by members of the so-called Group of 94, a collection of 19 smaller research-intensive universities.

geographers in different English universities can act alone and in competition. That scenario is rather unpalatable because it would surely allow smaller or less savvy departments to go by the wayside, as deans and vice chancellors restructure their faculties. Alternatively, we could do something that doesn't come easily to many academics: namely, join forces and take some pre-emptive measures in the common interest rather than the interests of individual universities and separate lobby groups. This presupposes that enough of us see some virtue in having the current (high) numbers of geography undergraduates and geography degree programmes in England as a whole. I realise that this presupposition is open to challenge. The measures I have in mind (see below) are largely institutional rather than matters of intellectual or pedagogical substance – those substantive issues would have to be debated using some of the institutional arrangements I'm proposing.

To what ends are my suggestions directed? As I said above, the best way to 'respond' to any student 'market' in degrees is to shape that market yourself. The long-term viability of university geography in England depends upon creating a supply of prospective undergraduates – not just to keep us employed in our current numbers, but because we take conscious ownership of, and believe in, the subject whose image and substance we collectively construct through our research and teaching efforts.

The measures I have in mind are these, and I regard the first three as especially important. First, review the role of the Heads of Geography Departments committee/conference. One idea is to raise its profile and for its members to give it greater authority. As now, the meetings should be facilitated by the RGS-IBG, but should they now become a formal part of the current Society committee structure? Should the meetings be more frequent, last longer, discuss matters of strategic importance, make clear decisions and recommendations, and be widened to include those academics charged with coordinating undergraduate curriculum issues in their home departments and schools? If so, the meetings could also create the necessary networks for the exchange of ideas, innovations and intelligence insofar as they pertain to teaching degree students. The nominated chair could be more empowered, in consultation, to set meeting agendas and push forward agreed actions. By definition, this chair would be a widely respected person who is persuasive, diplomatic and proactive.

Each geography department in England would need to commit (more) travel and accommodation monies to make attendance at the meetings possible and frequent for the relevant individuals. These

individuals would form an effective and representative community. The meetings and the attendees would, together, comprise a 'nerve centre' for university geography of the sort we don't really have at present.⁵ They might be able to do a range of things that the current RGS-IBG committees that cover university geography are unable to do. And they might act as a bulwark, of sorts, against the fissiparous tendencies emanating from separate universities each seeking access to the new student market. Heads would need to develop a highly corporate spirit and to balance local agendas with a wider sense of the discipline's well-being in England. This, I realise, is a significant challenge.

Second, building on their recent, fruitful collaborations, the RGS-IBG should interface more continually with the Geographical Association (GA) on pedagogical matters in schools. This, of course, requires time and money – both of which are often scarce. But the two organisations' joint work since 2006 on the central government funded Action Plan for Geography has been excellent (and hugely beneficial for British geography in all its constituent elements). It would be good to think that this sort of collaboration could be sustained. Linked to this, more university geographers – perhaps those mentioned in point one above – should, through the RGS-IBG, engage directly with the GA on the GSCE and A level curricula.⁶ Together, the RGS-IBG and the GA have extensive networks and connections in the arenas where pre-university geography curricula are debated, designed and implemented. This is a potentially important time for school geography because the 'national curriculum' is up for review, and the new government is also looking carefully at the elements of the new Baccalaureate qualification. The latter could bolster GCSE Geography numbers. A levels are also likely

⁵In saying that I am not disrespecting the various university-related committees of the RGS-IBG. My point is that these committees, because of their remit and membership, do not bring together the representatives of the relevant university departments, schools and divisions. The current heads of geography department meetings are relatively infrequent and not enjoy the prominence or influence that other RGS-IBG committees do. The comparison with the US is not favourable here, where Ken Foote and his predecessors have – through the AAG – done much to bring heads of departments together.

⁶Most British geographers, I suspect, give the GA nary a thought. However, Peter Jackson and Stuart Lane – both leading figures in international human and physical geography respectively – assumed editorial positions for the GA's journal *Geography* three years ago. This demonstrates that some in university geography see the value of connecting with the world of pre-university geography. I note too that David Lambert, the GA's current head and a Professor of Geography Education at London's Institute of Education, has been keen to liaise with the RGS-IBG and, in his own pedagogic publications, to keep abreast of the latest geographical research. On several occasions David has argued that every geography degree programme in the UK should have a staff member (or members) who subscribe/s to *Geography*, and possibly to *Teaching Geography* the professional journal for secondary school teachers (there's also *Primary Geography*, focussing on pre-11 geography teaching).

to be reformed (see Department of Education, 2010). The Geography curricula should be intellectually rich and stimulating for students and equip them with the basic knowledge and skills that we aim to enhance in our own degree programmes.

One arena where there is a conspicuous absence of input (and reciprocal learning) from university geographers is that of teacher training. Prospective geography teachers gain their post-graduate certificates in education (PGCEs) from universities, yet are instructed by staff who, often, have little or no interaction with academic geographers or geography research, usually because these staff are based in departments of education. Many of these staff are non-permanent and hired to teach on a per module basis. Full-time staff are typically contracted to teach pedagogy in a 'how to' sense, meaning they're not actively researching the pedagogy of geography teaching themselves (though some, of course, *are* – see, for example Graham Butt's book *Geography, education and the future*, 2011). Nor do many of these staff have the time or inclination to learn from university geographers about teaching – as showcased in the each issue of the *Journal of Geography in Higher Education (JGHE)*. The reverse also applies, of course, and I wonder how many teacher trainers in geography have any connections with their local university geography department or school. The disconnections between university geography and pre-university geography are potentially harmful, and they can only be addressed if sufficient will and resource is there to address the problem.⁷ The problem is long-standing and, as with some of my other recommendations, it is unfortunate that a looming 'crisis' in English universities has been required to make this writer recognise its severity.

Third, careful curriculum design is a must for university geography departments. But does it occur in all?. These days, geography lacks a canon and is thoroughly heterodox. In itself, this is not actually a virtue; how often do we lament, in our books and journals, the 'disunity of geography'? But geography's pluralism can be *made into a virtue* for students through the sort of intelligent curriculum planning that modularisation, research buy-outs of staff, and rolling sabbatical arrangements for up to 20% of a department's academics have made tricky to achieve. I'm arguing that if we're to

⁷The challenges are not, however, wholly internal to university geography. The external environment – the world of GSCE and A levels and of teacher training – is very complex and quite hard to access. It is down to central government to create better conditions for universities to shape the world of pre-university education. The final seminar in the ESRC-funded series 'Engaging geography' shows that there is a strong minority of individuals within and outside the world of university geography in England keen to enter into dialogue. Go to <http://engaginggeography.wordpress.com/>

give future generations of students a 'valuable' degree experience that may cost them a lot of money, then we need to do it on our own terms. That requires thought, deliberation and considered planning. It poses the big questions about why we teach, what we teach, and how. It also requires wide consultation and the 'buy in' of pretty well all staff in any given department. Because of geography's breadth and diversity as a subject, it offers usually high potential for different departments to consciously niche themselves pedagogically. This is surely a plus-point for the subject as whole and for individual programmes.

In the fourth place, it is very possible – if the current Research Evaluation Framework plans are a harbinger – that the 'impact' of research will, in future, become a key measure of any discipline's perceived social value. I mean impact in the *widest* sense, not just academic impact (as measured by citation counts). Here I think geographers in English universities are well placed, in two senses. On the one hand, the large amount of applied, policy-relevant, community-based or otherwise 'engaged' research being done offers large potential for demonstration of various kinds and levels of 'impact'. Danny Dorling's research (alone and with various colleagues) into socio-spatial inequality in Britain is one of several examples I could cite (Dorling 2010). But, on the other hand, this sort of research 'impact' has a bearing on teaching, because many degree programmes could – if they wished – build in 'service modules' in which students connect the academic and the 'real world' by undertaking local project work of benefit to communities and institutions on the door step. (Jane Wills, at Queen Mary College, University of London, has been one of several pioneers in this regard (Wills 2009). Her students have undertaken projects in East London – including on-campus ones – relating to low paid workers, many of which are overseas immigrants). Equally, applied, 'real world' project work can be built-into the design of many otherwise conventionally academic degree modules. This already happens to some extent, but there is potential for more innovations along these lines in the future. We have something to learn here, perhaps, from several US geography programmes, where civic engagement is a key part of a student's degree experience.

Finally, it may be time to revisit the national subject 'benchmark statement' for Geography. I'm not persuaded this statement is much used or has much influence anymore (if it ever did). However, a coordinated attempt to revisit it could catalyse a wider discussion of the way geography presents itself to external parties and stakeholders. What 'knowledge', 'competencies' and 'skills' are characteristic of a geography graduate? What is the substance of a rich and rounded 'geographic education'? Given the

uncertain future ahead, the stories we tell others about geography and the narratives we construct will be very important. They need to be clear and compelling, and contain engaging cases and instructive examples. We should recall too that geography, as is the case in many other countries, has a weak public image – notwithstanding its popularity as a school and university subject. This image has also been known to influence university managers who should, in theory, know better. Currently, the RGS-IBG – led by Rita Gardner – does an excellent job in lobbying central government (doing so on educational matters with the Geographical Association). But careful attention needs to be paid to our ‘local’ narratives too, at the level of different institutions across England.

Conclusion

These suggestions for pre-emptive institutional change may make it sound like all’s not well with university geography in England. Despite the public funding malaise, the Browne Review and the NSS, the subject is in a position of some considerable strength. This presents us with significant potential to make the future of geography, rather than having it made for us by others. But it will, perhaps, be necessary to make some changes within and between departments, and sooner not later. It will also – and this is challenging – be necessary to repair some of the burnt bridges separating university geography off from the world of teachers, schools, teacher-trainers and curriculum authorities. A century ago, a small number of university geographers in England and elsewhere worked hard to create a subject that is, today, far larger and more buoyant than they could possibly have imagined. Is this one of those critical moments when concerted and coordinated action of the sort we’re nowadays unaccustomed to taking is warranted?

If my argument has appeared all too ready to accommodate the current challenges it’s because I think we have little choice to work within the new parameters set by them. I’m not being defeatist: I’m simply acknowledging the limited ability – both imaginatively and in practice – that British academics now have to resist imposed changes from outside and above. Nor am I being coldly opportunistic: it would be wrong to interpret this essay as a call to ‘do what it takes to survive, regardless’. The proverbial rules of the game are, it seems, changing. Fortunately, there are many different ways to play any game. To say that the future of university geography in England will be ‘interesting’ is probably to understate the case significantly.

Acknowledgements

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