The future of higher education: Response from the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)

1. The Royal Geographical Society (with The Institute of British Geographers) welcomes this opportunity to comment on the inquiry into the future of higher education.

2. The Society is the Learned Society and professional body for geography and geographers. It was founded in 1830 for the advancement of geographical science. The Society maintains a strong overview of the discipline, its position and its practice in schools, higher education, and the workplace, including professional accreditation. We advise on and support its advancement, dissemination and practice in these realms and within wider public engagement and policy. We have 15,000 members and Fellows and our work reached more than five million people in 2010.

3. Our response concerns the perceived implications of the changed landscape of funding for the study of important subjects that contribute significantly to the workforce and which are not seen by parents and pupils as vocational in a strict sense. The changed funding landscape will place pressure on all institutions and courses to differing degrees, and on parents and students in making their choice. This applies to many of the disciplines identified as facilitating disciplines in the recent Russell Group Report, including geography.

The evidence for the employment benefits of training geographers to UK plc

4. Geography, for example, is an intellectually challenging subject. It requires: an understanding and application of scientific logic, principles, methods and laws; flexibility and openness of mind to deal with a range of different conceptual paradigms in both human and physical geography (transcending the natural and social sciences and humanities); an ability to develop and test hypotheses and to integrate ideas; and analytical capabilities to collect/select, analyse, present and interpret primary and secondary datasets, especially spatial data, and to understand and visualise complex data.

5. Geography graduates are highly employable and the skills, knowledge and understanding gained through this training are in demand and of need to the UK economy. Most geography graduates are numerate, literate, good team workers, can think analytically and critically, can analyse, interpret and present data, and are highly computer literate. They also have an understanding of the social and environmental issues of our time. Geography consistently attracts large numbers of high quality students with excellent A level grades and a wide range of A levels often including at least one other science subject. Evidence of the high employability and the relevance of geography to employers can be seen in the following studies:

6.1 The most recent Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) survey of university graduates (2010) showed the unemployment rates for geographers to be among the lowest recorded, second only to law.

6.2 Analysis of a randomly selected sample quarter from the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (First Quarter 2010) substantiates this. Using graduates of sociology, media studies, history, and chemistry/physics as a varied group of comparators: geography graduates show a relatively high employment rate (85% in full time or part time jobs, overall average 82%; chemistry/physics 78%); 67% of geography graduates in employment work in professional and managerial jobs (second highest to chemistry/physics (78%), and significantly higher than media studies (54%) and sociology (56%);and 74% of geography graduates earn more than £20,000 per year, above the overall average of 70% (behind chemistry/physics 87%; but well ahead of sociology 68% and media studies 50%).

6.3 A recent survey by geographical information business ESRI (UK) (published November 2010) of 200 business leaders across the public and private sectors showed that the skills they are looking for in future employees are critical thinking (nominated by 78% of businesses leaders as key for graduates), advanced analytical skills (76%), understanding and interpreting complex data (71%), advanced technology skills (57%) and understanding socio-economic environments (54%) – all of which are gained through a geography degree.

6.4 In a modern world where an estimated 80% of business decisions are underpinned by location, it is hardly surprising that the geospatial industry is growing rapidly and of significant importance to the UK's technology base and international competitiveness. Knowledge of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and its applications in business to make money or to yield efficiency savings and in the public sector to better target funding and resources, means that geography graduates who are able to illustrate an understanding of these technologies are increasingly sought after.

6.5 The environment sector is also a varied, vibrant and vital part of the UK economy and society. It relies on highly skilled people who, through their knowledge and innovation, ensure that the UK provides international leadership and solutions to the long-term challenges we face; continues to attract inward investment of high-value business; and becomes a world leader in new areas of growth such as low carbon goods and services. The National Environment Research Council (NERC)/Environmental Research Funders' Forum report (2010) on professional skills needs in the environment sector, which draws on the perspectives of more than 140 employers, highlights 15 critical skills gaps. Training in geography contributes significantly to the development of between five and seven of those skills areas, depending on the specific geography programme.

6.6 In addition, geography is a key provider of the knowledgeable personnel required across the wider business, management and commerce sectors as firms increasingly become environmentally aware and socially responsible. The buoyant demand for geographers reflects the knowledge value-added in the course of their higher education, together with their strong transferable skills base.

The concern that parents and young people will be poorly informed about the choices available and will seek courses that appear to be vocational in a 'high fee' scenario

7. Course choices made by young people depend on the quality and accessibility of information available to them on course choices. The lack of data has been recognised by the recent HEFCE, Universities UK and GuildHE consultation on proposals for giving prospective students useful information about higher education courses. Without this information, there is a risk that parents and young people will, under a 'high fee' scenario, may be more likely to seek vocational courses with a more visible 'up-front' career and income stream post-course. This will be to the detriment of those courses that are more discipline based, such as geography that deliver great employability benefits (as shown above – section 6).

8. Prospective students should therefore be able to access quality information on skills, employability and career paths relating to all courses. Access should be as easy as possible, and focus on the evidence of mid to long-term opportunities from different subjects.

The concern that universities will fail to support teaching of geography adequately as a relatively high cost subject to teach

9. There is a risk that high cost, but important elements within geography – training in fieldwork, laboratory work and geographical information – will be put under increasing strain under possible pressure to cut teaching budgets, and without which skills of need and use by UK plc will be lacking.

10. Geography has long been regarded as a part-laboratory subject, a status justified largely on the grounds that almost all research active Departments of Geography maintain scientific research laboratories, often highly sophisticated, with technician support in order to deliver departmental research agendas and meet the needs of both research and teaching staff in physical geography. These essential science infrastructure costs are further augmented by field equipment and by Geographical Information Systems (GIS) and Remote Sensing computer-based needs. This is an especially important element of teaching at a time when environmental issues of concern to physical geographers (for example, climate change, fluvial processes and flooding; Arctic/Antarctic dynamics and melt, sustainable development) are some of the most pressing ones facing society and government.

Mitigating the identified risks

11. We urge that mitigation measures are put in place and funded by the government to ensure that young people and UK plc benefit from the range of skills that studying geography brings and that universities are supported with a contribution to teaching funding in the current Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) re-allocation of support.

12. The Society made the case successfully to Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) for geography to be given part-STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) designation – through a 50% ring-fenced allocation – to reflect and preserve the breadth of the environmental science research base. This should continue to be reflected, both for funding of research and teaching.

13. There is an urgent need for parents and students to be better informed about choices open to them for study and opportunities for employment arising from that – beyond the limited 6-month Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) surveys.

14. In helping to achieve that, we urge the Committee to recognise also the role that Learned Societies have to play in initiatives to raise understanding of those opportunities and employability relating to their subject areas of expertise. Certain of the Learned Societies and Professional bodies have expertise and networks that link young people, their teachers and parents, with universities and professional communities. The advice and guidance given is of the highest quality, independent, and inspirational, drawing on the expertise and practice of their Fellows and members. The focus is on the young people and on opportunities.

15. We also urge Committee to recognise the role that existing Ambassador programmes – such as the geography ambassador programme run by the Society – play in informing young people about careers and especially in widening participation and access of young people to higher education. The Society's Ambassadors programme recruits, trains and supports geographers currently at university and graduate geographers from the workplace to act as ambassadors for geography in the classroom. The ambassadors are able to introduce younger students to the benefits of studying at university, of studying geography and encourage them to pursue the subject further, acting as positive role models for pupils and illustrating specific and transferable skills that can be developed as a geographer and how they are used in the workplace. The scheme also offers schools the opportunity to strengthen links with their local Higher Education Institute and businesses.

16. Through the Geography Ambassadors programme, more than 1,200 presentations about the relevance of geography to further study and careers were provided to 37,000 school pupils last year alone. Having started in 2006 by providing visits to just ten schools, the Ambassador programme has grown rapidly and now covers all nine English regions and recruits Ambassadors from 47 universities and many different geographically-driven professions. Ambassadors play a key role in inspiring and raising awareness of opportunities and benefits of higher education amongst hard to reach communities in inner city schools, thus contributing significantly to the widening participation agenda.

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