

Student number controls and teaching funding

● Consultation on arrangements for 2012-2014 and beyond

1. Summary

This response relates to HEFCE's proposals on student number controls and teaching funding in relation to geography specifically. It is submitted by the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) and the Council of Heads of Geography departments, the two key bodies that represent the geography higher education community in England. The response is based on detailed consultation with >40 heads of geography departments (or equivalent) in institutions across England, and takes into account the views of the two submitting organisations too.

We comment on three key areas relating to teaching funding support for geography, namely:

1. The principles on which HEFCE supports disciplines with additional teaching funding
2. Delivery and the comparison with Archaeology
3. The re-allocation of Geography from Band C2 to Band C1

Our conclusions are that:

- We are concerned that HEFCE has not fully thought through a logical approach to additional teaching funding support.
- Geography is being penalised for having delivered on the governments agendas much more fully than comparator disciplines such as archaeology.
- Both TAS and TRAC returns to date are seriously flawed because in the great majority of institutions neither have captured the significant costs of field teaching in geography degree programmes (both staff time costs and direct costs); and going forwards from 2012 those costs will be fully met by institutions. Taken together they place geography average teaching costs over the £7,500 threshold and into Band C1.
- In general, both TAS and TRAC data reporting also need a proper overhaul if they are to be used in future to allocate resources, a purpose for which they were not originally designed.

We also add our views briefly at the end on:

- Support for part-time students
- Support for postgraduate courses
- Accelerated programmes

2. The logic of HEFCE teaching funding support

We are unclear as to why HEFCE has taken the approach it has in proposing teaching funding support. We understand that HEFCE has created a threshold of £7,500 in terms of which subjects receive additional teaching support (above the threshold) and which ones do not (below the threshold). We also understand that £7,500 was the Government's planned average fee level. However, this figure is now arbitrary given the responses by universities in setting fees in many cases at £9,000.

Logically, surely, if institutions are charging fees that are higher than reported teaching costs in any subject, they should not receive additional teaching support and vice-versa. By taking its proposed approach, HEFCE

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is effectively rewarding institutions who are charging higher fees with extra teaching money, while relatively disadvantaging those who have set lower fees across the same range of subjects.

However, if this threshold approach is adopted, HEFCE must then abide by the full implications of that and cannot play the arguments both ways. So, if a discipline can genuinely demonstrate that its teaching costs have been systematically under-reported as a result of omission in what is included in TAS and TRAC, and that this then places the average costs per student above the threshold line, HEFCE cannot then argue that those additional costs can be borne at the margin out of the (higher than anticipated) fees. A threshold approach, like any other, has to be applied fairly and uniformly.

3. Delivery and the comparison with Archaeology

Geography as a discipline has been most successful at delivering on government agendas. This includes:

- increased efficiency in teaching
- outreach to underrepresented groups through widening participation initiatives
- taught courses with high student satisfaction and retention
- attracted and retained well qualified students, with average intake tariff scores (grades at A level or equivalent) higher than all those applying to comparator disciplines
- sustaining good levels of demand well exceeding the number of places available
- training graduates who are employable with skills, knowledge and understanding that is in demand by employers
- training in strategic and vulnerable subjects – notably quantitative skills
- as a part-STEM subject it delivers much needed STEM skills

In doing so, staff/student ratios have risen, inevitably given greater efficiencies. This is particularly evident when geography is compared to peer-disciplines. Archaeology is a good comparator for geography -- the disciplines were placed in the same REF sub-panel by HEFCE; both disciplines have the same broad scope across STEM, humanities and social sciences; and both involve field teaching, lab teaching and desk-based teaching.

The average staff: student ratio is 30% greater for geography than archaeology (17:1 and 13:1, respectively, based on data reported for 2009-10 in The Guardian's university subject guide (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/series/university-guide-2012-subjects>))

Geography also is being taught effectively in a wide range of departments across the full range of institutions and student capabilities. Data provided by HEFCE show that for Geography ca. 50% of institutions teaching geography programmes are categorised in A and B Groups, whereas for Archaeology the figure is 80%. Institution types will vary in their overhead costs and cost structures, reflecting different teaching environments.

Taken together this has driven down 'average' teaching costs for geography and makes them lower per student than subjects taught more selectively. And yet it is the subject (Archaeology) that is taught more selectively at higher cost institutions, and which does not deliver any way near as much on government agendas as Geography, that is being further supported (indeed rewarded) by additional teaching resources. In the process Geography is effectively being penalised for being successful.

This is further evidence, in our view, that HEFCE might do well to think through logically what it is supporting and why with further teaching funding, especially in relation to subjects in Bands C1 and C2. A basic numerical approach has simplicity but it might not achieve the desired outcomes.



4. Re-allocation of Geography from Band C2 to Band C1

We recognise there are general problems with TRAC and the way it is implemented differently across Higher Education Institutions. We have heard this from just about every department we have spoken to. Here we do not dwell on those issues other than to say that TRAC must be fit for purpose, and applied in a systematic way, in properly reporting genuine teaching costs if it is to be used in the future as a basis on which to allocate resources (as well as to report expenditure).

Regardless of the general issues with TRAC, there is a specific problem that directly affects Geography more than any other discipline. This is how TRAC captures and costs fieldwork. All departments have indicated a systematic under-reporting of costs of teaching both through allocation of time for teaching staff (TAS) and the costs paid directly by students (travel, accommodation, food etc) and not included in institutional TRAC returns.

Fieldwork is integral and absolutely fundamental to the teaching and learning of geography. In the subject benchmark statement it is identified as an essential element through which geographers develop knowledge, skills and understanding.

<http://www.gaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/geography.pdf>.

These discipline-specific and transferable skills are needed and highly valued by employers¹. See, for example, the review published by NERC on Skills Needs in the Environment Sector (<http://www.nerc.ac.uk/funding/available/postgrad/skillsreview/index.asp?cookieConsent=A>)

Fieldwork is a component of teaching and learning for all students in their first year; and for most students in years 2 and 3, often with multiple field visits per year. While some is optional, in all courses some is compulsory. It is that compulsory fieldwork we focus on here.

If fieldwork is not properly funded in the future then it will become a vulnerable area. Its funding in geography is critical to this given the high volume of geography students compared with students in earth science and archaeology, the other two main field sciences in higher education.

4.1 TAS

It is clear from responses from institutions that institutions/departments make TAS returns to TRAC in very different ways. Some sample one member of staff for a week; some inventory all staff for certain weeks; some ask for returns over longer periods; other approaches are used too. All those with whom we consulted, indicated their institutions only do this for term time. Yet in many institutions undergraduate taught fieldwork is scheduled out of term time. Where fieldwork does occur in term time, the period of TAS record rarely coincides with fieldwork weeks.

¹ Geographers have amongst the best levels of employment upon graduation. Recent HESA surveys of university graduates showed the unemployment rates for geographers to be among the lowest recorded, second only to law. Analysis of a randomly selected sample by 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%).

On the infrequent occasions where fieldwork teaching time is in the period of report, TRAC also makes assumptions about a five day, 35 hour work week. This poses particular problems for documenting the full amount of time dedicated to undergraduate fieldwork teaching. Residential fieldwork is usually at least 7 days in duration, with staff having direct teaching contact with students for a minimum of 10 hours each day for the full period in the field.

Thus the TRAC allocation of teaching time to fieldwork, if present at all, is a gross underestimate. This is further evidenced by the fact that TRAC data in institutions consistently show a lower teaching cost in terms of staff time in geography than that predicted by department workload models. For the departments who provided data at this level of details to the RGS-IBG, their underestimation of annual teaching time, owing largely to lack of fieldwork teaching inclusion, is conservatively ca. 10%.

4.2 Direct costs of fieldwork

In many institutions students have paid directly for some or all of the costs of participating in taught undergraduate fieldwork. This is typically for flights, accommodation, local travel and food. Estimates from a range of institutions suggest these costs account for between 60% and 70% of the direct cost of the provision of taught fieldwork (excluding the costs of staff time). A number of institutions have explicitly stated that these costs paid directly by students are not included in TRAC; i.e. the gross direct costs for the teaching of fieldwork are not included. Estimates for this underestimate range from £400 to £1300 per student per year, depending upon the choice of study modules.

A number of departments have also stated that the cost of salary payments for fieldwork assistants (student demonstrators); fractional costs for research acquired equipment used on fieldtrips; and consumables for field based or subsequent lab based work are all not captured in TRAC.

Looking ahead, all institutions who have responded to us have indicated that from this autumn all costs of compulsory fieldwork will be covered by the institutions and there will be no charges (as there has been before) levied against students. Thus going forward we believe TRAC will more accurately capture the direct costs of provision, if not the full allocation of staff time. For optional field courses, students may be required to pay a top up contribution for more expensive field courses; but departments are clear that they can only charge modest extra amounts.

The net effect, strongly supported by evidence from departments, is that direct field teaching costs at a minimum of the order of £400/student/year have not been captured in TRAC, and neither has the costs of staff teaching time spent on fieldwork. Thus, there is clear evidence that teaching costs have been underestimated and are significantly greater than the £7380 reported in Appendix C of the consultation document. In the future these costs will be borne fully by universities given new approaches to supporting and funding fieldwork in the new high fees regime (outlined above).

We request that HEFCE appropriately adjust the teaching costs for geography listed in the consultation document to rectify these underestimates that have arisen as a result of systematic non-reporting; and re-classify geography in the C1 band.

5. Additional points in the consultation

- We support fully appropriate funding of part-time students. The experiences they have and the costs incurred (including some of the higher cost elements of teaching and learning in geography – fieldwork, quantitative methods, science lab based works) are in no way different to those of full time students.
- Funding beyond next year is needed for the adequate provision of taught postgraduate courses for the same reasons outlined re undergraduate students.
- We question how all the elements of a geography degree can be delivered effectively through an accelerated programme.