

The Education Committee Inquiry

● Call for evidence into the English Baccalaureate: Response from the Royal Geographical Society with IBG

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1. The Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) is the learned society and professional body for geography and geographers. 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. Each year the Society works, on a face-to-face basis with teachers and pupils from over 50% of English secondary schools¹ and our online educational resources receive 400,000 'user sessions' annually.
 2. **The purpose and benefits of the English Baccalaureate (E-Bac) and its value as a measure of pupil and school performance**
 - 2.1 The Society welcomes the overall framework and choice of subjects for the E-Bac and believes it will provide benefits to schools, universities, employers and most importantly young people. Above all, in our view it represents a quality attainment of learning in the key subject areas for pupils and an appropriate standard for appraising school performance. The Society believes, on the evidence it has of the requirements of Higher Education and employers, the E-Bac also provides the platform necessary for successful further study and careers.
 - 2.2 In our view, the recent expansion of 'vocation' courses for 14-16 year olds has reduced the opportunity for many pupils to encounter the rigorous knowledge, understanding and subject disciplinary skills that are provided by the E-Bac subjects. The Society regards the age of 14 as being too early for young people to 'leave behind' the benefits that are gained by studying the full range of E-Bac subjects. We support the recommendation of the Wolf Report that vocational subjects should represent no more than 20% of the curriculum for 14-16 year olds.
 - 2.3 Clearly, not every pupil will achieve the E-Bac. However, its introduction should help ensure that all schools provide a broad and balanced curriculum for all pupils, which can broaden horizons, aspirations and life chances rather than narrowing them. The less academically able pupils should, in our view, be encouraged to study some of the E-Bac subjects even if not able to attain full E-Bac levels of qualification. To this end we hope that performance targets will not inadvertently penalize schools that encourage pupils to aspire to the E-Bac, knowing that they may well not reach full E-Bac qualification.
 - 2.4 The reporting of the E-Bac in school performance tables has our full support as it will remove the unhelpful practice of schools including 'vocational' qualifications as GCSE equivalents. As the Wolf report identifies, *"In recent years, both academic and vocational education in England have been bedeviled by well-meaning attempts to pretend that everything is worth the same as everything else. Students and families all know this is nonsense."*²
 3. **The choice of subjects included in the E-Bac**
 - 3.1 The Society strongly supports the inclusion of English, mathematics, two sciences, a language and the choice of history or geography in the E-Bac. These subjects equip 16 year olds with the essential grounding in a core group of rigorous academic subjects. The subjects have credibility

¹ The Society's face-to-face work includes providing CPD training, online resources and networks for teachers; careers and further study workshops, study days and field visits for pupils; presentations from Geography Ambassadors, lectures and other events.

² Review of Vocational Education: Wolf Report 2011 pg 8

- with parents, with employers and within Higher Education. They also provide the necessary knowledge and skills base which is demanded by many employers.
- 3.2 The Society welcomes the Russell Group's Informed Choices report which identifies a similar range of E-Bac subjects for study at A Level as "facilitating subjects" which open up, rather than close down options for study at university³.
- 3.3 The Society particularly welcomes the inclusion of geography, alongside history and ancient history, within the Humanities strand of the English Baccalaureate. This support is endorsed by the Society's Vice-President for Education and its Education Committee⁴. The Society supports and welcomes the comment by the Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove MP, that "*The decision to include geography and history in the humanities section of the English Baccalaureate will mean that those subjects, which have seen a decline in the number of students pursuing them will at last see an increase.*"⁵
- 3.4 We do not believe that the number of subjects in the humanities strand should be expanded further.
- 3.5 The case for inclusion of geography in the English Baccalaureate rests on the fact that it is the subject through which students learn about the world – its people, places and environments. Of particular importance are:
- 3.5.1 The content of the subject. Geography is the systematic study of the world's surface; its characteristic physical and human features and landscapes, and their formation. It is how young people learn about Britain and the wider world they live in, and depend upon, for food, energy, water and other resources. Underpinned by core knowledge and concepts, geography is the subject that also teaches knowledgeably about the environmental, social and economic processes that differentiate places, that bring about changes to places (neighbourhoods, regions and countries) and that connect places together.
- 3.5.2 The nature of the subject. Geography provides an essential role in education that spans (and integrates) the human and natural sciences. This scope enables students to study how humans depend on, utilise and interact with the environment; interactions that lie at the root of many of our environmental challenges, (including climate change) in the world today, and that inform learning about sustainability. At school, geography GCSE is also the root for subsequent specialisation into A level geography, social science and environmental science.
- 3.5.3 Geography as the spatial science. In a world where some 80% of our data is geo-referenced, mapped and subject to spatial analysis, including much of the current free data being made available to communities, people need to know how to access and use this data to understand their neighbourhoods, towns and regions. Geography is the subject through which young people learn how to select, interrogate and interpret soundly such data. Geo-spatial analysis and visualisation is also a significant economic and employment growth area.
- 3.5.4 The rich subject-specific and generic skill mix that is learned through geography and which makes geographers very employable (see section 4.10). Subject specific skills include spatial skills, use of maps, computer-based mapping (GIS), fieldwork analytical skills, integrating complex data and ideas. Generic skills learned through geography include team work, IT skills, critical thinking, research, data analysis, report writing and problem solving.
- 3.6 Given the depth and range of material necessary to teach geography successfully at GCSE⁶ the Society does **not** support any moves to provide a combined or integrated humanities course at GCSE. Ofsted has identified that, at KS3, "broad humanities courses tended to focus on teaching generic learning skills rather than knowledge and understanding that was specific geography." In almost a third of the schools Ofsted visited changes (such as the integration of subjects) at KS3 were having an impact on the quality of what was provided as well as on the time available, resulting in less geography being covered⁷. The Society does not wish to see this experience repeated within any proposal for combined or integrated courses in geography and history at GCSE.

³ Informed Choices, Russell Group 2011

⁴ The Society's Education Committee includes headteachers and senior school managers, head of geography departments, geography teachers and geography PGCE tutors.

⁵ (Hansard 7th February 2011: Column 10)

⁶ We believe many historians would hold similar views about the importance of providing a discrete and coherent GCSE in history.

⁷ Ofsted Geography Learning to make a world of difference 2011 pg 31

- 3.7 The Society notes calls for the inclusion of Religious Education, which is already a statutory requirement to the age of 16, within the humanities strand of the E-Bac. The Society does *not* support its inclusion in the E-Bac with statutory status. If RE wishes to be included in the E-Bac then its statutory status at GCSE should be removed. Our view is based on a significant issue of principle concerning parity of choice across subjects that are statutory or non-statutory. We do not believe pupils would well served by being presented with an invidious 'option' in humanities between statutory and non-statutory subjects, a choice which does not occur elsewhere in the E-Bac. If RE was to be included with its statutory requirement, the Society fears that some school leadership teams would choose a 'route of least resistance' through which a GCSE in Religious Education becomes pupils' *de facto* humanities option. For example, a school could require KS4 pupils to study an extra hour of RE, alongside their existing statutory lesson. This would be enough time for a RE GCSE and hence remove the need for pupils to study either geography or history as part of their E-Bac. The E-Bac humanities option has been developed to specifically encourage more pupils to study GCSE geography or history. The Society fully supports the Minister of State for Schools Nick Gibb MP comment, "*One of the intentions of the English Baccalaureate is to encourage wider take up of geography and history in addition to, rather than instead of, compulsory RE.*"⁸

4. The implications of the E-Bac for pupils, schools and employers

- 4.1 The Society's considered view is that the E-Bac will ensure more young people have the opportunity to choose geography at GCSE and that it will raise the numbers choosing to study it. Since 2002 the number of English candidates entered for a GCSE in geography has fallen from 215,056 to 174,347 in 2010⁹. The Society welcomes, for example, the heartening news from the Ark Schools that the average take-up in geography GCSE has risen from 15% to 22% in 2010¹⁰. From anecdotal evidence we understand other schools are already reporting or anticipating an increase in take-up too. We welcome inclusion of information about the E-Bac in KS4 guidance and options materials that schools are providing to pupils and their parents¹¹. In all, it is good news for geography.
- 4.2 The Society believes the E-Bac will promote to head teachers and school governors the important contribution that geography makes to young peoples' education. The active support of head teachers is a necessary precondition if geography is to be supported and well taught. For example, a key finding in Ofsted's latest subject report on geography, identified that "*Where provision (in geography) was improving, it was usually because head teachers acknowledged the value of geography, invested in subject-specific training and monitored the curriculum effectively to ensure coverage of and progression through the programme of study.*"¹²
- 4.3 The E-Bac has a particularly important role in re-establishing geography as a GCSE course in the relatively small, but increasing, number of schools that currently do not enter any GCSE candidates in this subject. The Society is concerned that currently there are 137 maintained schools and 19 academies that did not enter any pupils for this qualification in 2009¹³.
- 4.4 There is a marked difference in the proportion of pupils who study geography at GCSE across lower and higher income bands. The Society thinks the E-Bac can help address this. For example, pupils in high performing maintained and shire-county schools are more likely to study geography than their peers in lower income or inner-city schools. For example, only 9% of pupils in Knowsley (142 candidates) were entered for a geography GCSE, compared to 20% of pupils in

⁸ (Hansard 31 Jan 2011: Column 553W)

⁹ Joint Council for Qualifications examination results www.jcq.org.uk

¹⁰ Amanda Speilman. Research and development director Ark Schools TES Letters 4.3.2011

¹¹ For example the following was included in material provided to pupils and parents at Graveney School, London. "Key Stage Four Course Choices ENGLISH BACCALAUREATE (EBAC). As you will be aware, the government is planning to introduce an overarching certificate to be known as the English Baccalaureate from 2012. This will be awarded to students who achieve A*-C GCSE passes in English, Maths, two sciences, a modern or classical language, and either history or geography. It will therefore recognise the student's achievement across a broad range of subject areas. Although some of these subjects are compulsory at Graveney, the school believes it is important that students choose optional subjects which they enjoy and at which they are likely to succeed. However, we strongly recommend that when you are discussing Key Stage 4 optional choices with your son/daughter you include the possibility of achieving the English Baccalaureate as one of your considerations."

¹² Geography: Learning to make a world of difference pg6 2011

¹³ Ofsted: Learning to make a world of difference 2011. The number of schools not entering pupils for geography GCSE has risen from 2007 when 97 maintained schools and 6 academies to the 2009 figures of 137 maintained and 19 academies.

- Inner London LEAs (4,681 candidates), 27% of pupils in Outer London LEAs (13,676 candidates)¹⁴ and 31% of pupils (1,238 candidates) in the East Riding of Yorkshire.
- 4.5 To maximize the successful provision of GCSE geography, through the E-Bac, the recent Ofsted recommendations should be enacted. Namely, that schools should improve the quality of provision in KS3, so preparing pupils well for KS4; provide subject-specific support and professional development to improve teachers' confidence and expertise; and maximise opportunities for fieldwork to enhance learning and improve motivation. All are essential, but enabling teachers to undertake subject-specific CPD will require a change in approach to CPD in many schools.
- 4.6 The Society has proven experience of successfully providing the subject specific support and professional development that Ofsted recommends, through our work on the DfE supported Action Plan for Geography¹⁵. This is a subject disciplinary initiative focused on the teaching and learning of geography in English schools and it has involved 1,700+ English secondary schools (50% of the maintained sector) in face-to-face CPD, curriculum development and presentations by Geography Ambassadors. More than 5,000 teachers have attended Action Plan CPD events and in evaluations of this CPD over 90% of teachers rated it as either good or excellent. Geography Ambassadors have provided presentations on key topics and about the relevance of geography to further study and careers to some 107,000 pupils. The Action Plan's online resources and support, have received more than 1.25 million 'user sessions'¹⁶. 95% of teachers who have used this website and provide feedback on it rated it as good or excellent. The Action Plan has had a positive impact on the range of support provided to teachers, and their confidence about being able to maintain or improve the quality and status of geography¹⁷.
- 4.7 It should be noted that Ofsted recently commented on the impact of the Action Plan for Geography, stating that, *"the best geography was usually seen in schools which were participating in the professional development programme offered through the Action Plan for Geography, in specialist humanities schools or where the school shared good practice with local partner schools."*¹⁸ Given the investment made by government in supporting geography teaching and learning through the Action Plan, this is heartening; but there remains still work to be done to improve quality among remaining underperforming schools and teachers.
- 4.8 The maintenance of subject-based professional standards, centred on up to date subject knowledge and pedagogy, is another essential element to high quality teaching in the subject. In our role as the Professional Body for geography, the Society has been offering the professional accreditation for individual Geography Teachers - Chartered Geographer (Teacher) - for the past five years. This accreditation was the first 'subject specific' Chartered accreditation to be offered to teachers. It provides a robust and externally assessed and validated mechanism for supporting and recognising geography teachers' professional standing and ongoing development. In addition to Chartered Geographer (Teacher) other comparable Chartered schemes, all meeting the requirements of the Privy Council for Chartered accreditation, are available for science and mathematics teachers and under development for history and English teachers. They will soon provide a ready-made suite of accreditations across most of the English Baccalaureate subjects.
- 4.9 There is some, as yet anecdotal, evidence concerning two possible negative implications for schools and pupils of the introduction of the E-Bac in relation to geography. These are largely related to the 'down sides of success' however they still present potential challenges. They are:
- (a) reallocation of subject specialist geography teachers into expanded GCSE classes, leaving more non-specialist teaching at KS3. This could exacerbate the weaknesses in geography at KS3 that Ofsted has identified. The same may apply to fieldwork, leaving fewer fieldwork opportunities at KS3.
- (b) A shortage of geography teachers. We have had Head teachers report to us that recruitment of quality specialist teachers to geography posts is often harder than to recognised 'shortage

¹⁴ Department for Education (2010) House of Commons Library Deposited paper DEP 2010-2161

¹⁵ The Action Plan for Geography 2006-2011 is funded by DfE and jointly and equally run by the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) and the Geographical Association.

¹⁶ A 'user session' is a discrete period of time when one individual user has access the website and is browsing its materials.

¹⁷ The Action Plan final evaluation (March 2011) has identified that 76% of respondents feel there is more support provided by the subject bodies for geography, when compared with 4 years ago. 96% of respondents feel either very or quite confident about being able to maintain or improve the quality and status of geography in their school. 46% of respondents reported increased numbers for GCSE, 20% similar numbers, 34% a decline (note: this survey was completed before E-Bac effect has been seen). 75% of respondents reported increased numbers at A Level, 7% similar numbers, 18% a decline (ditto). 246 teachers completed the evaluation from a cohort of 2,000 a response of 12%.

¹⁸ Geography: Learning to make a world of difference Ofsted February 2011

- subjects' such as maths and the sciences. Combine a greater demand for teachers owing to increased GCSE numbers, plus the continued reduction in the number of initial teacher education places provided for geography, and real problems in specialist teacher numbers in geography could emerge quickly. The Society welcomes Government plans to increase the numbers of teachers trained through Teach First, and we would be pleased to offer our support to that training and professional development to ensure a good supply of quality geography teachers.
- 4.10 The implications for employers and potential employees of the E-Bac containing geography would appear to be entirely positive. Young people will be trained with the knowledge and skills required by employers. Recent studies of graduates have demonstrated the employability of geographers.
- 4.10.1 A survey by Esri UK, a leading Geographical Information Systems business, (published November 2010) of 200 business leaders across the UK public and private sectors showed that the graduate skills/knowledge they are looking for in future employees are critical thinking (78% of businesses leaders), 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.
- 4.10.2 The NERC/ Environmental Research Funders 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. A training in geography contributes significantly to the development of at least seven of those skills areas.
- 4.10.3 The most recent Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) survey of university graduates (2010)¹⁹ showed the unemployment rates for geographers to be among the lowest recorded, second only to law.
- 4.10.4 Independent analysis of a randomly selected sample from the UK Quarterly Labour Force Survey (First Quarter 2010) further substantiates employability. This survey is of a sample of more than 100,000 residents in the UK of all ages. Geography graduates show a relatively high employment rate: 85% are working either in full time or part time jobs, compared with an overall average for graduates of 82%. Using graduates of sociology, media studies, history, and chemistry/physics as a varied group of four comparators within the analysis 67% of geography graduates in employment work in professional and managerial jobs, within the comparator group geography is second highest to chemistry/physics (78%) and significantly higher than media studies (54%) and sociology (56%). 74% of geography graduates earn more than £20,000 per year, above the overall average of 70%²⁰.

5. International comparators for the E-Bac

- 5.1 The Society notes and welcomes the fact that the Wolf Review identified *“retention of a large common (ie academic) core is consistent with recent developments and current practice among our European and other OECD partner nations.”*²¹
- 5.2 The Society also welcomes the attention the Department for Education is giving to learning from high performing international educational systems. We welcome Dr Tim Oates' comments that *“in all high-performing (international) systems, the fundamentals of the subjects are strongly emphasized, have substantial time allocation, and are the focus of considerable attention in learning programmes”*²².

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¹⁹ This survey collects employment data 6 months after graduation.

²⁰ This analysis was carried out in January 2011 by staff at Birkbeck College, London University

²¹ Review of Vocational Education – Wolf Report pg 11 2011

²² Could Do Better: Using international comparisons to refine the national curriculum in England 2010 Cambridge Assessment.