

Response to British Academy call for evidence on Skills in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

Summary of main points

Please provide a brief summary (e.g. a list of bullet points), of not more than one side of A4, of the essential messages you are conveying in your response.

- Geographers are uniquely trained to think both as social scientists and natural scientists and are both highly valued by employers (among the lowest post-graduate employment rates of any subject) and employed across a wide range of job types and sectors. They bring geospatial literacy and analysis, skills and techniques in Geographical Information Systems, and the integration of these with contextualised analysis and problem-solving.
- The Society communicates and reinforces the value of geography, and of geographical knowledge, understanding, skills and techniques, across the study and career lifecycle, from schools to Chartered Status for professionals using geography in the workplace.
- We support a broad definition of skills, and encourage a distinction in the course of analysis between subject-specific and shared/generic, and between skills and graduate “attributes”
- How well a skill is executed matters, because the application of skills in context is what creates value (for employers and society). The transferability of skills to different applications and contexts is a skill in itself and must be taught – geography has traditionally done this well through authentic contextualised and applied learning.
- In addition to knowing what skills AHSS develops, it might be important to know if graduates of AHSS can articulate these for their own subject and in comparison to other subjects (STEM students were not good at this, said the Wakeham Report).
- We support analysing the skills and attributes set out in Subject Benchmark Statements for AHSS, with these also benchmarked against Statements for STEM subjects. We note that different university courses will develop different skillsets within the same subject.
- Employer engagement will be critical to understanding skills in demand/use and jobs that are hard to fill (indicating a skills gap). However, skills are only one of many factors about an individual considered by an employer when recruiting.
- To further enhance a longitudinal view of the value of AHSS skills to certain sectors or job types, the project could use Labour Force Survey to analyse the relationship between study subject employment over the life course, and engage with a range of trade bodies and sector representative organisations, who variously represent individual and organisational members within specific job types, sectors or skill areas.
- Many of the government’s [Industrial Strategy green paper](#) pillars for success were underpinned by key skills and knowledge developed by geography, in particular: geospatial knowledge and understanding, more effective engagement with the interplay between natural and built environments, and improved use of natural and cultural resources and infrastructure.
- Interdisciplinarity works best when well-developed and distinct disciplinary skills and strengths are employed for a shared purpose.

Response to British Academy call for evidence on Skills in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

The Royal Geographical Society (with The Institute of British Geographers) welcomes this opportunity to comment on the British Academy Flagship Skills Project. The Society is the learned society and professional body representing geography and geographers. It was founded in 1830 for the advancement of geographical science and has approximately 14,000 members.

Geography bridges the social and natural sciences, and sub-disciplines of historical, social and cultural geography are among those that reflect many of the characteristics of arts and humanities in methodology or research focus. Geography's holistic and integrating nature, encompassing this broad range of perspectives, makes it ideally placed to relate to many other fields of knowledge. It develops a wide-ranging skillset and a transferability of skills, knowledge and understanding to different contexts, job types and sectors that is consistently considered valuable by employers and society – the annual “What Do Graduates Do” report by HECSU/Prospects for AGCAS reports that geographers are less likely to be unemployed after their degree course than those studying almost any other subject”¹.

1. *What do we mean by skills?*

- 1.1. We support a broad definition of skills with a distinction in analysis between subject-specific and generic/shared skills that sit across subjects. We make a **distinction between skills and (graduate) attributes**, a term commonly used by institutions to group together the specific combination of skills, (subject) knowledge, attitudes and values that are usually developed by an institution, and which make a contribution to the future professional life². Within geography, the development of graduate attributes is often broader and more encompassing than simply developing skills or “employability”, by addressing both active (academic/other) citizenship and career competencies (Hill, Walkington and France 2016)³.
- 1.2. An individual's ability to use and deploy their particular mix of skills, knowledge, attitudes and values to create benefit for themselves and others, including how they apply disciplinary knowledge to unfamiliar contexts and/or create new knowledge and applications, will change between jobs and over the course of a career. How well an individual demonstrates a particular skill is important because of the importance (to employers and society) of the contexts in which skills are applied, and the ability of individuals trained in different subjects to apply ‘generic’ skills in different ways. **Transferability of skills to different applications and contexts is a**

¹ What Do Graduates Do. HECSU: https://www.hecsu.ac.uk/current_projects_what_do_graduates_do.htm. and <http://news.rgs.org/post/153564709243/geographers-remain-among-the-most-employable>

² Graduates acquire these through successful completion of a particular course of study, and they are increasingly embedded within subject module teaching and assessment (see, as one example: <https://www.brookes.ac.uk/OCSLD/Your-development/Teaching-and-learning/Graduate-attributes/>).

³ Hill J, Walkington H and France D (2016) Graduate attributes: implications for higher education practice and policy. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, Vol. 40, Iss. 2, 2016 - <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03098265.2016.1154932>

skill in itself and must be taught; geography has traditionally done this well, through active, applied and authentic ('real-life') learning and teaching in and across the classroom, field, laboratory, digital (geospatial) environments and elsewhere.

- 1.3. **The ability of AHSS students to articulate the skills gained by studying a particular subject might need further investigation;** the Wakeham Review of STEM Degree Provision and Employability found that "In some cases, graduates do have the requisite skills and knowledge, but lack an ability to articulate these adequately in applications and at interviews and in assessment centres" (p62)⁴. Along these lines, this project might also ask whether AHSS students are capable of articulating what sets their skills apart from those developed by other subjects, and how their subject enhances or uniquely applies skills that might also be claimed/developed by other subjects.
- 1.4. We note that where students undertaking further study in AHSS combine this with employment (social scientists are especially likely to do this, see the [AcSS Campaign for Social Science](#) comments on graduate employment) **there may be differences in the skillsets of students in AHSS further study**, which is significant in co-funding and professional or employer/workplace supported PhD research (the AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Award scheme being one example). EURAXIND/Vitae are exploring the career development of PhD researchers in jobs outside academia: <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/researcher-careers/euraxess-uk-career-development-centre/euraxind/euraxind-survey>

2. What skills should the arts, humanities and social sciences develop?

- 2.1. Subject Benchmark Statements set forth a framework of knowledge, understanding and skills expected of graduates in any particular subject, both subject-specific and generic. We recommend **analysing the skills and attributes set out in Subject Benchmark Statements for AHSS, with these also benchmarked against Statements for STEM subjects or HE more broadly**⁵ to identify similarities and differences in claims for skills development. It would be useful to set out subject-specific and generic skills separately, especially any priority or weightings given to specific skills within individual subjects.
- 2.2. Since higher education institutions have significant autonomy in the way they implement, frame or apply weightings to the various elements of a subject's Statement (e.g. according to research specialisation or institutional mission), we expect to see that **different skillsets will be developed by different programmes**. These differences may set apart graduates from the same subject at different institutions.
- 2.3. The Society was instrumental in the establishment of the Subject Benchmark Statement for Geography, and coordinated the 2014 consultation and update for the current version. The Society **communicates and reinforces the value of geography,**

⁴ Wakeham Review of STEM Degree Provision and Employability; https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/518582/ind-16-6-wakeham-review-stem-graduate-employability.pdf

⁵ Universities UK Review of Skills: <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/Pages/review-of-skills.aspx>

and of geographical knowledge, understanding, skills and techniques, across the study and career lifecycle, such as:

- Our Going Places with Geography (www.rgs.org/GoingPlaces) and Study Geography websites (www.rgs.org/StudyGeography) reinforce the benefits of studying geography, the skills students can expect to develop, and the wide range of career destinations.
- Our Geography Ambassadors scheme (www.rgs.org/Ambassadors) reinforces and communicates the benefits and skills of geography to students in schools through practical activities and engagement.
- Our undergraduate programme accreditation scheme (www.rgs.org/accreditation) references the Subject Benchmark Statement for geography and uses expert peer review to assess whether applicant undergraduate geography programmes are delivering the necessary knowledge, understanding, skills, techniques and personal/professional attributes expected of graduate geographers. (We do not have additional criteria over and above the Statement, nor do we currently link programme and individual accreditation for professional recognition.)
- We work with geography departments and staff in higher education institutions on matters relating to employability and graduate outcomes.
- Our Chartered Geographer scheme (www.rgs.org/CharteredStatus) offers professional accreditation to individuals using geography in the workplace, with CGeogs preparing a reflective statement in their application on how their geographical skills and knowledge are being professionally applied, and making a commitment to the continual development of their geographical and other skills through annual CPD.

3. What skills do individuals who have studied AHSS demonstrate?

3.1. A valued characteristic of geography is its plurality of ways of knowing and understanding the world, taught as an integrated study of the complex reciprocal relationships between natural and human environments, interactions and processes. Geography brings, in particular⁶: The critical selection, interpretation, evaluation and synthesis of different forms of [geographical] information (texts, images, archival records, maps, digitised and laboratory data); the selection and application of appropriate spatial and temporal scales, and suitable specialist techniques, to the collection and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data; fieldwork, and applied learning such as in laboratories, using geospatial technologies and other digital tools, and integration of these with contextualised analysis and problem-solving. The ability to collect, use and present geospatial data and knowledge, especially in conjunction with other forms of data and information is increasingly valuable and in-demand in light of a rapidly evolving job sector embracing themes

⁶ Geography Subject Benchmark Statement (2014): <http://www.gaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/SBS-geography-14.pdf>

of big data and spatially-located (mobile) technologies⁷, and the importance of big data to evidence based decision and policy making⁸.

- 3.2. **Skills are only one of many factors considered by an employer when recruiting;** interpersonal fit, potential for growth / capacity for flexibility, and an ability to apply skills in a range of contexts are just some of the factors considered.
- 3.3. The HESA *Destinations of Leavers in Higher Education* surveys tell us little about longitudinal career opportunities and future development/contribution of those with AHSS skills because they are too close to the point of graduation. The **Labour Force Survey could be used to analyse the relationship between study subject employment over the life course** (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/surveys/informationforhouseholdsandindividuals/householdandindividualsurveys/labourforcesurvey/ifs>).
- 3.4. In addition to learned societies and professional bodies, we also recommend **engagement with a range of trade bodies and sector representative organisations**, who variously represent individual and organisational members within specific job types, sectors or skill areas. Contact with such organisations may also make it possible to engage with employers from a range of sectors and sizes (e.g. SMEs, anecdotally, being more difficult to reach.)

4. What contribution do individuals with AHSS skills make to society and the economy?

- 4.1. Arts, humanities and social sciences graduates **make contributions beyond economic, both collectively and individually**. Geography embeds concepts of (local and global) citizenship and civic engagement in its teaching and learning, in the fostering of specific skills in individuals, and in the development of graduate attributes and behaviours across the subject. The ethical views and approaches of students and graduates of geography have often been considered in pedagogical research⁹.

5. What skills do employers want? What skills are needed for the future?

- 5.1. The government's [Industrial Strategy green paper](#) contained 10 pillars for success (p11), many of which were underpinned by key skills and knowledge developed by geography, in particular: geospatial knowledge and understanding, more effective engagement with the interplay between natural and built environments, and improved use of natural and cultural resources and infrastructure.

⁷ AGI Foresight Report 2020: <http://www.agi.org.uk/about/resources/category/100-foresight?download=160:agi-foresight-2020>

⁸ ESRC Blog: What happens when we don't have good data <https://blog.esrc.ac.uk/2017/03/16/what-happens-when-we-dont-have-good-data/>

⁹ For example: special section on *Geography, Community Engagement And Citizenship* in the *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* (2013, <http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/cjgh20/37/1>).

- 5.2. Interdisciplinarity works best when well-developed and distinct disciplinary skills and strengths are employed: **The advance of knowledge is often cross-disciplinary yet strong disciplines are the basis for the excellent multidisciplinary work** (Walport, M 2015 All the talents: policy needs social science and humanities' input, THE October 22 p28-29).