

# Consultation Response from the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)

**Royal  
Geographical  
Society**

with IBG

Advancing geography  
and geographical learning

## • Purpose and quality of education in England inquiry. Education Committee

••• The Society is pleased to respond to the Education Committee inquiry on the purpose and quality of education in England

The Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) is the UK learned society and professional body for geography and geographers. The Society maintains a strong overview of the discipline, its standing and practice in schools, higher education, and the workplace, including professional accreditation. We advise on, and support the advancement of, geography; the dissemination of geographical knowledge to the public, policy makers and other specialist audiences including teachers, scholars, and those involved in expeditions and fieldwork; and training and professional development for practising geographers. We have 16,000 members and Fellows and our work currently reaches more than three million people per year. Each year the Society works with teachers and pupils from about 50% of English secondary schools, providing CPD support to over 1,000 teachers and our online educational resources receive 1 million+ 'user sessions' annually. The Society's Education Committee advises on its work with schools.

This consultation response, set out on the following pages, is not confidential and an official response on behalf of the RGS-IBG.

Please contact the Society if you would like any further details about our views and work.

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- **What the purpose of education for children of all ages in England should be**

Education should equip children and young people with the knowledge, skills and ‘environment’ to achieve their full potential, so that they can:

- progress into further study, should they wish
- develop successful careers
- become informed and engaged members of British society
- expand their social and cultural horizons

To do so, education should:

- enable children to gain a substantive set of knowledge through the physical and social sciences, the humanities and arts, including knowledge about the people, places and environments of the world;
- develop transferable skills including thinking, writing, mathematical, analytical and problem solving, communication, team and practical skills;
- gain a life-long curiosity and thirst for learning;
- encourage a sense of community within a supportive learning environment.

Within this, the study of geography provides a distinctive, relevant and essential contribution to a young person’s education. It equips pupils with knowledge about the world’s diverse people, places and environments while also guiding them to understand their local communities and places, and the UK as a whole. In addition, it enables them to understand how physical and human processes shape and change our world at all scales, and how they present opportunities and challenges for our economy, society and environment. Embedded in geography is the learning of a wide range of transferable and subject-specific skills.

The Society strongly supports the National Curriculum as the basis of a nationally agreed framework for the essential knowledge, understanding and skills that pupils should learn. The Society contributed to, and welcomed, the recent reviews of the geography National Curriculum and accompanying GCSE and A level examination. The outcome is a much strengthened curriculum with sound progression from KS1 to KS5 and good opportunities for learning through fieldwork.

The Society believes that teaching and learning, particularly from upper Key Stage 2 onwards, should be based on subject specialist approaches that are rooted in discrete subject disciplines. Such an approach provides young people with access to key areas of knowledge, understanding and skills and to different ways of thinking. Subjects are proven ways of exploring and understanding the world; which are open to ongoing academic review and revision, and form the basis of teachers’ engagement and excitement.

- **What measures should be used to evaluate the quality of education against this purpose**

**The English Baccalaureate**

The Society believes that it is right for the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) to be used as a measure to evaluate the quality of education. The EBacc identifies the range of core subjects - including geography as one of its humanities options – which most pupils should study as their academic core of knowledge and skills, from which to then further develop additional knowledge and skills.

Its use provides an unambiguous measure, without the distraction of ‘equivalent’ qualifications, of how many pupils pass the identified EBacc subjects at GCSE.

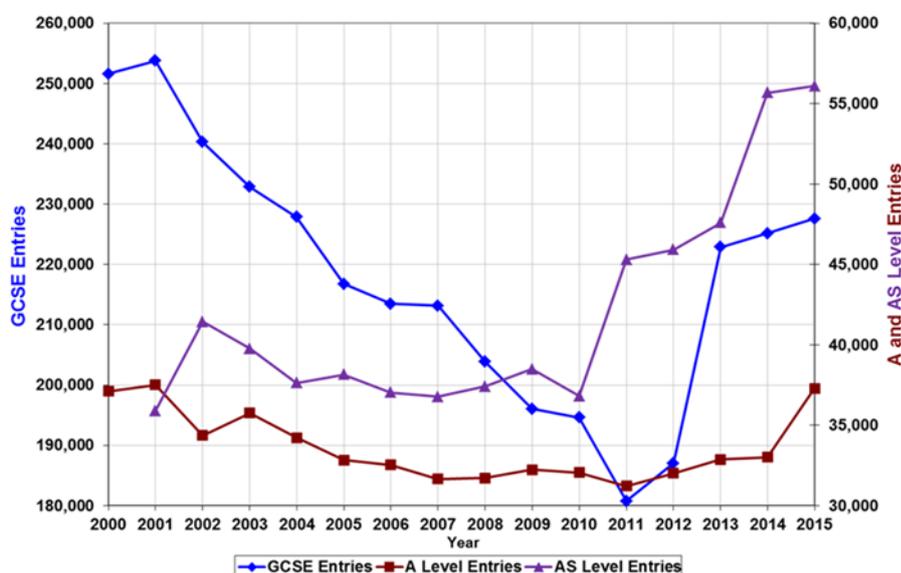
The Society is strongly supportive of the EBacc becoming the default option for (almost) all pupils, and considers that schools should be able to determine the small minority of pupils for whom taking the whole EBacc is not appropriate.

The rightful inclusion of geography within the EBacc has brought about a step change in the contribution of geography to school education and hence to young peoples' knowledge and understanding of the world in which we live and on which we depend.

The Society would wish to highlight the positive impact of the EBacc on the position of school geography. Moreover, A level geography is independently recognised as a 'facilitating subject' (Informed Choices, Russell Group of Universities 2011) and its graduates experience among the lowest levels of unemployment.

As shown in the accompanying graphic, entry levels for geography GCSE (and A Level) experienced significant decline during the early 2000s for reasons associated with the school targets existing at that time. Since 2010 the numbers studying geography at GCSE (and A Level) have recovered. This, we believe is beneficial to young people, for all the reasons given above.

**GCSE, AS and A Level Geography**



In providing new online resources, CPD training, inspiring and engaging presentations from our Geography Ambassadors and professionally accrediting teachers as Chartered Geographers, the Society has already supported teachers by responding positively to the opportunity of the EBacc. We celebrated this positive change in an opinion piece for the TES [Geography keeps getting more popular - what's the subject's secret](#) and the Society's President Nick Crane has stated, "there is no better time to be studying this enjoyable, exciting and highly relevant subject."

**Progress 8**

The use of Progress 8 ensures that the full range of GCSEs, within and beyond the EBacc, is fully recognised through the school accountability measures. This enables students to study three subjects outside the required five from within the EBacc choices, thus accommodating a breadth of individual interests across the wider arts, humanities, social sciences or vocational choices. We feel the balance between the EBacc and Progress 8 is a sensible one.

**An Independent Inspectorate: Ofsted**

In evaluating the quality of education there is an important role for Ofsted, as an independent inspectorate.

Ofsted's annual and thematic reports provide a regular, impartial and authoritative review of English education and the contexts of learning. These are essential.

However, The Society would also wish to see Ofsted continuing to publish regular and ongoing subject specific inspection reports for the EBacc subjects. These reports are the only national reporting mechanism for assessing the improving health (or otherwise) of a subject. They are an independent assessment of good practice and also indicate where additional attention needs to be focused. Ofsted's most recent subject specific report for geography was five years ago, entitled *Geography: Learning to make a world of difference* (Feb 2011).

- **How well the current education system performs against these measures**

As noted in the DfE consultation materials in relation to the EBacc, 'the proportion of pupils entering the EBacc nationwide has risen from 23% in 2012 to 39% in 2015, and the proportion of pupils achieving the EBacc over the same period has risen from 16% to 24%.<sup>1</sup> There is still much work to do to ensure that young people can benefit from the study that the essential core of EBacc subjects provides.

However, there needs to be caution in relation to any unintended consequences of the EBacc, particularly in relation to subject specialist teaching at Key Stage 3, in the current context of challenges in the supply of new teachers.

#### **Teacher recruitment**

From our regular contact with teachers and geography ITT providers, we understand that many schools are facing challenges in their recruitment of subject specialist geography teachers. We note that in November 2015 the TES reported that only 83% of geography ITT places had been filled<sup>2</sup>. Some schools have faced challenges in meeting the rising demand for geography at GCSE (and A Level).

#### **Improving Key Stage 3 provision**

The Society understands that, as a result of increased GCSE (and A Level) entries, some schools have (understandably, but regrettably) time-tabled their subject specialists to teach solely or predominantly GCSE and A Level geography. As a result their KS3 curriculum is increasingly being taught by non-specialists which can lead to a negative impact on the quality of teaching and learning.

Previously in 2011 Ofsted identified that, "*relatively weak achievement in Key Stage 3 (geography) often contrasted with the good progress of those who had chosen to study geography at Key Stage 4. Uninspiring teaching and the lack of challenge (at KS3) discouraged many students from choosing geography at GCSE.*" Such trends are *still* of concern in schools with weaker provision in geography, in spite of the general recovery in GCSE entries since 2011.

Indeed, our concern is evidenced in the publication of Ofsted's *Key Stage 3: the wasted years?* (September 2015) which identified that, "Inspectors reported significant weaknesses in all three subjects (MFL, history and geography). Too often, inspectors found teaching that failed to challenge and engage pupils ... Achievement was not good enough in just under half of the MFL classes observed, two-fifths of the history classes and one third of the geography classes".

These trends, of teacher shortages and a potentially weakening of KS3 teaching, are of significant concern to the Society. They are likely to be of concern for other EBacc subject disciplines too. The recent increased uptake of GCSE and A Level entries in geography can only be maintained by continuing to work on Key Stage 3 teaching quality and student engagement at that level. This needs subject specialist teachers at Key Stage 3.

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<sup>1</sup> Consultation on implementing the English Baccalaureate. DfE 2015

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.tes.com/news/school-news/breaking-news/teacher-shortage-fears-deepen-almost-one-five-secondary-trainee>



## Supporting the professional development (and retention) of subject specialist teachers

Bodies such as the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) provide leadership for their respective subject discipline, connect teachers and trainee teachers with examples of good practice and offer significant programmes of support within their field. They provide a flourishing and stimulating subject community.

The Society would like to see a requirement for a set minimum number of hours of **subject specific** CPD for all existing secondary teachers so that they can maintain good subject knowledge. Geographical knowledge is constantly evolving and it is vital that teachers stay up to date. We would also welcome a stronger commitment from school Senior Leadership Teams to encourage their teachers to become involved in their respective subject specific communities, through membership or Fellowship of their representative subject bodies and seeking appropriate accreditations such as Chartered Geographer (Teacher)<sup>3</sup>.

We note the prospective work of the College of Teaching in the provision of a workforce wide general voice for teachers' professionalism.

However, of equal importance is the need to directly support teachers' subject specialist knowledge, understanding and skills. It is the, typically long-standing and well-established, subject specialist bodies, such as the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) which already provide extensive CPD, professional accreditation and other support to their professional community of teachers and this continuing role is essential to sustain (and help retain) high quality, subject specialist teachers upon whom the quality of young peoples' education relies.

20 January 2016

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<sup>3</sup> Comparable subject specialist Chartered 'Teacher' accreditations are also available for English, history, mathematics and science teachers