

# **The State of Geography in UK Higher Education**



*Designed, analysed, and compiled by Professor Jenny Pickerill*

*School of Geography and Planning, University of Sheffield, and Vice President of Research and Higher Education, Royal Geographical Society*

*The survey was supported and distributed by the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) (RGS)*

*February 2026*

*DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55203/SXPZ4450>*



*This license enables re-users to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format for non-commercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator. If you remix, adapt, or build upon the material, you must license the modified material under identical terms. CC BY-NC-SA includes the following elements:*



*BY: credit must be given to the creator.*



*NC: Only non-commercial uses of the work are permitted.*



*SA: Adaptations must be shared under the same terms.*

*Cover image credit: Iskander Pols / Unsplash.*

# CONTENTS

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	4
<b>SURVEY</b>	6
<b>1. TEACHING</b>	8
a. Student admissions	8
b. Degree content	9
c. Field classes	10
<b>2. STAFFING</b>	12
a. Academic staff numbers	12
b. Professional Service staff and support	12
c. Disciplinary identity	13
d. Workloads, contracts and working conditions	13
<b>3. RESEARCH</b>	16
a. Staff research time	16
b. Internal research funds	17
<b>4. WHAT NEXT?</b>	19
<b>APPENDICES</b>	
Survey questions	20
<b>ENDNOTES</b>	23

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarises key findings from a snapshot 'State of Geography' survey, of all institutions in the UK who offer Higher Education geography degrees. It was conducted between mid-December 2025 and mid-**January 2026**, representatives from 56 institutions responded.

- 1. Smaller non-Russell Group institutions are encountering the greatest pressure:** they are experiencing the greatest reduction in student admission numbers, the great reduction in module choice and field class options, are the least likely to have hired new academic staff in the last 12 months, most likely to have promotions processes paused or reduced, have had the highest workload increases, and the least research time (see sections 1a, 1b, 2a, 2d, 3a, 3b)
- 2. Large Russell Group institutions in London or the south are expanding:** they are most likely to have increased student recruitment, maintain field class teaching with minimal changes, to still be hiring new academic staff, providing 2 days a week research time, study leave and promotions. However, staff are also facing increased workloads, a reduction in Professional Service staff and support, and experiencing reduced Graduate Teaching Assistant funding (sections 1a, 1b, 2a, 2d, 3a, 3b).
- 3. Uneven student admission changes:** Despite fairly stable admissions across the sector, 38% of departments experienced decreased undergraduate numbers in the last (2024-25) recruitment round. This has been most acutely felt in institutions with small numbers (< 20) of geography staff, but only in 25% of the large geography departments (> 40 academic geographers). Just over three-quarters of Russell Group institutions have maintained or grown their geography undergraduate student recruitment numbers in the last 12 months (section 1a).
- 4. Closing programmes:** Very few institutions have closed their geography programmes wholesale, but 15% have closed postgraduate programmes in the last 12 months (including Russell Group institutions). There is a clear correlation between institutions with decreasing postgraduate student recruitment and the subsequent closure of their postgraduate programmes (section 1a).
- 5. Reduced module choice:** Two thirds of geography programmes are reducing the number of optional modules available to students, including

half of those at Russell Group institutions, and 82% of the smaller departments (section 1b).

**6. Struggling to retain field class teaching:** While changes in recent years have been rightly motivated by environmental and inclusivity concerns - changing to UK locations (23% of universities) and non-residential versions (20%) – budget constraints are now shortening the length of trips (38%). Universities in Wales and the North have made the biggest adjustments in field class teaching, whereas those in London, the South, and Scotland have been less affected. Unsurprisingly, those most insulated from change are the Russell Group universities, where 83% are also still able to offer additional optional field classes (section 1c).

**7. Reduced academic staff numbers:** 61% have experienced a reduction in academic staff numbers in the last 12 months. This has been most acute in Northern institutions (with 71%) and Wales (with 75%), and small and medium institutions. The majority of institutions that have hired new geography staff on open-ended contracts in the last 12 months, are in the Russell Group, in London, and of the larger size (section 2a).

**8. Reduced Professional Service staff and support:** 75% departments have experienced reduced professional service support compared to 12 months ago. The highest burden has been experienced in non-Russell Group institutions and the small institutions (section 2b).

**9. Increased academic staff workloads:** 75% note that staff workloads have increased, including 62% of those in the Russell Group, and 85% of the small institutions, suggesting an uneven experience of workload changes in the sector (section 2d).

**10. Retaining research time:** 77% of institutions provide at least 1 day a week for research. 71% of Russell Group universities allocated academic staff 2 days a week protected research time, whereas only 23% of non-Russell group institutions allocate academic staff 2 days a week research time, and only 14% of small institutions have 2 days a week research time (section 3a).

## THE SURVEY

A snapshot 'State of Geography' survey was conducted between mid-December 2025 and mid-**January 2026** of all institutions in the UK who offer Higher Education geography degrees. This was to capture a sense of the myriad of changes and pressures geography providers are navigating during this intense period of sector wide change in the UK. The survey was distributed by the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) via a google form to all Heads of Department, School, or Discipline, at all 76 HE institutions that offer geography programmes. It was deliberately designed as a set of questions on teaching, field classes, staffing, and research that could be answered in binary with yes/no/don't know responses (see Appendix for list of questions). There was an opportunity to add additional text comments at the end.

The intent of the survey was to enable quick completion by leaders who are always time pressured, [i]. While this might limit in-depth analysis, it produced a high response rate of 74% - **56 universities** running Higher Education Geography programmes.

Given the sensitive nature of the questions, all results are anonymised. We stratified institutions by three broad themes to aid analysis: by **region** (Table 1), **size**[ii] (Table 2), and **identity**[iii] (Table 3).

**Table 1: Regional spread of HE institutions who responded to the survey**

REGION	Number of institutions
London	5
South (excluding London)	14
Midlands	9
North	17
Wales	4
Scotland	5
Northern Ireland	2

**Table 2: Size of institution determined by academic geography staff numbers**

<b>SIZE</b>	<b>No. of institutions</b>
Small	22
Medium	22
Large	12

**Table 3: Identity determined by Russell Group membership**

<b>IDENTITY</b>	<b>No. of institutions</b>
Russell Group	21
Non-Russell Group	35

The survey results reveal the extent, unevenness, and implications of the numerous cuts Geography as a discipline is facing. Institutions surveyed all continue to deliver a geography degree in some form, but form and breadth of content is changing.

## 1. TEACHING

### a. Student admissions

Overall, 38% experienced decreased undergraduate student numbers in the last (2024-25) recruitment round. Notably, there is no direct correlation between reduced undergraduate recruitment and closing undergraduate programmes. Only two universities who had reduced recruitment also closed programmes, while 5 had closed programmes without experiencing reduced recruitment in the last year.

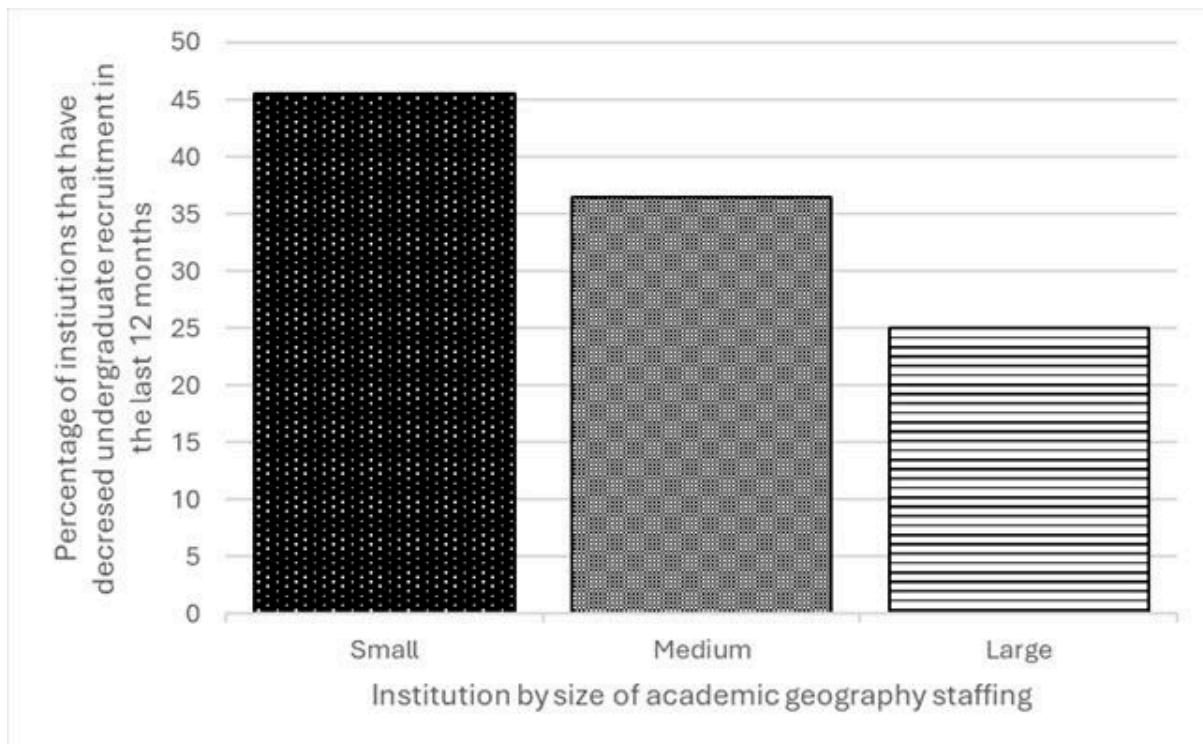
**"38% have experienced decreased undergraduate student recruitment"**

There is a strong correlation between size defined by academic staff numbers and those institutions which have experienced greatest decrease in undergraduate student recruitment; 45% of small institutions have decreased undergraduate recruitment, compared to 36% of medium institutions and 25% of large institutions (Figure 1). Indeed, one respondent notes that 'our numbers didn't look too bad ... but many students were poached at the last minute or traded up when Russell Group unis dropped their grades' (non-Russell Group, small, southern institution).

**"many students were poached at the last minute or traded up when Russell Group unis dropped their grades"**

At postgraduate level the results are more stark, with 15% of (responding) universities having closed geography postgraduate programmes in the last 12 months, with 34% experiencing decreased postgraduate student numbers in the last (2024-25) recruitment round. There is a clearer correlation here between those institutions that have experienced reduced student recruitment and closure of programmes, with 20% (11) of responding universities experiencing both.

**Figure 1: Decreased undergraduate student recruitment by size of academic geography staffing**



**"77% of Russell Group institutions have maintained or grown their undergraduate student recruitment"**

Of those closing undergraduate geography programmes these were evenly spread between Russell Group and non-Russell Group institutions, with a similar split in the closure of postgraduate programmes. But 77% of Russell Group universities have not experienced any decrease in undergraduate student recruitment, suggesting a deeply uneven pattern of student numbers. At postgraduate level the decrease is more evenly spread, with 62% of Russell Group institutions experiencing a decline of postgraduate recruitment.

#### **b. Degree content**

**"82% of small institutions have decreased module choice"**

Across all degrees, 66% have reduced the number of optional modules available to students, this includes 52% (11) of Russell Group institutions. Yet 82% of small

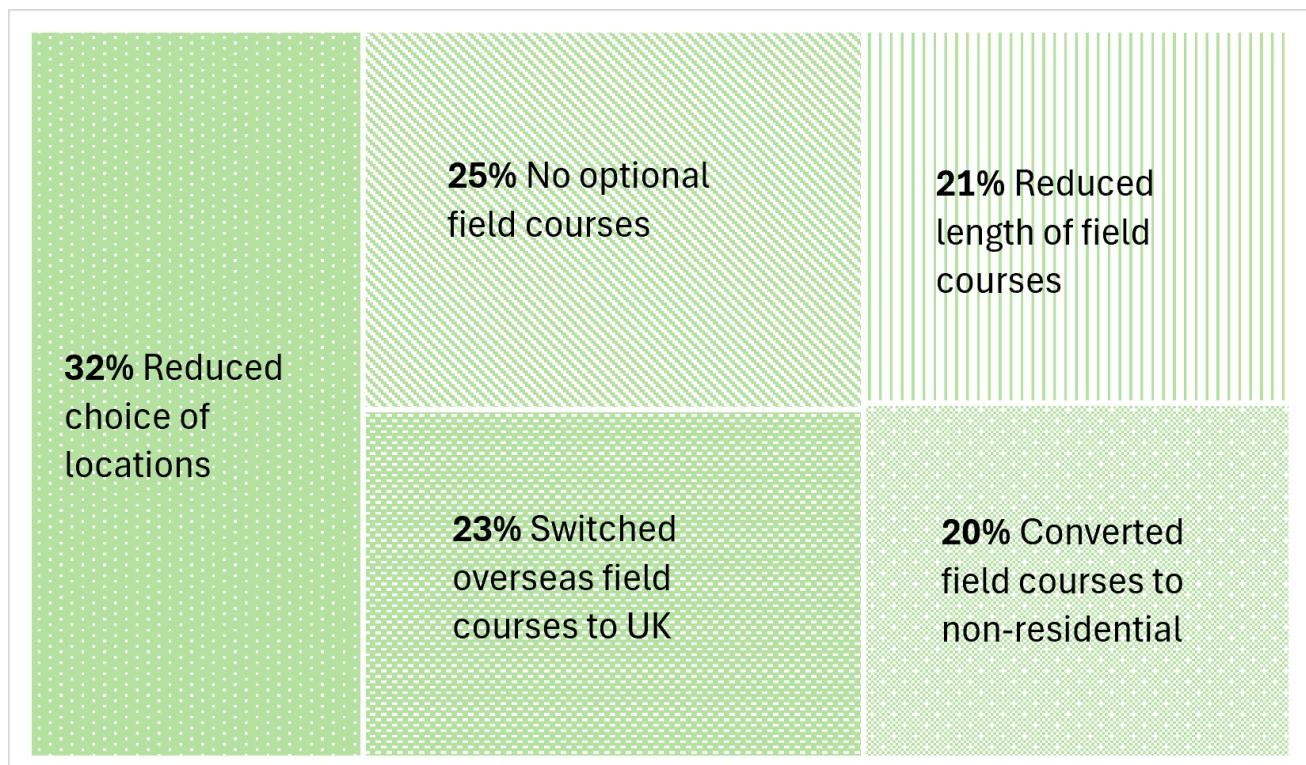
institutions have decreased module choice, suggesting the medium and larger programmes have been better able to retain module choice; 'we are concerned about how we give students the breadth and depth of geography that the course requires' (non-Russell Group, small, southern institution).

### c. Field classes

**"All universities have retained field class teaching, but provision length and locations are changing rapidly"**

All universities have retained field class teaching, but 32% (18) of institutions have reduced their field class offerings by reducing the choice of locations, 23% (13) have switched from overseas to UK locations, and 38% (21) have reduced the lengths of their field classes (including 38% [8] of Russell Group institutions), 20% (11) have converted some residential trips to non-residential (to save money), and 25% (14) now only have core (compulsory) field classes available. But the majority of Russell Group universities 83% (15) are still able to offer optional field classes - choice restrictions have been most acute in the non-Russell Group sector (Figure 2).

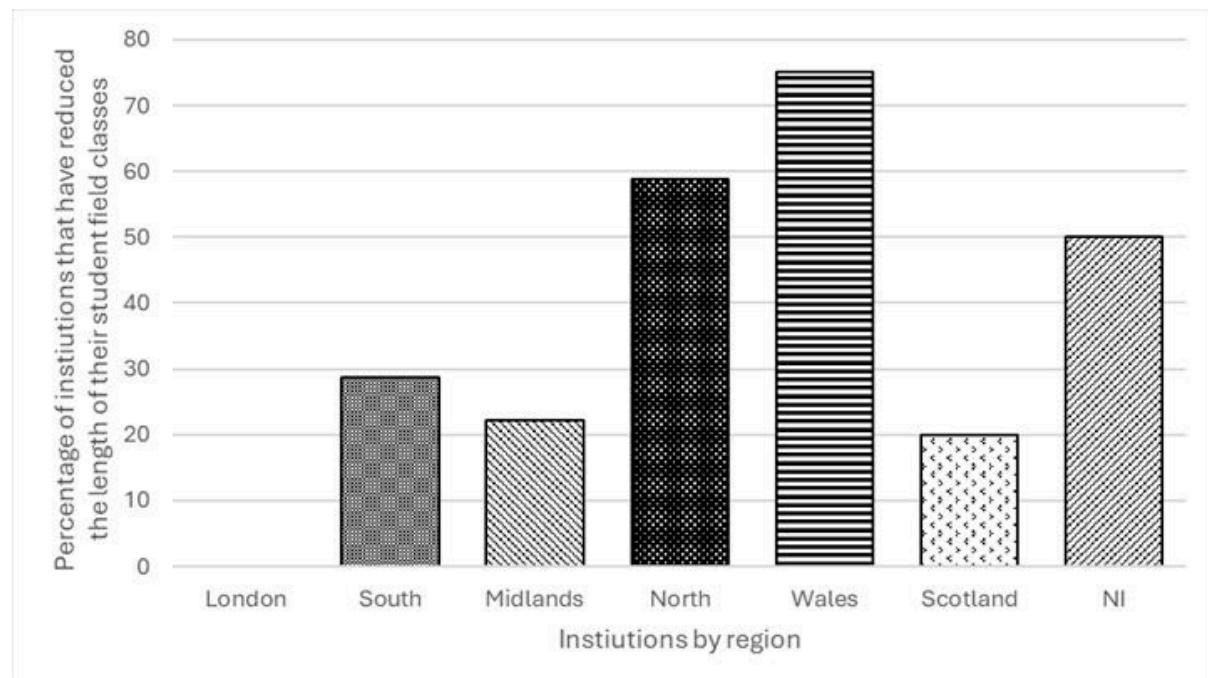
**Figure 2: Reductions made by institutions to field class teaching**



The drivers for these changes have been partly financial, but also to improve inclusivity, and reduce environmental impact; 'partly cost, partly to try and make them work better for students' (Non-Russell Group, small, Midlands institution), and 'there is less appetite from our students for overseas field trips due to their own financial constraints and work commitments' (Non-Russell Group, medium, Welsh institution).

Regionally, universities in Wales (75%) and the North (59%) have higher concentrations of universities who have reduced the length of their field classes, with universities in London (0%), the South (29%) and Scotland (20%) being least affected (Figure 3). This dynamic is broadly reflected across all the field class questions, with universities in Wales, Northern Ireland and the North having changed and reduced their field classes much more than those in London, the South, or Scotland. For some, while the overseas residential trips still exist 'there is constant pressure to reduce the number of days, fly at horrible times because they are cheaper, and change to cheaper hostels instead of tried and trusted hotels' (non-Russell Group, small, southern institution).

**Figure 3: Reduced length of field classes via region**



## 2. STAFFING

### a. Academic staff numbers

61% (34 universities) have experienced a reduction in academic staff numbers in the last 12 months, this includes 43% (9) of Russell Group institutions, and is roughly even geographically (with every region experiencing job losses except Northern Ireland), but the situation is slightly more acute in Northern institutions (with 71%) and Wales (with 75%) than in London and the South. It is the small and medium institutions who are most affected, with only 42% of large institutions experiencing a reduction in academic staffing. For some, this means 'I have spent the last year mentally preparing to not have a job in two years time' (non-Russell Group, small, southern institution).

**"a majority of geography departments have experienced a reduction in academic staffing"**

These reductions are a result of a combination of dynamics, including not replacing academic staff who leave (57% [37] institutions), be also through voluntary redundancy (experienced by 61% [34] departments in the last 12 months), compulsory redundancy (currently under threat at 16% [9] geography departments), retirement, job moves, or more staff going part-time (25% [14] of geography departments have experienced more staff opting for part-time roles in the last 12 months).

41% (23) have hired new geography staff on open-ended contracts in the last 12 months, with staff recruitment by Russell Group universities being 61% (13 of 21 responses). Regionally, institutions in Wales (0%) have recruited fewest to open-ended academic positions, with London (60%) having the highest recruitment. Elsewhere there is a fairly even recruitment between the South, North, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, with approximately 45% of geography departments hiring new academic staff. In terms of size, it is the larger institutions who have most been able to hire new staff (67% of large institutions), whereas only 27% of small institutions have hired new staff on open-ended contracts in the last 12 months. This is, however, still in the context that overall a majority of geography departments have experienced a reduction in academic staffing. 23% have more staff opting for compressed hours in the last 12 months.

### b. Professional Service staff and support

75% (38) departments have experienced reduced professional service and

administrative support compared to 12 months ago, of which the highest burden has been experienced in non-Russell Group institutions and the small institutions. This 'thinning admin ... results in academics picking up more of the work' (non-Russell Group, small, southern institution). 84% (47) departments have professional service and administrative support that is shared with other disciplines or centrally located.

### **c. Disciplinary identity**

#### **"Geography is now completely invisible"**

36% (20) departments have been restructured: 50% have merged with another department but retained their Geography identity, but 50% have merged and lost their disciplinary identity (such as losing Geography is the School name and/or having a disciplinary head). For some this has meant 'Geography is now completely invisible ... the School is now so large and untenable that we feel invisible even within in' (non-Russell Group, Small, southern institution). Another notes, that since a recent merger 'into a new school means that we have lost the visibility of our subject .. our [student] numbers dropped due to the lack of visibility of the subject and a poor redesign' (Non-Russell Group, small, northern institution). This change in disciplinary identity has further implications for field class teaching - 'we are now managed by disciplines who do not value fieldwork and have little understanding of our unique interdisciplinary subject' (Non-Russell Group, small, northern institution).

### **d. Workloads, contracts and working conditions**

#### **"Morale is good"**

*(Russell Group, Large, Northern institution)*

#### **"Morale is poor"**

*(non-Russell Group, medium, Scottish institution)*

75% (43) note that staff workloads have increased, including 62% of those in the Russell Group, and 85% (19) of the small institutions, suggesting an uneven experience of workload changes in the sector. There is also, obviously, a disjuncture between planned and experienced workloads; 'the reality is that staff support for teaching is not well accounted for on the workload model, given our

high proportion of students with additional needs who require tailored support' (non-Russell Group, small, southern institution).

Workloads have increased due to a variety of factors, which include that 59% of departments are not covering staff illness with bought-in replacements, 27% are not covering staff maternity with replacement positions, and 48% have had funds to pay for Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTA) reduced. The reduction in GTA support is broadly spread equally across universities with 43% Russell Group departments experiencing reductions.

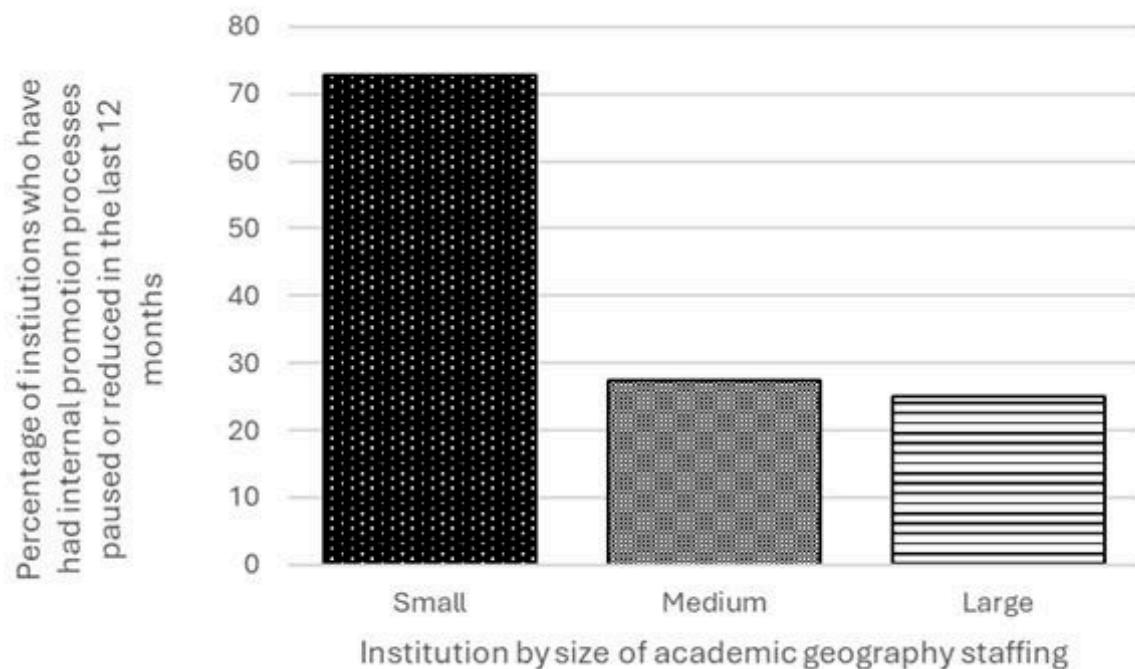
### **"71% of Russell Group institutions geography departments employ temporary academic staff"**

20% (11) have increased their number of teaching-only staff and 43% (24) of all geography departments or schools employ academic staff on 9 or 12 month temporary contracts. However, 71% of Russell Group institutions geography departments employ temporary academic staff, with a clear tendency for the more 'elite' universities to offer the least secure and more short-term employment contracts.

Only 46% of academic staff have their own office, which has implications for their ability to meet students and conduct deep-thinking work. 63% of academic staff carry an administrative/ leadership role.

45% (25) geography departments have had internal promotions processes paused or reduced in the last 12 months, but notably only 4 (19%) Russell Group institutions have had changes to promotions. There are stark differences via size, with 73% of small institutions having had internal promotions processes paused or reduced, but only in 25% of large institutions (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Size of institutions who have had internal promotion processes paused or reduced in the last 12 months**



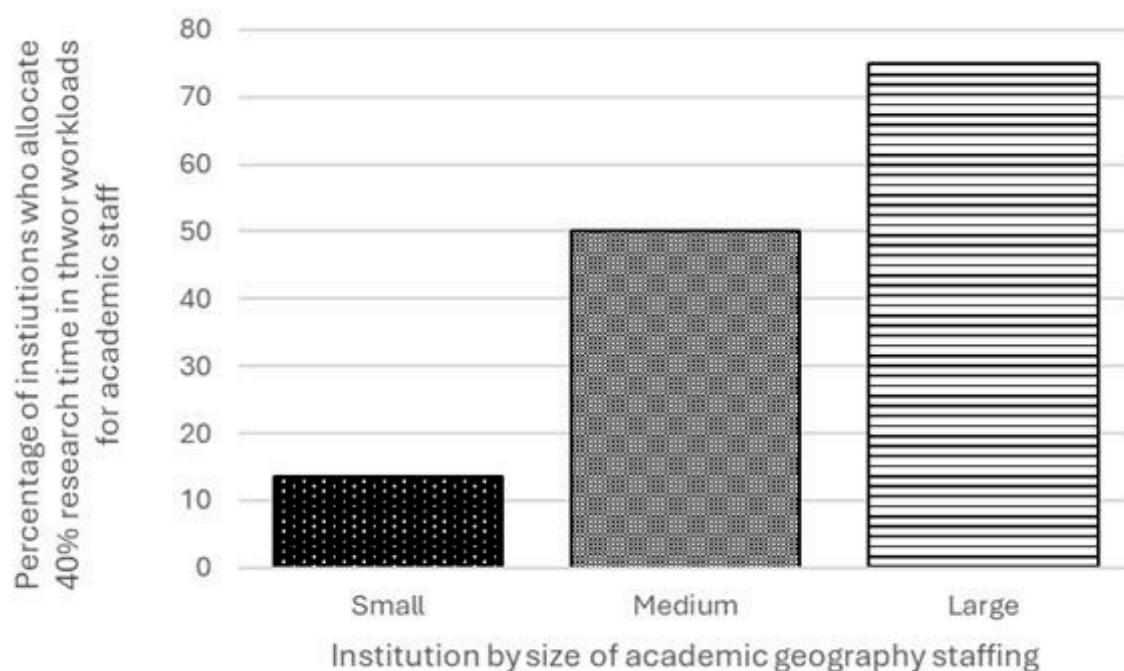
## 3. RESEARCH

### a. Staff research time

41% (23) of universities allocated academic staff 2 days a week protected research time, with a further 36% (20) allocating a protected 1 day a week of research time (regardless of external research funding secured). Overall, 77% of institutions provide at least 1 day a week for research. However, 71% (15) of Russell Group universities allocated academic staff 2 days a week protected research time, whereas only 23% (8) of non-Russell group institutions allocate academic staff 2 days a week protected research time. For example, 'we have never had study leave, sabbaticals, and our formal 'research allowance' is five working days per academic year' (non-Russell Group, small, northern institution). This is further differentiated by size, 14% of small institutions, but 50% of medium and 75% of large staffed departments allocated 40% research time (Figure 5). Even where 2 days a week is planned, 'in reality it is difficult to achieve that for everyone' (non-Russell Group, Medium, Welsh institution).

**"77% of institutions provide at least one day a week for research"**

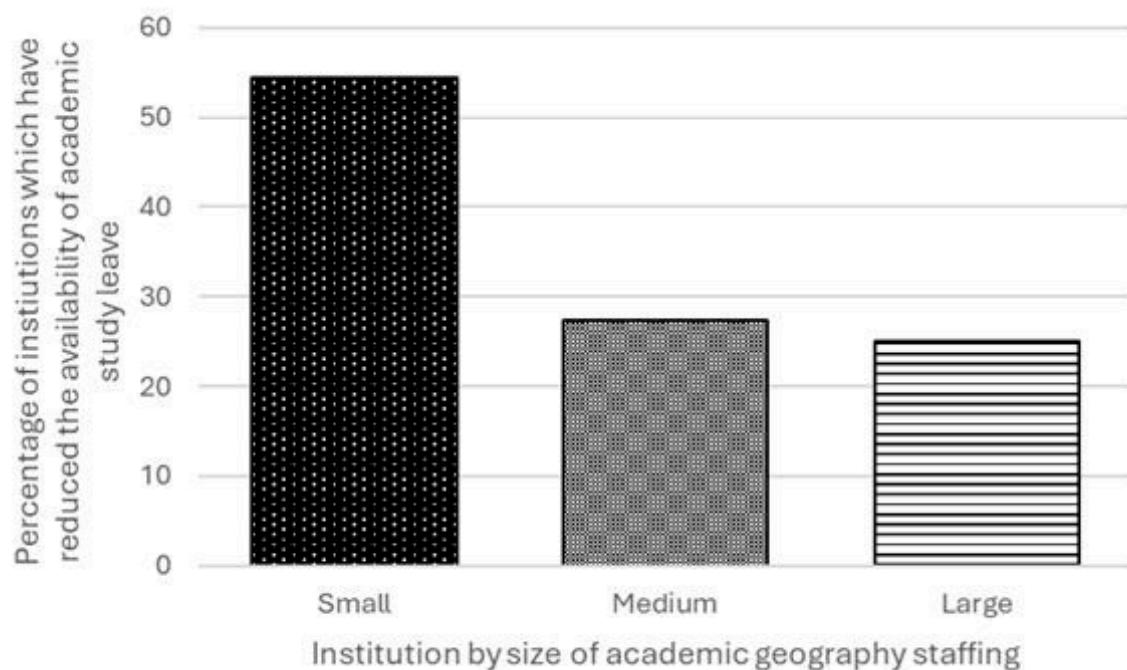
**Figure 5: Staff allocated 40% research time in their workload by size of staffing numbers**



59% (33) of departments struggle to provide staff research time buy-out (relief from teaching or administrative responsibilities) even when they have secured external funding (and funders have expectations that time will be provided). While this includes 38% Russell Group institutions, this is still dominated by non-Russell group departments (which constitute 71% of those who struggle). Again, small institutions struggle most here (77% struggle) as compared to 46% of medium, and 50% of large institutions.

Further pressure is put on research time by the reduction of academic staff study leave availability, which for 38% of universities have reduced, with the majority of those affected non-Russell Group institutions. 55% of small institutions have reduced study leave availability, whereas only 25% of large institutions have reduced study leave (Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Reduction in the availability of study leave by size of staffing numbers**



### **b. Internal research funds**

**“54% have reduced internal research funds”**

54% (30) have reduced internal research funds for academic staff, which includes 38% of Russell Group institutions. This impact is also stratified by size; 73% of small institutions, 46% of medium, but only 33% of large institutions have reduced their internal research funds. However, for several institutions there

were no research funds to reduce; 'we haven't reduced internal funds for staff research because there are no funds and haven't been for several years ... we have never had staff study leave' (non-Russell Group, small, southern institution). 63% (35) of geography departments and schools have experienced a reduction in the availability of funded PGR positions.

## 4. WHAT NEXT?

### “chill wind is blowing”

As a snapshot this survey cannot identify temporal trends, but in the text response there was **significant concern that worse is to come** in the next 12 months. Many respondents noted a ‘chill wind is blowing’ (Russell Group, Large, Midlands institution), that ‘we are facing restructuring within a year or two’ (Russell Group, Large, Northern institution), and we ‘are currently under review, and are required to raise operating surplus ... that is equivalent to doubling research income, 100 additional overseas students per year, or loosing 6 to 8 academic staff’ (Russell Group, Large, southern institution). For many the ‘battle is to come in the new year’ (Russell Group, large, Welsh institution) and ‘further changes likely over next 12 months’ (Russell Group, medium, London institution).

Notably these fears of what was yet to come were from the large and Russell Group institutions, suggesting that the pressure and challenges already being endured by small institutions is beginning to be experienced elsewhere in the sector. As one respondent noted, ‘the timeline is just different – they are present and future, not yet implemented’ (Russell Group, Large, southern institution).

## **APPENDIX**

### **State of Geography in the UK survey**

#### **TEACHING**

1. We have closed undergraduate programmes in the last 12 months
2. We have closed postgraduate taught programmes in the last 12 month
3. We have reduced the number of optional modules available to students
4. Our undergraduate student numbers have decreased in the last recruitment round
5. Our postgraduate taught student numbers have decreased in the last recruitment round

#### **FIELDCLASSES**

1. We have reduced our field class offering by reducing choice of locations
2. We have switched from overseas to UK locations
3. We have reduced our field class lengths
4. We have converted some residential trips to non-residential
5. We only have core field classes available

#### **STAFFING**

1. Our academic staff numbers have reduced in the last 12 months
2. There is, or has been, a voluntary redundancy scheme open for staff in the last 12 months
3. We are under threat from compulsory redundancy in Geography
4. We have been restructured
5. We have merged with other departments/ schools, but retained our disciplinary identity (i.e retaining Geography in the department name,

retaining a Head)

6. We have merged with other departments/ schools, and lost our disciplinary identity (i.e loosing Geography in the department/ school name)
7. We are not replacing any staff who leave
8. We are not covering staff illness with bought-in replacements
9. We are not covering staff maternity with replacement positions
10. We have increased our number of teaching-only staff
11. We employ some staff on 9 month or 12 month contracts
12. We have hired new academic staff on open-ended contracts in the last 12 months
13. We have reduced Professional Service/ Administrative support are shared with other discipline/ centrally located
14. Our Professional Service/ Administrative support compared to 12 months ago
15. Staff workloads have increased
16. More staff have opted for compressed hours in the last 12 months
17. More staff have opted to go part-time in the last 12 months
18. Our promotions process has been paused or reduced in the last 12 months
19. We have reduced funds for Graduate Teaching Assistants

## **RESEARCH**

1. Staff have 40% protected research time
2. Staff have 20% protected research time
3. We struggle to provide staff research time buy-out when they have secured external funding
4. We have reduced staff study leave availability

5. We have reduced internal research funds for staff
6. Every academic on an open-ended contract has their own office
7. The availability of funded PGR positions has reduced
8. All staff carry an administrative/ leadership role

Anything else you would like to share with us, including details on any of the above

## ENDNOTES

- Any missing data was coded as 'I don't know'
- Measured by REF FTE submissions into simplistic categories whereby where there are 40+ Geographers the institution is considered to be large, between 20 and 40 geographers it is categorised as medium, and less than 20 geographers it is considered small.
- We acknowledge that this distinction between Russell Group and 'other' is problematic and not representative of research or teaching quality. We explored adding additional categories (such as MillionPlus and University Alliance), but even then had 22 institutions uncategorised which are not members of a clear University group. Therefore we use this distinction as it is used regularly by the universities themselves and in the media, but do so cognizant of its limitations.