

Programme Accreditation Handbook

Version 4.1, published July 2020

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1 Introduction and aims

The Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) is the learned society and professional body for geography. Formed in 1830 for 'the advancement of geographical science', today we deliver this objective through developing, supporting and promoting geographical research, expeditions and fieldwork, education, public engagement, and geography input to policy. We aim to foster an understanding and informed enjoyment of our world.

The Society supports higher education institutions and departments in their efforts to achieve excellence in their delivery of teaching and/or learning in geography, at both undergraduate and master's level. The programme accreditation scheme uses professional judgment to appraise geography programmes which seek to deliver the knowledge, understanding, skills, approaches and professional/personal attributes expected of high quality geography graduates.

Programmes which are professionally accredited have been subject to a rigorous evaluation of their curriculum against external standards commonly held by the sector, in this case the geographical community.

The Society's accreditation scheme aligns the criteria and process for accreditation of undergraduate programmes with the learning outcomes described in the QAA's Subject Benchmark Statement for geography and existing quality assurance processes¹. For master's programmes, enhanced criteria are used to assess applications for accreditation in place of the Subject Benchmark Statement. In making an application, departments are also given the opportunity to highlight what is distinctive in their delivery of geographical teaching and/or learning. Providers offering degree programmes in geography are free to decide upon the details of content, organisation and delivery.

For institutions offering geography programmes, receiving accreditation may:

- Help raise awareness and understanding of a programme, e.g. through including a programme's accreditation status in marketing materials.
- Signal to students and employers (via university directories and marketing materials) that a department's teaching and/or learning is aligned with professional development, including a future career using geographical knowledge and skills
- Encourage programme leaders and other staff to engage in a quality self-assessment process, which will contribute towards existing measures for continuous quality improvement in a department and institution.

The scheme is voluntary and optional. This means that some UK geography programmes are not accredited even if they meet the criteria, or they may be accredited by other organisations. There are excellent degree programmes delivered by UK universities which do not have accreditation. Departments offering programmes accredited by the Society must not imply that other departments or institutions who are yet to achieve accreditation are not offering relevant and high-quality programmes when making reference to their accreditation.

The Society also reserves the right to make spot checks of accredited programmes and to make occasional changes to the scheme as needed. In the event of extraordinary circumstances, appropriate changes, including temporary changes, may be made to the processes and procedures outlined in this handbook. This will be in consultation with stakeholders, include HE Providers and other relevant organisations (e.g. Quality Assurance Agency and Department for Education).

¹ The QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for Geography defines what can be expected of a graduate in the subject, in terms of what they might know, do and understand at the end of their undergraduate studies. It was last updated in December 2019. [Download a copy \(PDF\) from the QAA website.](#)

2 Eligibility

The Society welcomes applications from registered [UK Higher Education providers](#) for the accreditation of:

Undergraduate programmes (FHEQ Level 6 or SCQF Level 9 or 10), specifically;

- **Single honours programmes** in geography;
- **Combined honours programmes** where geography is studied in combination with (an)other subject(s); and/or
- **Integrated Master's programmes** in geography, where a Master's degree is awarded upon completion of a specialist fourth year.

Master's programmes (FHEQ Level 7 or SCQF Level 11), specifically;

- **Master's programmes**, taught or by research, which focus on a specific, contemporary sub-discipline or area of professional practice within geography.

2.1 Undergraduate (and Integrated Master's) programmes

The criteria for the Society's undergraduate programme accreditation scheme is closely aligned to the [QAA Subject Benchmark Statement \(SBS\) for Geography](#) and takes account of the breadth of geography and its constituents, as acknowledged therein. Applications for accreditation may be made for either existing or new programmes (where institutional approval has been received). In the case of new programmes that have not yet been offered or are in their first year of delivery, a shorter period of accreditation may be recommended.

The accreditation scheme recognises geography programmes that seek to deliver learning outcomes aligned with the attributes outlined in the Subject Benchmark Statement. It does not accredit individuals who have completed the programme.

In all cases, geography should make up at least 60% of the qualification at each level, calculated using module credits with the Review Panel deciding what content constitutes 'geography' for this purpose. This requirement does not apply to the first two years of four-year Integrated Master's programmes in Scotland. For a geography programme to be considered for accreditation, an application should unambiguously demonstrate that it offers "...an integrated study of the complex reciprocal relationships between human societies and the physical, chemical and biological components of the Earth. Geographers study place, space and time, recognising the great differences and dynamics in cultures, political systems, economies, landscapes and environments across the world, and the links between them."

[SBS, Section 1.1]

In doing so, accredited programmes are expected to demonstrate that graduates of their geography degrees are able to:

...articulate the knowledge, understanding, skills and approaches that characterise the discipline as a whole. They understand the place of their discipline in contributing a holistic perspective on natural and human worlds, interactions, and processes that is distinctive of geography compared with other disciplines. They understand the complex relationships between natural and human aspects of environments and landscapes.

[SBS, Section 3.2]

To achieve this, the programme is expected to include:

- Modules that deliver the knowledge, understanding, skills and approaches described in Section 3 of the Subject Benchmark Statement, and in particular:
 - “knowledge of the main dimensions and scales of economic, social, political and environmental inequality and difference, are familiar with a range of interpretations of these processes, and are aware that scale itself can be contested and politicised” [SBS, Section 3.8], and
 - “ a clear understanding of the drivers of change in the natural world over space and time, demonstrating knowledge of the interactions between climate, ecosystems, and landscapes” [SBS, Section 3.9]
- fieldwork and experiential learning, including knowledge of and skills in a range of theoretical and methodological approaches to inform their conduct;
- progression towards a substantive depth of knowledge in sub-fields of the discipline, underpinned by appropriate skills and philosophies;
- development of a range of academic, professional and generic skills, including the ability to interpret and analyse information, and make use of appropriate information and communication technologies; and
- fostering of personal attributes relevant to the world beyond higher education.

[SBS, Section 2]

The accreditation scheme recognises that “a valued characteristic of the subject is its plurality of ways of knowing and understanding the world, and the depth to which individual specialisms are studied varies according to the nature of specific departments” [SBS, Section 1.6]. However, geography programmes that focus on a particular sub-disciplinary pathway (human geography, physical geography, environmental geography, geospatial/data approaches) are expected to demonstrate the delivery of key concepts, knowledges, understanding, skills, approaches and signature teaching methods that characterise the discipline as a whole, to *all* students at some point in the programme.

2.2 Master’s programmes

The study undertaken for Master’s degrees is at, or informed by, the forefront of an academic or professional discipline. Successful students show originality in the application of knowledge, and they understand how the boundaries of knowledge are advanced through research. They are able to deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, and they show originality in tackling and solving problems. They have the qualities needed for employment in circumstances requiring sound judgement, personal responsibility and initiative in complex professional environments. Compared with first degrees (including integrated Master’s programmes), Master’s degrees are characterised by an increased intensity, complexity and density of study. Master’s degrees typically include planned intellectual progression that often includes a synoptic/research or scholarly activity; much more so than undergraduate programmes.

Geographical Master’s degrees typically focus on a specific, contemporary sub-discipline or area of professional practice within the subject more broadly. The framework for geographical Master’s programmes outlined below is necessarily generic and each statement should be appropriately contextualised within the purpose of a particular programme.

Accredited programmes must comprise at least 180 credits at FHEQ Level 7 or SCQF Level 11. Programmes are not expected to incorporate the breadth of geography as a whole, but are expected to develop a depth of understanding of geographical issues relevant to the context of a particular sub-discipline. Primarily, this should be evidenced in programme and assessment outcomes. While it is anticipated that most Master’s programmes seeking accreditation will be based within geography departments, it is recognised that multi-disciplinary programmes based elsewhere may also be eligible, provided that they have strong spatial elements with geographical applications. For example, a programme largely focussing on data processing methods, statistical

approaches and non-spatial analyses may be eligible for accreditation if, in addition, it requires students to apply this to the conceptualisation of complex geographical patterns, processes and interactions. Other such cases are anticipated in fields including, but not limited to, international development, water resources and engineering. Programmes without this element of geographical application are not eligible for accreditation. If a programme meets this threshold of geographical application, it should also fulfil the following criteria² in order to receive accreditation.

2.2.1 Geographical knowledge and understanding

1. A specialist and detailed understanding and critical awareness of contemporary geographical issues at, or informed by, the forefront of a geographical academic sub-discipline, field of study or area of professional practice.

Your application should demonstrate how the programme develops graduates who:

- a. Have an advanced knowledge of the literature, ideas, approaches and substantive themes of the field, and how the boundaries of knowledge are advanced through research.
- b. Demonstrate a critical awareness of emerging knowledge, recognising limitations and gaps, and the factors influencing the nature and pace of its emergence.
- c. Structure, analyse and critically evaluate the theories, concepts, methods and techniques central to understanding the areas of study.
- d. Conceptualise complex patterns, processes, interactions and change in spatial processes, and use appropriate approaches to explore them.

2. Originality and sound judgement in the application of knowledge to solve geographical problems, together with an advanced practical understanding of how established methods of research and enquiry are used to create and interpret knowledge within the discipline.

Your application should demonstrate how the programme develops graduates who:

- a. Plan, design and execute an original piece of advanced-level rigorous research or enquiry, including project design, planning, management, and analytical and interpretive skills.
- b. Demonstrate critical evaluation skills in order to make a contribution to knowledge or professional practice and assess different approaches, evident in data collection, analysis and reaching sound conclusions based on the evidence acquired.
- c. Adopt the appropriate format and style for communicating the findings of an advanced-level, rigorous research project or enquiry.

² These criteria are derived from UK Quality Code for Higher Education ([Download a copy \(PDF\) from the QAA website](#)) in addition to learning outcomes from 15 Master's programmes.

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2.2.2 Skills, techniques, methods and practical applications of concepts and theories

3. A comprehensive understanding of the diversity of geographical skills, techniques, methods and practical applications, concepts and theories applicable to research and advanced scholarship or professional practice.

Your application should demonstrate how the programme develops graduates who:

- a. Are conversant with a substantial range of analytical and observational techniques appropriate within the field.
- b. Demonstrate sound judgement and effective research and source appraisal skills in data collection.
- c. Apply critical analysis, evaluation and synthesis to solve complex problems, including solving open-ended problems where more than one solution is apparent.
- d. Exercise judgement whilst understanding the different sources of geographical data and their uncertainty, the limitations of judgements made in the absence of complete information and variations in data at different levels of complexity.

2.2.3 Graduate qualities and transferable skills

4. The qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment

Your application should demonstrate how the programme develops graduates who:

- a. Exercise initiative and personal responsibility, including reflection and evaluation of their academic progress and its implications for emerging/changing professional practice, including the ability to engage with and learn from feedback.
- b. Decision-making in complex and unpredictable situations.
- c. The independent learning ability required for continuing professional development
- d. Ethical integrity and professional conduct reflected in personal and professional practice.
- e. Display innovation and creativity in the formulation of original ideas, their applications and the continuous improvement of existing methods and technologies.

2.3 Ineligible programmes

The accreditation scheme does not currently extend to programmes of study outside of the criteria outlined above. This includes:

- **Doctoral degrees** (or any other award above FHEQ Level 7 or SQCF Level 11)
- **Postgraduate certificates or diplomas** (including PGCert, PGCE and PGDip)
- **Fast-track programmes** (including two year undergraduate degree courses)
- **Foundation degrees** (including FdA and FdSc)
- **Certificates or diplomas of higher education** (including Higher National Certificates (HNC) or Diplomas (HND) and Certificates and Diplomas of Higher Education (CertHE and DipHE))

If an application for an ineligible programme is submitted for review, it may still be reviewed and be subject to an application fee, although accreditation will not be awarded.

3 Definition of ‘programme’ and ‘application’

A programme is a course of study that leads to a named qualification. Typically, a separate application form is needed for each programme submitted for accreditation, although closely similar programmes may be ‘bundled’ into a single application form. A set of application forms from the same department may share a common set of mandatory/additional supporting evidence (e.g. shared library of module specifications). However, undergraduate and master’s programmes at the same institution must be submitted as separate applications with separate supporting evidence. The application fee (see section 5) is payable for each programme/bundled set of programmes that is accredited, i.e. per application form considered.

3.1 ‘Bundled’ applications

Where programmes share compulsory modules, and it is the optional elements that differentiate them, they may be treated as a single programme for the purposes of accreditation applications. Examples of this include programmes that have: a foundation year, a study abroad year, or a sandwich/industry placement year, or subject specialisms that are dependent on optional rather than compulsory module pathways. Please contact accreditation@rqs.org for advice before starting a bundled application. If the Panel deems programmes within a bundled application sufficiently different from one another, resubmission may be required.

Example programme structure	Application approach
Common first year across breadth of geography (undergraduate) or common core modules (master’s), then an option to specialise (usually split by human or physical geography, but other options may be available). <i>For example – Enrol in BSc Geography, with option to progress via BSc Geography, BA Human Geography or BSc Physical Geography.</i>	If compulsory modules are largely common across programmes, single application. If compulsory modules split into specialisms by programme, separate applications required.
Specialisation or mostly separated pathways from first year with few or no shared modules <i>For example – BA Geography (Human) or BSc Geography (Physical)</i>	Separate applications
Master’s programme with different modular content, apart from core research methods and dissertation module <i>For example – where MA Human Geography and MSc Geography share these modules</i>	Separate applications
Master’s programmes assessed entirely by research	Separate applications
Joint programmes, e.g. BSc Geography with/and... (see note below)	Separate applications

3.2 Combined honours programmes

Given the expectation that geography must form at least 60% of the qualification at each level, it is likely that only single honours geography or geography-major programmes will qualify for accreditation. However, combined honours programmes will be considered for accreditation where this condition can be met.



3.3 Integrated Master's programmes

Integrated Master's programmes that share compulsory modules with an undergraduate programme (i.e. same pathways, with the exception of the specialist fourth year) may be included in the same application form as the related undergraduate programme.

Where an Integrated Master's programme follows a different module pathway to that of other undergraduate programmes offered, it must be submitted as a separate application.

3.4 Geography under another code

In some cases, applications may be received for programmes where the geography content is lower than 60%, but the balance of content may be argued as geography under another code (e.g. earth sciences) or a subject whose content or teaching is highly complementary (e.g. transport studies, planning). The application must specifically address these issues, and adequately demonstrate that the overall qualification has sufficient geographical content at each level to qualify for accreditation as a geography degree. It must also still meet the subject coverage requirement described elsewhere in this handbook.

If you are unsure about how many programmes/applications you are submitting, please contact accreditation@rgs.org for advice.

4 Application process

Applications for programme accreditation are administered by the Society's Research and Higher Education Division (RHED), working with an Accreditation Review Panel ('the Panel') made up of academics and practitioners. The Panel will assess all applications and make recommendations for acceptance to the Society's Council, which meets in June and December each year. All correspondence regarding the accreditation programme should be sent via RHED at accreditation@rgs.org.

Information about the scheme is available on the Society's website at www.rgs.org/accreditation.

Applications for RGS-IBG accreditation must conform to any relevant individual institutional procedures regarding accreditation. The Society aims for the assessment process to complement other measures of quality already in place in departments/institutions, such as institutional processes for the development and review of programmes and their specifications.

A completed application for programme accreditation includes:

- **A completed Application Form**, which will contain a written reflection on the programme's content and aims, and the development of professional practice with reference to graduate attributes (in total 2,000 to 4,000 words for both sections).³
- **Mandatory supporting evidence**, to include:
 - Programme specification
 - Module specifications (with module code and name in the title)
 - A module map or diagram showing the compulsory and optional modules within the programme and any relevant pathways. To the extent possible, indicate where modules contribute to programme learning outcomes
 - Student handbook (or any other documents that regulate student progression through this programme and its modules)
 - External examiner reports for the past three years (or for as long as the course has been delivered if shorter), and the Department's responses to each of those
 - Most recent Periodic Review Report (or evidence of programme approval if it has not yet been through Periodic Review)
- Mandatory supporting evidence, especially module specifications, may be submitted in a shared folder structure if files are appropriately labelled and referenced within the application form.
- Any **additional supporting evidence**, at the discretion of the applicant.

The completed application form and supporting evidence should demonstrate the department's commitment to excellence in teaching and/or learning, and a commitment to continuous improvement in the same, through:

- the programme's aims and delivery, in terms of appropriate breadth and depth of geographical knowledge, understanding, skills and approaches developed, and the supporting infrastructure and resources; and
- the development of professional and personal attributes of geography graduates at the relevant level, laying a foundation for the use of geographical skills and knowledge post-graduation.

³ If accreditation is sought for multiple programmes, it may be possible to combine them into a single form/application in certain circumstances (see section 3). Please contact accreditation@rgs.org for advice before starting a combined application.

Further guidance for completing the application form can be found later in this handbook in the section [Guidance on application form and evidence](#) (section 6).

Applications should be sent to accreditation@rgs.org before the next deadline. Deadlines are bi-annual, on 31st March and 30th September.

Applications will be checked for eligibility and completeness before being prepared for assessment by the Accreditation Review Panel. The Chair of the Accreditation Review Panel may request that the Department sends a representative (at the cost of the Department) to meet with the Panel during their review meeting. A site visit to the institution will not normally be required, but the Society reserves the right to request one at the discretion of the Panel. If a visit is required, an additional fee will be due to cover costs.

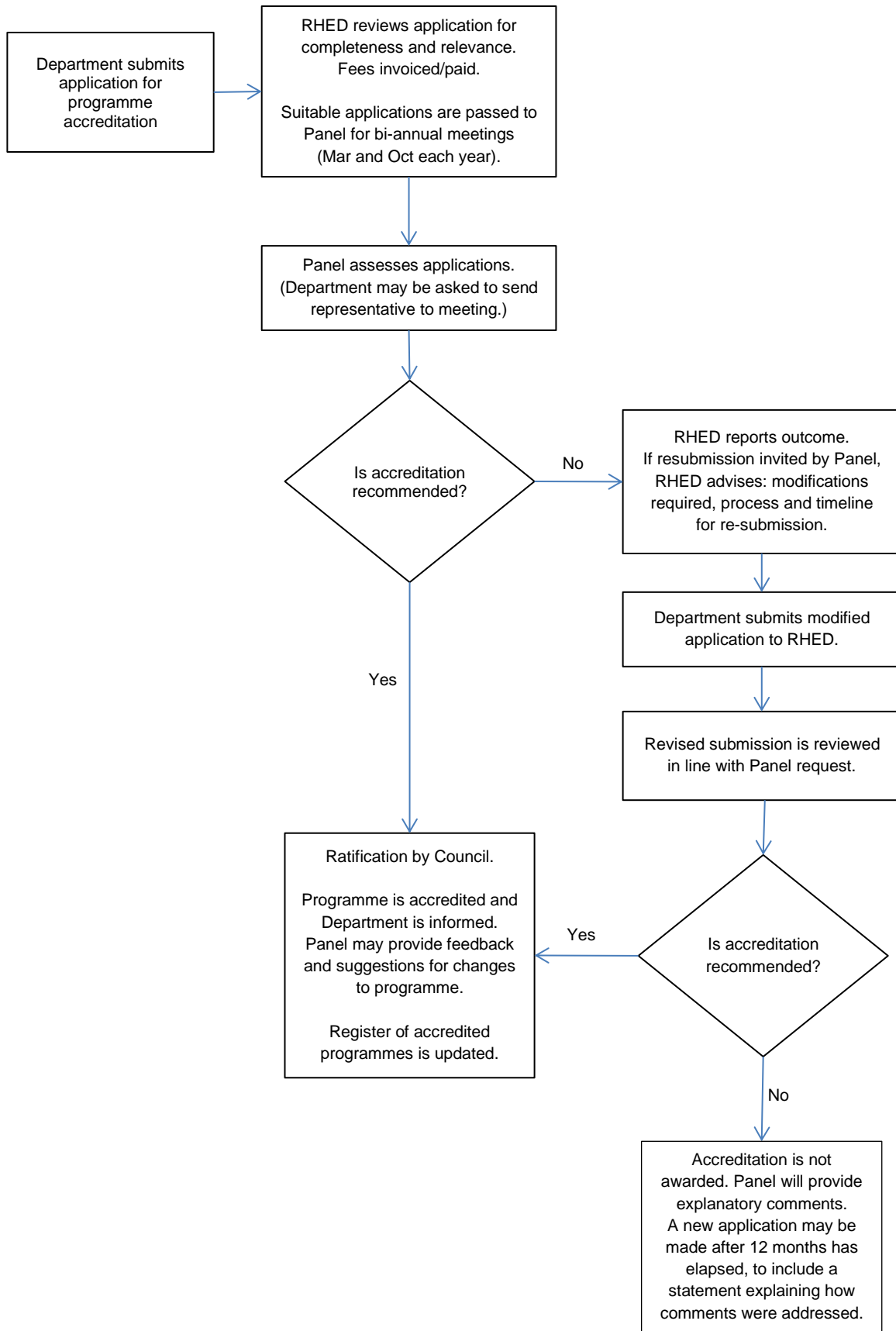
4.1 Validity

Accreditation is valid for six years. Departments must apply for re-accreditation to one of the two Panel meetings taking place in the year prior to the end of their accreditation (i.e. after five years and before six years of accreditation). If a programme is being offered for the first time or is in the first year of delivery, the Panel may recommend a shorter period for initial accreditation.

Applications for accreditation are welcomed at any stage of a programme's life-cycle, but departments are recommended to seek (re-)accreditation in the year after the programme's Periodic Review as this will provide the strongest supporting evidence for the application. The Society reserves the right to make spot checks of accredited programmes within the period of accreditation.

Departments must also accept and follow the terms and conditions of accreditation in order to maintain their programme's accredited status; see [Conditions of accreditation](#) (section 10).

4.2 Application process flowchart





5 Fees

5.1 Application fee

The one-off application fee for accreditation is £500 + VAT per programme to be accredited (totalling £600 at the current VAT rate of 20%). When a bundle of programmes is submitted in a single application form, this attracts a single application fee. Please see the section on [Definition of 'a programme'](#) (section 3) for more information.

This fee is non-refundable. The accreditation application fee will be invoiced at the point of ratification by Council. Invoice details, including purchase order numbers, should be included in your application form.

5.2 Annual registration fee

An annual registration fee of £150 + VAT (totalling £180 at the current VAT rate of 20%) per department will be levied to maintain accreditation. This is a flat fee regardless of the number of programmes accredited within a department. The annual registration fee will be invoiced in the autumn of each year.

At the end of the accreditation period (normally after five years and before six years) a new application for accreditation must be made. An application for re-accreditation may be made sooner in order to align accreditation with the programme's Periodic Review timetable.

5.3 Future changes to fees

The Society reserves the right to review and change the application and annual registration fees.

In 2022, the application fee will increase to £650 + VAT per application, and an annual registration fee of £180 + VAT per institution. Thereafter fees will rise annually in line with Society membership (Fellowship) increases.

6 Guidance on application form and evidence

There is no maximum word count for the application. However, we would normally expect to receive between 2,000 and 4,000 words in total for Parts 1 and 2 of the form. There is no maximum word count for supporting evidence, but please be respectful of the Panel's time when considering what to include; non-written evidence (e.g. video, web) may also be submitted.

We will not count module titles or references to the titles of evidence within your word count. Please include the full names of these in your application text to help the Panel. Please do not use embedded links to files. Please check that links to websites work outside your institution.

6.1 Part 1: Programme

This section should demonstrate:

- the aims of the programme (both in terms of alignment with the relevant accreditation criteria for the type of programme, and what makes it a distinctive programme)
- subject coverage and integration. For undergraduate programmes, this should include specific reference to the requirements set out in Section 3 of the Subject Benchmark Statement for Geography, and how the compulsory elements of the programme address these. For Master's programmes, evidence of how the criteria in section 2.2 are met should be included⁴
- the teaching and/or learning approaches (as appropriate to the type of programme)
- the assessment strategies (both formative and summative where present)
- how excellence is being developed and maintained, including: responses to issues raised in External Examiners' reports and/or Periodic Review reports, and a description of any other processes or opportunities for critical reflection in the department that offer a chance to make changes with input from staff, students and/or external practitioners.

Reference is expected to:

- tutor-led (taught module) and student-led learning opportunities (excluding research-only programmes)
- individual research projects
- opportunities for practical, field and laboratory based activities, and training and other development to support these
- staff, infrastructure and other resources that support the delivery of teaching and how these are developed/enhanced to support and improve the delivery of geography teaching
- student and external practitioner involvement in curriculum design and/or quality assurance for the programme.

Please include specific geographical examples that demonstrate how your activities have been delivered in the context of this programme – what you do, why you do it, what effect it has. For example, *Module 123* develops core skill *abc* by *xyz* for the benefit of...

When using examples please also make it clear whether it applies to some or all students on the programme (compulsory or optional).

⁴ You may find it a useful exercise to undertake a mapping of your modules against the Section 3 Subject Benchmark Statement for Geography or the Master's accreditation criteria in section 2.2 of this handbook (as appropriate). This can be included in your evidence.

6.2 Part 2: Professional practice

This section should describe how your programme develops the professional geographical skills and practice of students, including details of:

- how the development of employability and graduate attributes is embedded within the programme, either through specific experiences and/or across modules
- opportunities for placements and work experience
- project planning and management at individual or team levels
- career and professional planning
- inputs from professions and employers using geographical skills and knowledge.

Please make clear the extent of involvement and inputs from outside the department, and outside the institution, and whether these opportunities are available to all or some students.

You should describe the attributes of your geography graduates, and the nature and scale of resources deployed to support the acquisition of their skills and attributes.

In each section, reference should be made to the mandatory and other supporting evidence, but any application that duplicates these without explanatory comment will be returned to the applicant.

6.3 Part 3: Supporting evidence

The following evidence must be submitted with your application form, as individual files, and preferably in a text-searchable PDF format:

- Programme specification
- Module specifications (please name these using the module code and name)
- A module map or diagram showing the compulsory and optional modules within the programme and any relevant pathways. To the extent possible, indicate where modules contribute to programme learning outcomes
- Student handbook (or any other documents that regulate student progression through this programme and its modules)
- External examiner reports for the past three years (or for as long as the course has been delivered if shorter) and your department's responses to these
- Most recent Periodic Review Report (or evidence of programme approval if it has not yet had a Periodic Review)

You may submit up to five further pieces of evidence to support any aspect of your application. These may be submitted in any format. Please be respectful of the Panel's time when considering what else to include with your application. Examples might include:

- benchmark compliance statement (mapping programme/modules against SBS Section 3);
- assessment strategy or matrix (mapping modules against assessment types);
- learning outcome mapping (mapping module learning outcomes against programme learning outcomes);
- employability and attribute mapping (mapping module learning outcomes against graduate attribute and employability outcomes)
- staff data and information about continuing professional development or recognition in the area of teaching and learning;
- student summary feedback, (e.g. KIS, NSS, PTES or PRES data relevant to the programme);
- destination statistics for graduates (DLHE or departmental) for this programme.

All supporting evidence must be submitted electronically (as a zipped folder by email or secure file transfer) preferably using a folder structure to sort files. Electronic file names should include the institution name and nature of evidence, which should be cross-referenced with the list in Section 3 of your application form.



RHED will review applications for completeness and relevance. In cases where the Panel would like more information, the Chair of the Accreditation Review Panel reserves the right to request that the department sends a representative (at their own cost) to speak with the Panel during their review meeting. A site visit to the institution by Panel members will not normally be required for the assessment process, but the Society reserves the right to request one.



7 Assessment criteria

All applications should aim to demonstrate:

1. That the scope of the course content is appropriate
2. Detailed course materials which include clearly defined course objectives, explaining how the course will meet its objectives
3. The full range of benefits a student can expect to derive from completing the course
4. A clear understanding of the attributes (knowledge, understanding, skills, approaches, personal/professional attributes) gained by graduates of the programme in terms of the current and future opportunities and breadth of outcomes
5. Appropriateness of module pathways (especially where multiple pathways are offered as specialisms)
6. Involvement in the course by external practitioners (from outside the institution)
7. Internal and external validation and moderation of assessments of learners' work
8. Clearly documented quality assurance arrangements, which include adequate opportunity for students / external examiners / industry / employers / etc to influence the ongoing quality and future development of the programme

In addition to points 1-8, all undergraduate applications should demonstrate:

9. Clear and unambiguous subject integration (please see the section on [Eligibility](#) (section 2))
10. That a full range of delivery and assessment methods are in use, which are appropriately challenging and rigorous

In addition to points 1-8, all Master's applications should demonstrate:

11. Development of a depth of understanding of geographical issues relevant to the context of a particular sub-discipline
12. Appropriate and rigorous assessment methods

8 Notification of outcomes

Once an application has completed the peer review process, the applicant will be advised of the outcome in one of the following categories:

- Application for accreditation successful – recommended for acceptance by Council;
- A request for further information or clarification, which may require re-submission; or
- Application for accreditation unsuccessful.

Formal notification of programme accreditation will be made once the recommendation for accreditation has been accepted by the Society's Council. Formal notification will comprise:

- A letter to the department/institution confirming accreditation, with permission to use the Society's name and logo in relation to the accredited course/s; and
- Publication of the institution, department and course information in the register of accredited courses.

In the event that accreditation is unsuccessful, the Panel will provide feedback to the applicant. A new application for accreditation may be made after one year has elapsed (from the date of last application), with a covering letter that explains how the Panel's feedback has been addressed.

9 Process for appeals

All applications receive careful scrutiny by the [Accreditation Review Panel](#). Their recommendation is confirmed by the Society's Council. Appeals may therefore not be made against the professional judgement of the Panel or Council.

The sole ground on which an appeal may be made is one based on procedure. Anyone wishing to make an appeal against a decision should write to the Society no later than two months after the result of the application is announced, citing the specific decision and setting out clearly the substantive basis of the appeal. The Society will respond in writing within 30 days.

10 Conditions of accreditation

Accreditation will be awarded, and maintained each year, subject to the following terms and conditions:

- 1) Payment of the one-off application fee in full (see section 5)
- 2) Annual re-registration and payment of an annual registration fee (see section 5)
- 3) Following the guidance for the use of the RGS-IBG accreditation logo mark and statement (see section 15)
- 4) Notification of any changes to programmes (see section 12)

11 Annual re-registration

At the end of each calendar year during the period of accreditation (with the exception of the year in which accreditation was awarded), an Annual Re-registration Form should be completed and submitted to accreditation@rgs.org. This confirms that the terms and conditions of accreditation are accepted for a further year, that any changes to accredited programmes since the preceding re-registration (or application in the case of first-time re-registrations) have been submitted in accordance with this handbook and that the relevant fees have been paid (see section 5).

12 Changes to accredited programmes

The Society accepts that programmes of study evolve to reflect the latest developments in the subject and to meet the needs of students and employers. Providers offering degree programmes in geography are free to decide upon, and are responsible for, the details of content and organisation of their programmes.

If the content or delivery method of a programme will change substantially during the period of accreditation, departments are asked to send a summary of changes to the Society (accreditation@rgs.org) each year at the time of re-registration, and/or at the point in their institutional review process where input from an accreditation provider is normally expected.

The Panel expects to review any changes to accredited programmes that fall into the following categories:

- Any changes to credit weighting, content or assessment methods in core modules;
- For undergraduate programmes, changes that affect the mapping of the programme against the Geography Subject Benchmark Statement, especially the balance of human/physical geography across the programme (bearing in mind the expectation that an accredited programme adequately demonstrates Sections 3.2, 3.8 and 3.9 of the Subject Benchmark Statement);
- For Master's programmes, changes that affect the mapping of the programme against the criteria in section 2.2 of this handbook (Master's programmes); and/or
- Any other changes that would trigger an institutional review, or which would require feedback from an accreditation provider before institutional sign-off may occur.

Changes to programmes accredited by RGS-IBG must conform to any relevant individual institutional policies and procedures regarding accreditation.

12.1 How to notify changes to accredited programmes

Institutions that are making changes to accredited programmes are asked to send the following information to the Panel (accreditation@rgs.org):

1. A short covering letter that clearly describes the nature and scope of the changes, with reference to supporting evidence, and clearly setting out:
 - What has/will be changed;
 - What impact this will have on: the programme content and aims and the development of professional practice in graduates of the programme.
 - For undergraduate programmes, this should include reference to subject coverage and integration as per the Subject Benchmark Statement for Geography
2. Supporting evidence related to the changes, e.g. updated and/or new programme or module specifications (with inline tracked changes or comments highlighting changes where possible).

12.2 Process for reviewing changes to accredited programmes

The Society expects that most institutions will notify changes to accredited programmes at one of the two deadlines for applications (31st March and 30th September) each year. The changes will be considered at the next Panel meeting and, if appropriate, an outcome notified following ratification

by Council. In some cases, however, changes to programmes may not require review by the whole Panel.

The framework below categorises common changes to accredited programmes and the level at which they are reviewed and either accepted or rejected. If changes to a programme (or cluster of programmes) are submitted which include multiple elements from the framework below, these changes will be reviewed at the level appropriate to the most major of these changes. Should any changes be submitted which are not listed below, these will be submitted to the Panel Chair who will determine the appropriate course of action.

If moderate or major changes to accredited programmes are submitted, accreditation of the affected programme(s) is temporarily suspended from the date of submission. Once a decision has been reached, the Professional Officer will notify the institution which submitted the changes of the outcome and archive the associated documents. The possible outcomes are:

1. **Approval of changes** and continuation (minor changes) or resumption (moderate or major changes) of accreditation for the remainder of the original term (subject to the approval of any subsequent changes and maintenance of the conditions of accreditation).
2. **Permanent revocation of accreditation.** The affected programme(s) will be removed from the Register of Accredited Programmes. If, after revocation, the institution has no remaining accredited programmes in the same annual registration category (undergraduate or master's) the annual registration process will be waived. References to accreditation in programme marketing must be removed within 30 days of revocation. A new application for accreditation may be made after one year has elapsed (from the date of revocation), with a covering letter that explains how the Panel's feedback has been addressed.
3. **Request for further information.** The additional submission will be reviewed before outcome 1 or 2 is reached.

Framework of Changes to Accredited Programmes

- **Minor Changes - Reviewed by the Professional Officer overseeing Programme Accreditation (in consultation with Head of RHED)**
 - Additional material which does not replace any aspect of the accredited programme (including an additional sandwich year, placement year, foundation year, year in industry or professional practice).
 - Renaming of modules with no change to content or assessment.
 - Minor changes to assessment methods or weightings within one module, unless the changes affect the balance of human/physical geography.
 - Any changes to the learning outcomes or content of optional modules, including the removal or addition of optional modules.
 - Timetable changes which do not limit the module options available to students (e.g. semesterisation or moving modules between semesters).
 - Changes to fieldwork locations with no change to the relevant module learning outcomes.
- **Moderate Changes - Reviewed by the Accreditation Review Panel Chair (with the option to refer any to the full Panel)**
 - Modifications of module content, or replacement of modules.
 - Additional material which replaces any aspect of the accredited programme (including an sandwich year, placement year, foundation year, year in industry or professional practice which prevent a student selecting particular modules).



- Any changes to the learning outcomes or content of core modules, including the removal or addition of core modules, especially where there is a change to the balance of human/physical geography.
 - Changes to compulsory module or programme learning outcomes.
 - Changes that affect the mapping of the programme against the Geography Subject Benchmark Statement or the criteria in this handbook (as relevant to the programme). For undergraduate programmes, this includes the balance of human/physical geography across the programme.
 - Renaming of the programme.
- **Major Changes - Reviewed by the full Accreditation Review Panel**
 - Full programme revalidation.
 - Changes for which there are no precedents among accredited programmes.

13 Closure of accredited programmes

If a currently accredited programme is due to close, the institution should notify the Society as soon as possible. From this point until the final student has graduated or withdrawn (including transferal to another programme) the programme may retain its accreditation on the following conditions:

- The institution must continue to annually re-register the programme and pay the annual registration fee for each full year of operation. If the same institution has other accredited programmes which are not closing, the annual registration fee will be unaffected after the closure of a programme, as this fee is paid once per institution, irrespective of the number of accredited programmes (see section 11). If the Society revokes accreditation, and the institution has no other accredited programmes, the annual registration fee is no longer due.
- The programme must continue to meet the criteria for accreditation. The institution must submit a 'Changes to accredited programmes' form with each annual registration, providing an update on any forthcoming changes to the programme which may affect its eligibility for accreditation (see section 12). This includes, but is not limited to, changes made as a result of staffing changes or the withdrawal of modules. Should such changes be made, about which the Society has not already been notified, a 'Changes to accredited programmes' form should be submitted in the usual way (see section 12). In either case, these submissions will be reviewed (see process outlined in section 12.2) and accreditation will be approved or revoked as appropriate.

14 Accreditation Review Panel

14.1 Appointments

The Society is responsible for appointing an expert [Accreditation Review Panel](#) to assess and make recommendations on all applications for programme accreditation.

The Accreditation Review Panel will normally have a minimum of four and maximum of ten members, invited from:

- Geographers who hold teaching and learning leadership positions at a senior level in Higher Education
- Geographers working in industry, at least one of whom will be a Chartered Geographer;
- Others with recognised expertise in teaching and learning in higher education geography, at the invitation of Vice President for Research and Higher Education.

The Panel may draw upon the expertise of the Society's Research and Higher Education Committee.

All members will have experience of approvals and quality assurance and be expected to be up to date with current practice in higher education. The Research and Higher Education Division will maintain a list of suitable persons to contribute to the Panel each year. The Society is committed to equal opportunities and endeavours to appoint a Panel representative of the community.

Panel membership will typically be for a period of three years, with the opportunity to renew for an additional three year term. Terms of appointment will be staggered to ensure continuity. All appointments will be approved by the RGS-IBG Council.

The Panel will normally convene at least twice per year, usually in May and November, to review applications and make recommendations to Council. An additional meeting may be added if the volume of applications requires it.

In cases where the Panel would like more information, the Chair of the Accreditation Review Panel reserves the right to request that the Department sends a representative (at their own cost) to speak with the Panel during their review meeting. A site visit to the institution by Panel members will not normally be required for the assessment process, but the Society reserves the right to request one.

Terms of reference for the accreditation Review Panel are held in the Society's records.

14.2 Requirements of Panel members

The full terms of reference for the accreditation Review Panel are held in the Society's records. A summary of the requirements of Panel members is below.

14.2.1 Conflicts of interest

Members of the Panel may not have worked for, acted as an external examiner for, or have had any other personal connection to, the institution/department being assessed in the last five years. Members of the Panel will be given the opportunity to, and must declare, prior to the start of any accreditation assessment cycle, any potential conflicts of interest with the applications under consideration.



14.2.2 Confidentiality

In the course of assessing accreditation applications, members of the Panel may come into contact with individually identifiable, commercially sensitive and/or confidential information. Panel members must treat all information received or obtained while performing any duties on behalf of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) as confidential and not divulge such information to any other person or organisation unless authorised to do so. This responsibility continues after the assessment has concluded.

14.2.3 Conduct

In order that institutions and departments, the geography community and the wider public may have confidence in the accreditation scheme's impartiality and effectiveness, members of the Panel must:

- Inform the RGS-IBG of any conflicts of interest as soon as practically possible
- Respect the confidentiality of the information they come into contact with in the course of acting as a Panel member
- Not use their position on the Panel to advance or promote their personal, professional or business interests
- Attend all meetings at which their presence is required
- Prepare for meetings by reading all papers requested beforehand
- Be fair, open-minded, unbiased and non-prejudicial on the grounds of gender, race, disability, lifestyle, culture, beliefs, sexuality, age and not use any language that could be deemed offensive or discriminatory
- Not request or accept any inducement, gift, commission, discount or any other profit from the institution/department being assessed or from any other interested person.

Abiding by these guidelines is the minimum expectation of all members of the Panel. Members of the Panel who are Fellows of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) are also expected to abide by the Society's Code of Conduct for Fellows.

15 Guidance for publicity following accreditation

Programmes that are successful in securing accreditation will be entitled to:

- Receive formal confirmation of accreditation from the RGS-IBG (by letter)
- Promote the accredited programme(s) in marketing materials using approved wording and/or logos (see below).

15.1 Acceptable uses of the Society's name and logo

The Society's name and/or logo may be used to indicate programme accreditation in the following ways:

- On institution-authored/approved marketing materials for the accredited programme;
- On an institution's website, on the webpage for the accredited programme;
- On the UCAS website, where the HEI's name appears in relation to the accredited programme;
- On other departmental materials (electronic or print) relating to geography programmes for public distribution, subject to permission from the Society.

The following statements may be used:

This programme has been accredited by the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG).

or, for undergraduate programmes;

This programme has been accredited by the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG). Accreditation recognises programmes that deliver the geographical knowledge, understanding, skills, approaches and professional attributes expected of high quality geography graduates, as recorded in the QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for Geography.

The following logo may be used, which will be made available to departments with accredited programmes. There are six colour options which can be used as desired:



IMPORTANT: Departments offering programmes accredited by the Society must not imply that other departments or institutions who are yet to achieve accreditation are not offering relevant and high-quality programmes when making reference to their accreditation in external literature.

The Society maintains the right to request the removal of its name and its logo from printed or electronic material or publications at any time.



16 Records

The Research and Higher Education Division is responsible for maintaining the following records:

1. A list of departments and programmes that made an application for accreditation;
2. A list of departments and programmes that are currently accredited (which will be published on the Society's website);
3. A copy of each application and supporting evidence, to be placed in the Society's archives.
4. Terms of reference for the Accreditation Review Panel.

16.1 Data Protection

The RGS-IBG is registered under relevant Data Protection regulations and adheres to its data protection obligations. Information provided to the Society by institutions in connection with programme accreditation will be treated in the strictest confidence and only used in connection with relevant procedures, as outlined in this handbook. Data will be shared with members of the programme accreditation Review Panel (deleted after use) and successfully accredited programmes will be listed on our website. Further information can be found in our privacy notice (www.rgs.org/privacy-notice).

17 Contact information

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