

## Chapter 22

**"Mind the Gap!" Or, how can we bring together geography education in schools and universities?'**

***Graham Butt and Gemma Collins***

A chasm has developed between those who teach at school and those who teach in universities.

(Goudie, 1993, p. 338)

### **Introduction**

The current 'state of play' concerning the health of geography education in English state schools and universities is intriguing. On the one hand, geography remains a popular option in many English schools, experienced positively by large numbers of students who ultimately perform well in public examinations. In these schools standards of teaching on examination courses remain high, with pleasing numbers of students progressing onto geography (or geography-related) courses as undergraduates – where their experiences are also generally positive (Butt, 2008, 2011). The launch of an English Baccalaureate in 2010, in which students are expected to achieve 'good' GCSE grades (at level C or above) in a number of subjects – including either geography or history – has also provided a substantial fillip to the numbers opting for geography. Geography remains a subject of real relevance to many young people in our rapidly changing world, capable of addressing aspects of space, place and environment that will affect their future lives.

On the other hand, geography is under pressure with around 20% fewer candidates entered for public examinations in the subject at the end of the first decade of the 21st-century compared with the beginning (see David Gardner and John Hopkin's chapters in this volume). And just as geography departments in schools have faced pressures, so too have those in universities, as outlined by Castree (2011).

This constitutes a backdrop to the current shifts in the form and content of geography taught in schools – a consideration when evaluating the potential impact of the recent 'knowledge turn' (Lambert, 2011) in geography education. Any gap between schools and the academy can be considered to be mutually damaging, as Andrew Goudie (1993) noted in his Presidential address to the Geographical Association conference in its centenary year. Here, Goudie bemoaned the lack of involvement of academic geographers both in the Association and in schools, stating: 'A chasm has developed between those who teach in schools and those who teach in universities' (p. 338). However, this begs the question of how best to conceptualise the relation between the school subject and the wider academic discipline. They are different, with different priorities and different purposes. We should perhaps *expect* a 'gap'.

## **ERODING THE LINKS BETWEEN UNIVERSITY AND SCHOOL GEOGRAPHIES**

All school subjects have a 'curriculum story', and probably all subjects experience periods of uncertainty about their status and appeal. For school geography, the rise of humanities teaching in many schools in the 1960s and 1970s, the debate over whether geography would be included in the National Curriculum in the late 1980s (see Bailey and Binns, 1987), and the increased focus on vocational education from the 1990s, all feature as pressure points. Essentially, school geography has always been affected, to a greater or lesser extent, by:

the prevailing philosophies of education, the existing paradigm of geography in higher education, the economic climate and the political complexion of the government of the day.

(Butt, 2002, p. 17)

The comprehensivisation of state secondary schools from the mid 1960s meant that many secondary school teachers in England found themselves teaching a different student clientele. This led significant numbers of geography educators towards curriculum development, driven primarily by the educational needs of a 'new' student group. Graves (1975) refers to this period as one of 'crisis in geographical education in Britain' (p. 61), a consequence of conceptual shifts in academic geography, advances in education theory and the restructuring of secondary schools. Marsden (1997) echoes these observations, referring to the 'unhealthy stresses' between school and university geography which developed from this time.

For Naish (2000), the period from the late 1960s to the early 1980s was one of 'laissez faire' in geography curriculum development, when considerations of the broader aims, objectives and purposes of education came to the fore. One of the consequences of this increased '*educational focus*' was that many geography teachers, according to Naish, stepped back from considering the primacy of geography's academic subject content. The Schools Council, founded in 1964, actively supported curriculum reform and development, sponsoring three major geography curriculum development projects in the 1970s: Geography for the Young School Leaver (GYSL); Geography 14–18 (Bristol Project) and the Geography 16–19 Project. Geography curriculum development was also influenced by a project from abroad – the American High Schools Geography Project (HSGP, 1971) – which instructed teachers how to incorporate new ideas, content and techniques from the 'quantitative revolution' in academic geography into their schemes of work. However, most

curriculum development projects focused more on how geography could contribute to the fulfilment of the needs of young people, than on considerations of academic subject content. The Geography 16–19 Project, examined at A level from 1982, achieved great popularity, experiencing a near-exponential growth in student numbers during the 1980s. This project had an impact on the teaching of geography within universities – for incoming undergraduates who had studied 16–19 Geography had been taught through a ‘route to enquiry’ approach, acquiring geographical content, skills, techniques and values very different from those provided by more ‘traditional’ geography syllabuses. The change was not universally welcomed by university geographers, many of whom criticised the (supposed) superficiality of content covered by the 16–19 syllabus, particularly of physical geography. Although these curriculum development projects offered some connection with academic geographers and their research, the 16–19 Project team stated that there was ‘no requirement that all new academic developments necessarily be translated into the school context’ (Naish et al., 1987, pp. 26–7).

The geography curriculum development projects were based within higher education institutions (HEIs) – predominantly in departments of education, not geography – with each project team emphasising the need for geography teachers to be involved (Boardman, 1988). The resultant curricula reflected *some* of the changes from the academic frontiers of the subject, often mediated by teacher educators, but also incorporated (and valued highly) the application of innovative curriculum theory. During the late 1970s, university geography departments saw humanistic, behavioural, welfare, and radical geographers reacting against the narrowness of the positivistic, quantitative approaches developed at least a decade earlier. This plurality of approaches may have proved confusing for school geographers, making the application of new ideas in schools problematic. A further, practical issue when considering the connections between schools and universities is the time lag between developments in universities and their adoption in schools, as there is an understandable conservatism about swapping syllabuses.

The 1980s saw increasing centralisation and politicisation of the school curriculum, culminating in the passing of the Education Reform Act (1988) and the establishment of a National Curriculum in English and Welsh schools. The first iteration of the Geography National Curriculum (GNC) (DES, 1991) has been seen as a 'restorationist' curriculum (Rawling, 2001). As Lambert (2011) succinctly observes:

The Schools Council projects introduced the idea that subject knowledge was not an end point in education, but a vehicle contributing towards educational ends (geography as a 'medium of education'). The 1991 National Curriculum can be interpreted as an attempt to restore subject knowledge.

(p. 248)

Geography had won the 'status battle' by achieving a secure curriculum place, but arguably at the expense of previous educational, ideological and conceptual gains. It was soon apparent that the 'statutory order' was overloaded with content, making assessment problematic and restricting future curriculum development. Following the Dearing Review (1993–5), a second, slimmer, more pragmatic version of the GNC was published (DfE, 1995). Subsequently the QCA Review (1998–2000), and that of 2007, continued to slim the geography curriculum (DfEE/QCA, 1999; QCA, 2007), eventually shifting its focus from content to 'key concepts'. The 2012 review of the National Curriculum, under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat administration elected in 2010, signalled a shift away from the 'relaxation' of content, towards the more prescriptive and centrally controlled knowledge-based curriculum evident in the 2014 National Curriculum.

Morgan (2008) has outlined the development of school geography curricula since the 1970s, whilst simultaneously highlighting an uncoupling of school and university geography during this

period. He notes the limited involvement of academic geographers in the development of the GNC – just two were chosen to sit on the Geography Working Group, few made significant submissions to the curriculum-making process, whilst only modest numbers engaged in lobbying through their professional associations. This reflects the declining influence of university geographers in shaping the content of geography taught in schools over the past forty years. By the late 1990s, few academic geographers crossed the school–university divide, making limited contributions to the work of awarding bodies, the creation of geography syllabuses, and to the professional development of teachers. From the mid 1980s numbers of geography undergraduates were increasing rapidly, with commensurate pressures on university class sizes, teaching and research quality, funding and research outputs. Just as schools have endured huge changes in policy and practice, higher education has also been subject to increased bureaucratisation, marketisation and rising accountability. The limited involvement of most academic geographers in debates about the content of public examinations in geography, their general unwillingness to write for school teachers and students, and their lack of engagement in the professional development of teachers may be attributable to their need to publish high-quality research and on preparing high-stakes audits (QAA) (see Castree et al., 2007).

### **THE 'DIVIDE' BETWEEN SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY GEOGRAPHY – RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT**

The first of the famous Madingley conferences in 1963, creating what Rex Walford called the 'new model army' (Walford, 2001, p. 158), gave academic geographers and (some) teachers opportunities to discuss developments in their subject, under the direction of a couple of exciting and ambitious young Oxbridge geographers, Richard Chorley and Peter Haggett. The tone of these conferences were somewhat paternalistic, given that academic geographers were largely handing down research

findings and techniques to those teachers present – who Rawling refers to as ‘junior partners in this relationship’ (Rawling, 1996, p. 3). Nonetheless, Unwin (1996) comments positively on the influence of Chorley and Haggett’s ideas on ‘a generation of geography teachers’, noting how their emphasis on quantitative approaches, modelling and theory building subsequently ‘filtered down into school textbooks and examination syllabuses’ (p. 21). Although sceptical about the extent of these impacts across the majority of schools, Unwin (1996) asserts that a minority of geography teachers remained heavily influenced by the research agendas of university geographers in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Whilst it would be a misjudgement to visualise the 1960s and early 1970s as some kind of ‘golden age’ of interaction between school and university geographers, there is evidence of pockets of influential engagement with regard to examinations and professional development. This gradually changed from the mid 1970s, as the sectors began to grow further apart. One reason for this, according to Bradford (1996), was that:

during the 1980s and 1990s there has not been one major trend affecting as many areas of the subject as did either the scientific revolution of the 1950s and early 1960s, or the radical geography movement of the early 1970s. The absence of such major changes may partly account for the reduced impact of higher education on the geography taught in secondary education.

(p. 282)

Michael Bradford’s view of the school–HE interface as ‘presenting a gap or discontinuity in methods and content’ (1996, p. 277), has held true for much of the following 15 years, despite attempts to bridge the gap, notably by the Council for British Geography (Cobrig) and its seminars of the mid 1990s (see Daugherty and Rawling, 1996). In fact it seemed like a decision needed to be made about whether ‘there should be uniformity or diversity in what is learned’ (p. 277) in schools and

universities. This is a fundamental issue, at the very heart of our consideration of the connections between the geographies taught within schools and universities. It hints at a basic epistemological divide between the aims, rationale and scope of the work of academic and school geographers, with respect to both teaching and research. Essentially, when considering geography either as an academic discipline or as a school subject, there will always be differences and divides. Put crudely, geography in the academy is afforded the opportunities to develop in innovative, experimental, tentative and uncertain ways – the very nature of ‘cutting edge’ academic research work makes this so. Here we are at the forefront of knowledge creation, which is a piecemeal, painful and ‘backwards and forwards’ process, often leading down blind alleys or at best revealing findings that are contingent and relational. The geography taught in schools probably cannot be of this nature. It is certainly *informed* by the advances in knowledge achieved by academic geographers, but requires more objectivity, stability and certainty about the content it conveys. The selections of geography to be taught in schools have a greater need for endurance than those which may have recently emerged from the frontiers of academic research. Laying aside for one moment the vexed question as to the choice of contents for this enduring school geography, a divide will therefore always exist between academic and school geography; it will not be ‘closed’ by seeking to align both geographies (an impossible, Sisyphean task) but bridged by achieving a better understanding of their differences.

## **BRIDGING THE DIVIDE – WAYS FORWARD**

We have seen that the issue of a ‘chasm’, ‘gap’, ‘border’ or ‘discontinuity’ between geography education in schools and universities is persistent (see Goudie, 1993; Machon and Ranger, 1996; Bradford, 1996; Marsden, 1997; Bonnett, 2003; Butt, 2008; Johnston, 2009; Hill and Jones, 2010), although some geographers have recently attempted to build bridges between the two sectors. The



need for further dialogue (Jeffrey, 2003; Stannard, 2003), hopefully followed by rapprochement (Yarwood and Davison, 2007; Pykett and Smith, 2009), is generally acknowledged.

We outline below (Table 22.1) ways in which academic geographers, initial teacher educators, professional associations, awarding bodies and geography teachers can connect to develop the content of school geography. There are obvious overlaps between many of the suggested ‘activities’ and ‘agents’ – the key is achieving stronger, more frequent and clearer lines of communication between the academy and schools. Often this will occur through the actions of particular ‘mediators’ and ‘ambassadors’ interested in the wider development of geography content and pedagogy.

Each year new cohorts of geography graduates train to become geography teachers through programmes of initial teacher education (ITE), be they school or university based. Each trainee must make their own attempt to bridge the ‘gap’ between university and school geography, striving to translate or transform their recently gained geographical knowledge, understanding and skills to the classroom. This is not an easy process as ‘students are recruited to teacher education courses with wildly different concepts of the nature of geography’ (Marsden, 1997, p. 250; also see Barratt Hacking, 1996; Walford, 1996; Brooks, 2010). In some sense each ITE student acts as a conduit, bringing aspects of recently acquired geography content from their university courses into schools – a process extended by the growing cohort of geography teachers who go on to study for a Masters degree, Ed D or PhD in geography education.

*Table 22.1* Bridging the divide – updating the content of school geography

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Agents</i>
Professional development conferences and Professional associations (e.g. GA and GA branches, RGS-events)	IBG and GA conferences)

Academic conferences and events	Academic geographers and initial teacher educators (with some geography teachers) (e.g. COBRIG, Association of American Geographers Conference, IGU, ESRC 'Engaging Geographies' seminar series, RGS-IBG and GA conferences)
Producing textbooks/journal articles for school students/geography teachers	Geography teachers, academic geographers and/or initial teacher educators (in schools and universities) (e.g. <i>Teaching Geography</i> , <i>Geography Review</i> , <i>Geography</i> )
Producing scholarly/research texts	Academic geographers and/or initial teacher educators (in schools and universities) (e.g. GReCo, Rawling and Daugherty (1996), Kent (2000), Butt (2011))
Research projects	Geography teachers in association with academic geographers and/or initial teacher educators (in schools and universities) (e.g. Young People's Geographies Project)
Curriculum Development Projects	Notably subject associations (e.g. see under 'projects' on <a href="http://geography.org.uk">geography.org.uk</a> )
'Mediation'	'Mediators' and 'Ambassadors' working in/with geographers in schools (e.g. GA Chief Executive/Professor of Geography Education; RGS-IBG subject officers; key geography academics; initial teacher educators in geography; geography undergraduates in schools; A level geography students attending day

'outreach/widening participation' courses in university geography departments).

Special Interest Groups	As represented in professional associations (IGU, GA, RGS-IBG, etc.)
Political lobbying for government funded initiatives	Professional associations (GA, RGS-IBG) (e.g. Action Plan for Geography); 'mediators'
Award bearing courses/CPD (Masters, Ed D, University Schools of Education PhD in geography education)	
Initial Teacher Education	New geography teachers, with geography educators (e.g. PGCE and PGDipEd courses)
Development and review of examination specifications <sup>1</sup>	Awarding bodies in association with academic geographers, teacher educators and geography teachers

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<sup>1</sup> We cannot escape the sustained influence of the awarding bodies on the content of geography taught in schools. Many geography teachers express a desire to include up-to-date research in their teaching and may be encouraged to do so by their choice of syllabus. However, most teachers will only teach content which they believe will be credited by the examiners, who may favour 'traditional' (and possibly outdated) answers.

## THE 'KNOWLEDGE TURN'

We have largely focused this discussion on the connections between geography in schools and in Higher Education. We choose to end our deliberations by concentrating on the recent 'knowledge turn' in school geography.

David Lambert (2011) shows that the direction of travel taken by the Schools White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010), encourages (geography) teachers to engage more deeply with the question of 'what to teach?' Here the issue is what constitutes 'essential knowledge'. Whether this is a question solely about 'school geography' or whether the impetus is for geography teachers to engage with developments in their subject discipline is unclear. Lambert welcomes a re-focusing of geography teachers' attention on their subject, arguing that this has been neglected during a period of overemphasis on aspects of pedagogy. David Mitchell (2011) similarly refers to an 'emptying of subject knowledge', and is concerned about the 'weak' geographical content taught in schools – a consequence, according to Alex Standish and others, of the 'ethical turn' in education for social purposes ('education as therapy'), but also of the extent to which pedagogy has come to dominate knowledge. This serves to exacerbate the 'great divide' between university and school geographies as the relevance of the discipline to raising achievement becomes questionable on a practical level. John Morgan (2009), Margaret Roberts (2010, 2012) and Ruth Totterdell (2012) each explore the issue of what makes geography teachers, and their lessons, 'good' – concluding that the focus should be as much on the geography taught (and learned) as on the process of teaching. Mitchell (2011) implies the need to develop a more theorised and sophisticated understanding of perspectives on knowledge, incorporating an appreciation of Young's conceptions of 'powerful knowledge' (Young, 2008), Hirsch's notions of core knowledge and cultural literacy (Hirsch, 1987, 2007), and possibly the 'capability approach' to geography (Lambert and Morgan, 2010).

In these scenarios, geography teachers are visualised as 'independent, autonomous, knowledge workers' (Mitchell, 2011), as well as 'curriculum makers' (Lambert and Morgan, 2010), and of course, this is distinctive and results in a very particular form of geography: that is, geography in education

(rather than geography as an independent discipline). The prospects of bridging the gap between schools and universities are not necessarily dimmed by making such a distinction, but we may have to work hard at working out what the links are, or should be. For example, as Peter Jackson (2006) has argued, we could stress that 'thinking geographically', allowing us to apply geographical knowledge and conceptual understanding to different settings, is a uniquely powerful way for students to see the world and make connections. Conceptualising geography in this way may help us build bridges. But we do not need to unify for, as Noel Castree reminds us, 'students will only come to university to read for a geography degree if they've first been inspired by their geography teachers – teachers who often present a very different sort of geography to that most university academics teach' (Castree, 2011, p. 3). But, we might add, it does need to be geography.

The connections between university geography departments, Schools of Education and schools are always in flux, particularly at times of major shifts in education policy, practice and assessment. At the time of writing universities and schools are engaged in negotiating and enacting changes to their geography curricula, to assessment through high stakes public examinations, and to initial teacher education (ITE) in geography. This inevitably has an impact on the ways in which disciplinary knowledge from the academy eventually contributes to new subject knowledge taught in schools. Such processes are, in part, currently mediated by initial teacher education - which itself is experiencing radical shifts in form, structure, content and location.

Reforms to the school geography curriculum, and to public examinations, inevitably affect both schools and higher education - altering the nature of cross-phase collaboration and shifting the drivers responsible for the creation of geography subject knowledge. The most recent reviews of the National Curriculum, GCSE and AS/A level geography examinations in England have been 'knowledge-led' and more inclusive of contributions made from higher education, largely as a

consequence of educational policy re focusing its attention on the prioritisation of subject content in schools. Geographical content is therefore shifting, with the connections between schools and universities being somewhat mediated by far reaching changes to teacher education. First, with reference to the work of the A-level Content Advisory Board (ALCAB) in 2014, it is helpful to remind ourselves of the board's impacts on the geography content of A and AS level syllabuses – a revision process which included contributions from academic geographers, GA and RGS-IBG members, and a practicing teacher. These reviews necessitated a scoping exercise followed by extensive discussions with school examination awarding bodies, drawing together the views of higher education and teachers in schools. What resulted, despite some inevitable disappointments, was 'a degree of reconnection of HE with A level content' (Evans 2015) with concomitant alterations of specifications for the teaching and assessment of geography.

Second, the radical reform of initial teacher education - which has now emphatically shifted location, both physically and intellectually, away from university-led provision to school-based training - is having a significant impact on both the quality of preparation of new entrants to the profession, and on geography curriculum development in schools (Butt 2015). Recent policy statements from each of the main political parties firmly position the future of teacher education and training in schools, largely ignoring the contributions made previously to England's 'world class teaching profession' by higher education institutions (HEIs). The role of the specialist geography educator in ITE is therefore sadly disappearing. Given the significant decline in numbers of trainee geography teachers based in HEIs, and the increasing placement of trainee teachers on school-based routes, this is likely to lead to narrower forms of teacher preparation and the loss of subject specialisms. This will inevitably have far reaching effects on research and scholarship in geography education and ultimately on the quality of geographical knowledge experienced by students in schools (Tapsfield, Roberts and Kinder 2015).

It may be that University geography departments, Schools of Education and schools see such challenges as a call to arms, to embrace curriculum reform together and to attempt to mitigate the effects of such radical reforms of initial teacher education. The UK's first two University training schools (UTSs) opened in 2015 with significant investment from not only the government but also from their respective founding institutions, the University of Cambridge (primary) and the University of Birmingham (secondary). In the case of the University of Birmingham School, the school's leadership worked with University academic departments and subject specialists from the School of Education to recruit staff who already were, or had expressed a commitment to becoming, 'research active' in the school environment, with all Heads of Department holding Masters level qualifications. The purpose of the UTS is to provide teachers with access to high quality education research and the ability and opportunity to apply this in the classroom, as well as eventually becoming a hub for ITE. At the time of writing, with the first full academic year almost completed at the University of Birmingham School, the signs are that this is an achievable purpose and that the UTS is already having an impact on geography education in the city. ITE students completing their Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDipEd) have planned and delivered a residential field course for Year 12 pupils from the school, and geography was the first subject to gain approval for a joint research project between the University academic geography department, School of Education and the school geography department. The relationships already fostered between these three stakeholders is flourishing, with more joint projects being planned as the school expands.

## **Conclusions**

The existence of a 'gap' between school and university geography is increasingly well documented (Clifford, 2002; Thrift, 2002; Bonnett, 2003). It represents a discontinuity keenly felt by many geography graduates who enter initial teacher training, only to discover that the geography

syllabuses they teach in schools reflect very little of the themes and content recently studied within the academy.

This is perhaps unsurprising. There will always be significant differences between the two sectors, given their asymmetrical priorities, purposes and concerns: the prime focus of school and university geographers *is* different. But there must always be strong connections between the two if the discipline of geography is to remain healthy, for one important purpose of school is to introduce disciplinary knowledge to young people. More prosaically, universities will continue to supply new geography graduates to be trained as geography teachers and there must be a shared commitment both to, and for, the geographical education of young people. This symbiosis, borne from the mutual needs of both sectors, should encourage the creation of closer ties. Or, if not closer ties, links and connections that are better understood: we do not argue for a ‘new model army’ – or indeed shock troops of any kind! More modestly we encourage a deeper appreciation of the geography taught in schools and universities, and how collectively this may contribute to ‘thinking geographically’ (see John Morgan in this volume). This is not to create uniformity, or an overly regimented continuity and progression of geographical themes, but to achieve a mutual, coherent and agreed understanding of the subject, recognisable by both sectors.

### **Key readings**

1. Rawling, E. and Daugherty, R. (eds.), (1996) *Geography into the Twenty-First Century*, Chichester: Wiley. Eleanor Rawling and Richard Daugherty’s edited work provides a good historical account of how school and university geographies have progressed up to the mid 1990s.
2. Butt, G. (ed.) (2011) *Geography, Education and the Future*, London: Continuum. To take these debates forward, read selected chapters from Graham Butt’s (2011) edited work.



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## Note

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<sup>1</sup> Castree (2011) estimates that some 80 (of 140) English higher education institutes (HEIs) offer single or joint honours degrees in geography, to around 15,000 students (in 2008–9). Similar numbers are currently studying for degrees in mathematics, and economics.