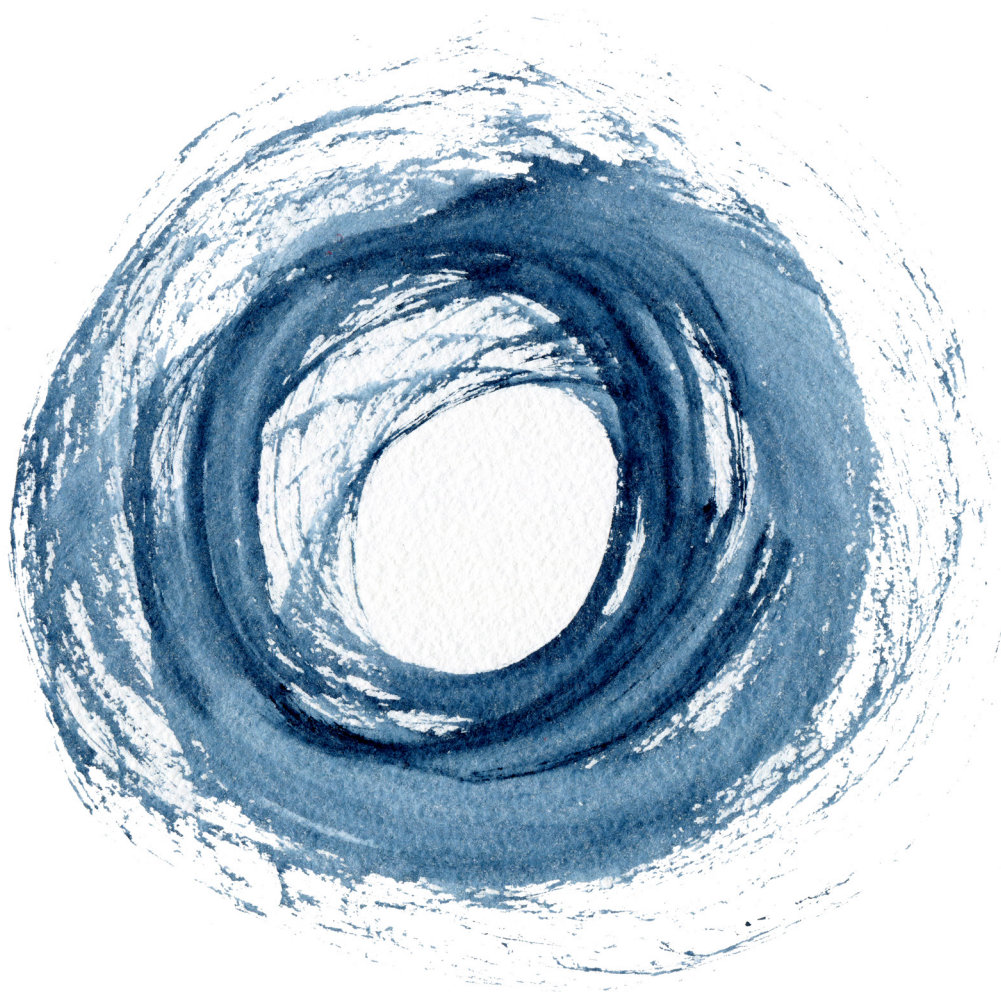


# What do young people think about geography?

**Royal  
Geographical  
Society**  
with IBG

Advancing geography  
and geographical learning



In many respects geography in schools is enjoying a renaissance.

Since 2010 GCSE entries have risen year-on-year from 180,000 entries to 285,000 in 2021, and there is now much greater diversity in those who study GCSE geography, as measured by ethnicity and family income.

However, there is lower uptake of geography at A Level by students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and minority ethnic groups. The narrowing of the subject's intake continues into university<sup>1</sup>.

At the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG), we wanted to know more about these trends, so commissioned Censuswide to undertake independent research with 500 young people. Here we report on their findings on the views of young people about geography.

This report follows the companion report *Young people's views on subject choices, further study and careers*<sup>2</sup>, which explores the importance of career and job prospects, and the other issues young people care about most, when making decisions about subject choices and future careers.

## The survey

Censuswide surveyed 500 respondents in March and April 2021. All respondents were living in England, 16-21 years old, and in education (studying GCSE or equivalent, A Levels or equivalent, or at university).

To ensure a good response rate from those historically under-represented in the discipline of geography, Censuswide ensured there was a minimum of 250 respondents who were from Black, Asian, or other minority ethnic groups, a minimum of 100 white respondents, and a minimum of 100 respondents from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

268 of the respondents were studying geography (at either GCSE, A Level or at university) during the research period; 232 were not.

This is what they thought.

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**1** [The Geography of Geography. RGS-IBG 2020](#)

**2** [Young People views on subject choices, further study and careers. RGS-IBG 2022](#)

## How would you describe geography to your friends?

33% of respondents provided open text answers.

Respondents could give several responses and 172 responses were provided.

The top three most common responses, clustered by broad themes, were:

- Study of/a subject about (variously) climate change, coasts, countries, earth, economy, environment, geology, human and physical topics, humans, impacts, issues, landscapes, maps, natural and human influences, rocks, weather and climate, wildlife, the world 55 responses
- Interesting, fun 34 responses
- Boring 15 responses

Some individual responses also highlighted the respondent's distinctive view about the subject:

- *"A caring subject that will make a difference to the world"*
- *"A key subject for life"*
- *"A way to learn about the environment and how you can save it"*
- *"An interesting, globalised subject that brings many travel and social opportunities"*
- *"Becoming one with nature"*
- *"Difficult but sometimes interesting"*
- *"Globally eye-opening"*
- *"Not helpful to my career path and has too much content at GCSE that put me off"*
- *"What's happening in the world around us and why"*
- *"Where you can make a living and make the world a better place"*

## Who do you think geography appeals most to?

The majority of respondents, 73%, reported that they “do not think geography appeals most to any sort of students”.

27% of the respondents provided 125 responses through open text answers

The top three most common responses, clustered by broad themes, were people:

- (Who want to) change the world, (are) environmental/socially concerned, ethical, interested in the future of the earth and nature, and socially minded 56
- (Who are) analytical, intelligent, open minded, and smart 20
- (Who) enjoy it, like it, and are interested in geography 12

Some individual responses highlighted other themes:

- *People who choose it simply because they have to or because it's the only (GCSE) option left*
- *People who don't like history*
- *Students with higher class parents*
- *Want to be teachers*
- *White people*

## What words would you most associate with a person who studies/studied geography?

Respondents could provide up to three words in response to this question and 362 responses were given. The top four groups of answers, clustered by theme, reveal views about:

- The mindset and outlook of geographers: *Aware, caring, committed, concerned, interested, perceptive* 78
- Their academic abilities: *Academic, articulate, clever, intelligent, smart* 71
- Their interests: *Climate change, eco, environment, green, world issues, possibly vegan* 57
- Their broader characteristics: *active, adventurous, ambitious, enthusiastic, fun, friendly, hard-working, helpful, outdoorsy, keen, kind, passionate* 41

We also surveyed young people's interest in environmental issues, and their views about their experiences of green spaces.

## Which environmental and social issues, if any, are you most interested in?

Respondents were asked to tick up to five from a list of 12 issues. In order the top three responses were

1. Climate change 55%
2. Plastics in the oceans 37%
3. = Recycling 32% = Social justice 32%

Climate change was the most popular response overall by a substantial margin, and also ranks highest in most subgroups.

In Black ethnic groups, 'Social justice' ranked higher; it was the top response in the Black-Caribbean group (56%) and second to 'Climate change' in the Black-African group (41%).

In comparison, 25% of White-British respondents selected 'Social justice'.

There was also a gender difference in rank order and intensity of choice:

Male: Climate change, Plastics, Recycling, Deforestation, Sea level change,

Female: Climate change, Plastics, Recycling, Social justice, Deforestation

Climate change was selected first by a greater proportion of female respondents (58%), compared to male respondents (49%).

## When thinking about visiting natural/green spaces that are outside towns and cities (such as the countryside, national parks, woodlands, the coast, or nature reserves), how you feel?

Respondents were asked to tick up to three from a list of 15 statements. The most popular responses were:

1. I enjoy being in the fresh air 42%
2. I enjoy visiting green spaces 33%
3. It's great to be in the outdoors 33%
4. I feel comfortable in green spaces 27%

These were the most popular responses in most subgroups, with some variation in order.

Response rates in the White-British category for the less frequently selected categories include 'I prefer towns and cities' 12% and 'there's nothing to do there' 6%. The respective responses for these categories for the Black-African respondents were 22% and 11%.

There was also a gender difference in the intensity of choice

Male respondents:

- |                                |     |
|--------------------------------|-----|
| I enjoy being in the fresh air | 30% |
| I enjoy visiting green spaces  | 28% |

Female respondents:

- |                                |     |
|--------------------------------|-----|
| I enjoy being in the fresh air | 45% |
| I enjoy visiting green spaces  | 35% |

## Conclusion

This research reveals young people's views about geography as a subject, and geography students as a group. Many of the findings present a broadly positive view of the subject, others not.

There is a broad archetype that might broadly describe a geography student as someone who is 'a (climate) activist, aware, caring, clever, open minded, environmentally and socially concerned, interested in the world, logical, outdoorsy and (possibly) vegan.'

Most respondents did not feel that geography appeals to any one particular type of student and when views were expressed about geography, they were largely positive. However, some of the individual responses did connect with geography's relative lack of diversity in post 16 education – for example noting that geography was appeals to children of 'higher-class parents' or 'white' students.

There are some differences between groups of young people when they are asked about their environmental and social concerns. Overall, climate change is chosen as their first concern. However, when responses are broken down by ethnicity or gender there are some different orders of priority and the level of intensity of response. For example, Black-Caribbean and Black-African respondents highlighted social justice as their first (above climate change) and second concerns respectively. Female respondents also identified social justice in a higher rank position than male respondents.

The above findings provide further evidence to be read alongside the research set out in Young People's views on subject choices, further study and careers. That report notes how young people hold a relatively narrow view of what career options are open to geographers and have little awareness that geographers experience above average graduate salaries and employment rates.

### Key questions:

- Can the views shared by young people about their interest in, and engagement with, environmental concerns, as well as social justice, be used to support their future study and career choices? If so, how best can this be achieved?
- How might young people's interest in social justice, particularly as expressed by some under-represented groups, be better reflected within the subject?
- If natural/green spaces don't appeal to all students, is there a role for more geographical fieldwork in urban areas - as well as more inclusive and engaging fieldwork in green spaces?
- How might the current archetypes of geography and geographers be further developed to more strongly connect with young people's top three concerns when choosing their subjects: earning a good salary, finding the right job, and finding a job in general<sup>3</sup>?
- How do the views about geography presented here compare to young people's views about other subjects<sup>4</sup>?

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**3** See [www.rgs.org/youngpeoplesviews](http://www.rgs.org/youngpeoplesviews)

**4** The Society notes comparable subject specific research with reference to such as [mathematics](#), [physics](#) or the [sciences](#)

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