

# Geography QAA Subject Benchmark Statement

## ● Consultation response submitted by the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)

The Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) strongly supports the revised Geography Subject Benchmark Statement (SBS). The SBS has been updated appropriately to reflect developments in the discipline, conceptual, theoretical and methodological, as well as new modes of assessment and delivery of content. We particularly welcome the strengthening of statements on fieldwork and methods training, across a breadth of quantitative and qualitative approaches. The SBS remains pitched appropriately; i.e. it is not overly prescriptive, allowing for the diversity of courses and approaches that are key to the health of the discipline of Geography in UK higher education. Furthermore, comments on the SBS from the community, which we have been copied on, are overwhelmingly positive. We commend the work of the panel.

However, we do wish to make comments on three substantive areas:

- (1) Specificity on the statements about Quantitative Methods (and methods more generally);
- (2) Overlap with the Earth Science, Environmental Science and Environmental Studies (SBS), in terms of subject content and JACS codes; and,
- (3) The importance of graduates having a holistic sense of Geography as a discipline which they can articulate

### (1) Quantitative Methods

We recommend that the statements about quantitative skills and GIS be strengthened further. Quantitative skills/expertise in GIS are core to the employment prospects of many geographers, with demands from employers increasing in the era of 'big' and 'open' data. There is a widespread expectation that such quantitative, and also qualitative skills, should be integral to the training of all geography graduates.

The need to enhance quantitative skills/GIS training in undergraduate training is often expressed to us by employers/Chartered Geographers. It was also one of the recommendations of the ESRC International Benchmarking Review of Human Geography. Strengthening the SBS in this regard is also a logical progression from the enhancements of quantitative skills content and assessment at GCSE and A-level.

We should stress this is not requesting more details on technical competence, rather explicit statements about the importance of graduates being able to think critically about data, its reliability, and the appropriateness of different analytical techniques. Thus we recommend that the SBS be more specific about the role of quantitative methods and the importance of numeracy in all areas of the discipline. Specific recommendations on wording were made in the report of Harris et al (2013)<sup>1</sup> (repeated below). We recognise that some elements have already have been incorporated in the SBS, but we ask the panel to consider this further.

Statement on numeracy from Harris et al (2013)

<sup>1</sup> Harris, R. et al (2013) Quantitative Methods in Geography: Making the Connections between Schools, Universities and Employers. London: Royal Geographical Society (with IBG). [www.rgs.org/QuanTiLe](http://www.rgs.org/QuanTiLe)

Geographers frequently use information that is presented in some numerical form. The raw data are often in tabular form; the processed data as a graph, as a table of elementary statistics, as an output from a model, or as a map. Numerical skills are necessary to handle this sort of information. Presentation skills are needed to communicate quantitative information in usable ways. Students should be able to move appropriately between counts, rates, standardised and index values, and be familiar with more advanced forms of statistical analysis and model building. They should have the ability to judge what is an appropriate spatial (and temporal) scale for the purpose of the analysis.

Geographers should learn not to misapply data. They should question whether the numbers represent what they claim. They should understand the principles of determining statistical significance and of forming confidence intervals, and be aware of some of the difficulties in sampling a population. They should appreciate the limitations of classical statistical approaches when applied to very large datasets or those that violate assumptions of independence. They should be aware of the problems of generalising from data with no clearly defined population.

Geographers should recognise that conclusions drawn from data can be ambiguous and may be affected by issues such as the modifiable areal unit problem, ecological fallacy and issues of spatial (and temporal) dependence. They should be capable of critically evaluating quantitative material published within academic literature and elsewhere, and able to balance critique with knowledge of the importance of numerical analysis and empiricist methodologies for social and scientific debate. Their quantitative education should be aimed at enabling them to take informed and professional judgements regarding statistical analysis and modelling”.

To be clear, we are not arguing for the dominance of quantitative methods at the expense of qualitative or any other approaches. Parity in methodological approaches is essential in the statement. Hence, if the statements on quantitative methods are strengthened/made more explicit, additional attention to descriptions of qualitative methods will be needed too.

## (2) Overlap with the Earth Science, Environmental Science and Environmental Studies (E3S) SBS.

Our concerns here relate to the different approaches taken in the Geography and E3S statements about subject specific content, and the JACS codes of programmes listed for which the respective statements apply. Our request is for explicit and equivalent recognition in the Geography and E3S SBS on subject overlap and JACS codes.

We raised these issues in our response to the consultation on the E3S specification too (see the Appendix of this document for comments on subject overlap). While we do not believe such issues, or at least to the same extent, will exist with other SBS, this should be considered too.

Subject content: We recognise that significant overlap in content between Geography and Earth Science, Environmental Science and Environmental Studies (particularly the latter two) is inevitable. Many of the subjects listed in the E3S document (see the Appendix below) are core topics in Geography programmes, supplemented in the latter by a broad range of Human Geography topics.

As noted above, we support the approach taken in the Geography SBS not to be prescriptive about specific content, recognising that degree programmes in Geography vary. Thus we are not suggesting that similar lists of content be added to the Geography statement. However, we believe it is very important in the Geography SBS that there is a very clear statement that recognises this overlap in content and the integral nature of these topics to Geography.

JACS codes: We respect the need for flexibility in the codes listed, given the huge variety under which degree programmes (particularly joint programmes) are offered. We also recognise that there is overlap in what is taught under some JACS codes. However, we do request that those codes specific to Geography, F800/F810 being notable examples, only be listed under Geography (and not in the E3S SBS).

However, if the approach to be taken is all-encompassing and indicative, we request the same approach and wording in the Geography SBS as adopted in the E3S statement. And, that at a minimum, the following codes be listed for the Geography statement:

*For 2014, the JACS codes for degree programmes with Geography in their title include L7xx and F8xx, under which the majority of geography courses are listed, but also:*

8810 09F4 0Y46 1D79 2A72 37X2 3BC2 4B99 4J26 4R60 52F9 5F19 6LF5 8B12 8M33 8T16 BCG0 CF1V  
CF3V CFG0 CL1R F640 F9F0 FF4V FF6V FGC0 FL25 FL44 FNV2 FV40 FVN1 FWN1 FXV3 G5LR GF4V  
GF7V GFC0 GL4R GL5R L000 L1FV L2LT L311 LCR1 LF2V LFT1 LFT2 LLN0 LLR2 LLT2 LMR9 LMV0  
LNR6 LNR9 LNT5 LQR3 LRR1 LRR3 LRR4 LTR6 LTRR LTT3 LTT5 LTT6 LTT7 LTTJ LVR1 LVR2 LVR3  
LVR5 LVT1 LVT2 LWR3 LWT3 LXR3 N1FV NL4R P5FV PL3R Q3LR Q3LT QL3R QRV0 R4LR R7LR TLHR  
TLJR VF1V VL48 WL49 X3FV XF1V XF3V Y001 Y003 Y004.

We attached a list from our search of the UCAS database in a spreadsheet. This should be checked independently and carefully. Explicit recognition of the challenge presented by JACS codes for Geography, a discipline that sits under both Physical and Social Science groupings, would be useful.

JACS codes are fraught with problems. This is an issue the RGS-IBG has raised a number of times with the QAA, HESA and others. We strongly support any initiatives to revise these and would welcome involvement in consideration of how better to better categorise Geography degree programmes.

It is unfortunate that the Chair of the Geography SBS panel, Professor David Thomas, was not given sight (we believe) of the final draft of the E3S document. We do hope that the mechanisms put in place by QAA to ensure liaison across the panels, by a subject specialist, have worked effectively and very much hope careful cross comparison of the two documents can happen and parity between the two statements ensured.

### (3) Holistic view of Geography

Geography graduates should have a holistic view of the discipline, how it is distinct from cognate subjects, and its importance and relevance beyond the academy. Importantly, they should be able to articulate this clearly to a broad range of audiences. This is particularly important for those students who pursue careers in teaching Geography, but is relevant for all Geography graduates in the workplace and beyond. We recommend an additional sentence be added, about expectations of graduates to articulate this, to the end of statement 3.1.

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