

● School curriculum and accountability

... In a flurry of recent consultations, drafts and Ministerial announcements the government has proposed major changes to the school curriculum. They will fundamentally affect what is taught, how it is examined, how schools will be held accountable for performance and, for those in the final years of their schooling, how A levels will become differentiated from AS levels.

It is undoubtedly good news that the government intends to retain the compulsory status of geography in the curriculum between the ages of 5 and 14. The National Curriculum's vision for geography is to 'inspire in pupils a curiosity and fascination about the world and its people' and to equip them with 'knowledge of diverse places, people, resources and environments, together with a deep understanding of the Earth's key physical and human processes'. These statements are encouraging. So, too is the clear support for the use of maps and fieldwork at all stages, and a better balance between human and physical geography.

Knowledge of geography is essential for all young people. Without an understanding of where places are how can anyone make sense of the news or the weather forecast? Without knowledge of the key physical and human characteristics of the planet how do we make sense of the differences between tropical rainforest and deserts, of climate zones, or know how our population is distributed or where key natural resources are? The new curriculum proposals rightly put more of this 'what and where' back into the geography curriculum.

More than that, without studying the environmental, social and economic processes that bring about change and explain differences and interactions between places, societies and environments, how can we understand the present or start to plan for the future? The National Curriculum proposals also clearly focus on this 'how and why' of geography. In doing so, the curriculum anchors the study of geographical processes back into the locational context of real places and countries, rather than as abstract thematic studies.

It is a curriculum that focuses on the basics of geography, 5-14. The Society welcomes this and believes that, in the hands of good geography teachers, the basics can be taught in imaginative and inspiring ways that will engage young people today. We see the 5-14 curriculum providing a sound underpinning of factual knowledge to prepare, at GCSE and A level, for pupils to study the topics in depth that confront us all, globally, as citizens and which are inherently geographical, such as climate change, pollution, 'food, water and energy' security and globalisation.

Clearly, the demands on teachers will be great with such a degree of curriculum change, and we have already asked government what support will be available for teachers, either directly or through organisations such as ours, for professional development.

What worries us most at the Society is the proposal to introduce a new main target measure for school accountability based on 8 subjects at GCSE and to reduce the perceived status of the English Baccalaureate family of GCSEs (which requires study of English, maths, modern foreign language, science and geography or history). The new proposals will mean that a young person can attain their 8 good passes without necessarily studying either geography or history at GCSE. For a government keen to support the concept of a balanced education, this needs rethinking to ensure that the core of subjects that young people study at GCSE includes English, maths, and at least one science, one humanity (either geography or history) and one language; with the further three subjects chosen more widely from among these or other academic subjects, the arts or vocational subjects.