

Young people's views on subject choices, further study and careers

**Royal
Geographical
Society**
with IBG

Advancing geography
and geographical learning



Introduction

Much has been written about why students do, and do not take geography; the role of careers and potential jobs in their decision making; and the environmental and social issues most important to them.

Despite large increases in the number of young people studying geography at GCSE and growing diversity in the GCSE cohort over the last decade, there has been lower uptake of geography at A Level by students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and some ethnic groups. The narrowing of the subject's intake continues into university¹.

At the Society, we wanted to know more, so commissioned Censuswide to undertake independent research with 500 young people. Here we report on their findings about

- the importance of careers and job prospects in decision making and how this varies by gender, ethnicity, region and socio-economic background
- the issues young people care most about and how they view their importance in subject choices and future careers

The survey

Censuswide surveyed 500 young people 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.

Summary

1. Careers:

- Most young people see a connection between their subject choices and their future careers, and this is important to them
- Earning a good salary, finding the 'right' job and finding a job in general are the three most important concerns for when students leave education
- Wider considerations about future careers - such as making a difference by addressing environment/social concerns - are, for most young people in this survey, and for some groups in particular, of lower priority²
- For those not studying geography, some made this choice because of a concern about career paths/options, but more commonly it is because they have a greater interest in other subjects

2. Graduate outcomes for geographers:

- The positive outcomes for geography graduates, such as above average rates of graduate employment and above average salaries, are not widely recognised
- Young peoples' views on which jobs or careers are available to geographers is focused on a relatively limited range of opportunities and sectors

¹ [Geography of geography: the evidence base, RGS-IBG 2020](#)

² These findings contrast with the results of the [Careers2032](#) report; respondents there ranked interest over salary

Detailed findings

1. Careers

Most young people stated they chose their A Levels based on ideas about their future careers.

When asked, 'have you chosen/did you choose your A Levels based on what career you want to get into?', the responses were:

- Yes 67%
- No 25%
- No response 8%

Groups with a higher positive response rate include:

- Males 73%
- Those living in Greater London 76%
- Some Asian ethnic groups
 - Bangladeshi 76%
 - Indian 77%
 - Pakistani 86%
- Those from higher socio-economic status backgrounds
 - higher managerial 74%
 - supervisory or clerical 74%

When asked to choose their three top concerns for when they leave education, young people focused on earning a good salary, getting the right job, or a job in general.

Making a difference through their job, using their subject in their job or finding a career where they could help the environment or address social concerns were a lower priority.

In rank order:

- Earning a good salary 51%
- Finding the right job for me 44%
- Finding a job in general 37%
- Starting my career in the right subject 23%
- Doing 'good' through my job 19%
- Using my subject in a future workplace 16%
- A career where I can address environment/social concerns 14%

There were some variations by demographic group:

- Earning a good salary:
 - Black and Black British 60%
- Finding a career where I can help the environment/address social concerns:
 - White 19%
 - Asian 12%
 - Black and Black British 9%

Those respondents who were *not* studying geography stated that this was because they prefer other subjects, feel another subject is better for their future/career, or do not know what career geography could lead onto.

The reasons given by those currently not studying, or not planning to study geography at school or university, in order (through an open choice of ticking all answers that applied) were:

- I prefer a different subject 78%
- I think a different subject will be better for my future/career 67%
- I'm not sure what career path I could take with geography 43%

There were no significant differences across demographic groups to this question.

2. Graduate outcomes for geographers

Geography graduates experience above average rates of graduate employment and above average graduate salaries³. However, this is not widely understood.

When asked 'what level of salary do you think someone might earn after studying geography?', the responses were:

- Above average 14%
- Average 54%
- Below average 14%
- Not sure 18%

When asked, 'after graduation how more or less likely do you think people who have studied geography are to be in employment compared to graduates who have not studied geography?', the results were:

- Much more or slightly more likely 33%
- Neither more nor less likely 49%
- Much less or slightly less likely 18%

³ See www.rgs.org/choosegeography

All respondents were asked to provide open responses answers to the question ‘what jobs would be available to you if you studied geography?’. The top five responses, clustered by broad occupational groups, were:

- Geography teaching (46 mentions)
- The built environment, planning, surveying (24 mentions)
- Travel and tourism (24 mentions)
- Environment (23 mentions)
- Weather/meteorology (15 mentions)

Conclusion

This survey highlights the need for more work to:

- More strongly articulate the positive outcomes that geography can provide its graduates with respect to above average rates of graduate employment and graduate salaries
- Widen young people’s understanding of the range of careers that geography can lead onto
- Better connect the opportunities presented by geography to do ‘good’ and/or address environment/social concerns through clearer guidance and tangible careers choices
- Recognise that some groups of young people may need more targeted support and engagement with respect to the value of geography to their future study and careers.

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