School-University Transition: Where are we now?

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Student transitions from school to university within GEES disciplines
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1. Introducing the literature
2. Case study from geography
3. What might the future hold?
4. Questions to consider
1. Introducing the literature

- language of a ‘divide’ commonplace in articles examining the nature of the discipline:
  - ‘decoupled’ (Rawling 1996)
  - ‘dislocation’ (Kent 2000)
  - ‘divorce’ (Stannard 2003)

- number of recent contributions:
  - nature/origins of the divide (Castree et al. 2007)
  - call for dialogue (Bonnett 2003; Stannard 2003)
  - bridging the divide (Bednarz et al. 2000; Yarwood & Davison 2007; Pykett & Smith 2009)
Forces creating the ‘divide’

University sector:

• RAE altered balance between teaching and research (Sidaway & Johnston 2007):
  - Few research-active university academics submit articles to school-level journals
  - University geographers rarely input into pre-university curricula

• QAA assessments led to inward-looking examinations of pedagogy
School sector:

- early Geography National Curricula resulted in KS3 geography that was centrally-controlled, content-heavy, performance-driven

- increased demands for accountability through teacher-assessment and reporting levels of attainment

Why important?

- ‘fossilisation’ of subject in schools … can decrease university recruitment and retention (Castree 2011), and help to isolate geography from the public realm (Ward 2006)
Hill & Jones (2010)

• examined perceptions of secondary school geography teachers and university lecturers on nature of the divide

• identified their perceptions of how closer links can be forged between the two sectors

• suggested opportunities for further co-operation and collaboration
Research methods

1. Small scale primary data collection (questionnaire and focus group) undertaken with:
   - six geography secondary school teachers from across the Bristol region
   - six geography lecturers from UWE, Bristol:
Results - Perceived nature of the divide

• all lecturers and teachers perceived the existence of a divide between school-level and university-level geographies

• divisions were identified in relation to the ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘how’ and ‘where’ of geography teaching and learning
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of the divide</th>
<th>School environment</th>
<th>University environment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who is teaching (teacher/lecturer identity)</td>
<td>Teacher as ‘jack-of-all-trades’. Research re-active, with breadth of knowledge</td>
<td>Lecturer as expert. Research-active with depth of knowledge</td>
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<td>What is taught (content of courses)</td>
<td>Dated and restricted content imposed by curricula and associated textbooks</td>
<td>Current and diverse content emanating from a research base</td>
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<td>How teaching is delivered (pedagogy)</td>
<td>Restricted to rote learning or ‘spoon-feeding’</td>
<td>Variety of means from cohort lectures to small group tutorials</td>
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<td>How geography is presented (representation)</td>
<td>One view, one ‘right’ answer</td>
<td>Multiple views, partial representations, numerous answers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Where teaching and learning occurs (educational spaces)</td>
<td>Restricted spaces: predominantly classrooms and field sites</td>
<td>Varied spaces: lecture theatres, classrooms, computer and environmental laboratories, field sites</td>
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Who is teaching?

- teachers believed lecturers exercise ownership of their scholarship through research

- teachers described themselves generally as disenfranchised from discovery research

'Lecturers who have been there and done the research are then delivering lectures, rather than us relying on a 10 year old textbook that we may not be familiar with ourselves' (DJ)
What is taught?

- half the teachers believed university teaching was based on current research

- they did not think this permeated to school level:

  ‘University level is, from what I remember, concerned with current research topics. In school we often do not have enough time to keep up-to-date with current research issues’ (JP)
How is teaching delivered?

• different styles of teaching delivery was noted by five of the teachers and all lecturers:

  'Delivery of lessons, from whole course lectures to small group tutorials, is very different from often 'spoon-fed' school-style delivery' (DJ)

How students learn?

• four lecturers perceived a relative inability of the school system to inculcate deep learning in students:

  - critical enquiry, numerical analysis, process studies
How is geography presented?

• ‘how’ teaching and learning takes place was related by the two sample groups to ways of looking at the world

• one lecturer noted that school textbooks and teachers:

  ‘seem to give the answer, with little space for investigating/understanding variants. The university system [by contrast] offers questions, with no fixed answers’ (DC)
Results - Activities to connect school-university geographies

• all teachers expressed desire to experience closer links with university geography departments

• half the academics expressed a clear desire to forge further links with school geography departments

• remaining half of academics indicated they would be willing to build stronger links dependent upon:
  - time (constraints of workload models and curricula)
  - reward (build into promotion process)
  - budget (for schools to visit universities)
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<th>Current Activities undertaken</th>
<th>Future Activities that could be undertaken</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>School teachers</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Attend GA branch lectures</td>
<td>Organise university taster days (for years 9/10 and AS/A2 levels)</td>
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<td>Attend A-level student conferences</td>
<td>Establish joint <strong>fieldwork</strong> opportunities</td>
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<td>Attend school teacher conferences</td>
<td>Establish school <strong>curriculum link</strong> driven by the university</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attend widening participation activity days at university</td>
<td>Assign university <strong>student ambassadors</strong> (who visit schools or aid school fieldtrips)</td>
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<td>Use departmental newsletters in lessons</td>
<td>Assign university <strong>staff ambassadors</strong> (who visit schools to teach a particular aspect of geography)</td>
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<td>Use teaching resources provided by university academics (hard copy or via the web)</td>
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<td>Establish a <strong>buddy/mentor system</strong> between school and university students</td>
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**University lecturers**
- Sit on the local **GA committee**
- Deliver **GA branch/conference lectures**
- Provide A-level **student conferences** (at university or in schools)
- Provide widening participation **activity days** at university
- Emphasize the real world relevance of the subject
- Contribute to **journals** read by school students and teachers (e.g. *Geography Review*, *Geography, Teaching Geography*)

**University lecturers**
- Increase regular contact with local schools (by pro-active roadshows or **in situ** activities)
- Establish a curriculum link driven by the university
- Review provision of school resources on the departmental web site and utilise topical web sites for marketing (including social networking sites)
- Offer **CPD activities** for teachers
- Offer outreach activities to students pre A-level
- Lead field projects in areas local to schools
Discussion

• lack of academic research permeating school curricula is noted in the literature, particularly with respect to advances in human geography (Morgan 2008)

• recent revisions of A-level specifications and national curricula re-ignited debates about school-university transition

• can we break the control of Awarding Bodies and their set texts – offering singular perspectives?

• university academics seem reticent to get involved in re-working school curricula (THE articles)
• gap noted between intellectual skills base developed in schools and what is required at university

• resonates with Keylock’s (2006) work in physical geography

• principles for improving school-university transition:
  - demystify the university experience for prospective students through knowledge exchange
  - maintain continuity of taught themes from schools into HE by transferring research from universities to schools
  - highlight the relevance of the discipline through its focus on pertinent global issues and its development of skills
3. What might the future hold?

- **some** teachers and academics welcome initiatives to strengthen links between school and university geographies

- enthusiasm moderated by constraints of time, financial resources, appropriate recognition

- evolving financial and policy envs. might prompt greater interaction between school and university geographies:
  - UKRC research impact
  - heightened competition for students
  - employability agenda
• RCUK (June 2012) announced initiative worth £1.5 million over three years to create and build partnerships between universities and secondary schools

• Hill *et al.* (forthcoming) note universities need to be pro-active in communicating how their courses develop knowledge, skills and competencies derived from school education

• latter includes digital learning – NUS Charter on Technology in HE

• graduate attributes & self-authorship
Enhancing transition … discuss …
4. Questions to consider

1. What mode(s) of collaboration should be adopted to ensure successful school-university transition?
   - local v regional v national?
   - hybrid curricula or extra-curricular exchange?

2. Who should be included in such partnerships and how do we ensure equitable power relations / reciprocal dialogue?
   - liminal borderland space?

3. Which transition issues should we prioritise?

4. How can we share best practice?
   - new modes of communication / new audiences?

5. What are our training needs to address transition issues?
   - do we have the skills for ‘boundary crossing’?
References


