

Student perspectives of the transition between A-level and degree-level geography

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Outline

- **Background in academic literature**
- **Getting a student perspective**
- **Gaps students felt were most important**
- **Conclusions, constraints and ways forward**

“University and pre-university geography [in the UK] are like distant relations: there is a family connection but it is fairly weak...”

Identifying the Gap

Differences:

What is geography? (Bonnett, 2008)

Role and importance of academics in setting content of A-level curricula (Castree, Fuller and Lambert, 2007)

Types of geography done at school vs university - e.g. issues vs process-response

Closing the gap

How to close the gap:

**Improving dialogue between teachers and academics
(Birnie, 1999; Imrie and Cowling, 2006; Jeffrey, 2003)**

Geographical Associations

**But what about the
students?**

Previous Student-focused work

Bryson (1997) - tutorial designed to get students reflecting on the usefulness of what they learnt at A-level

Haigh and Kilmartin (1999) - student perception of skills taught and assessed

Mcguire et al. (2001) - examining the type of learners first year students understand themselves to be

Getting student views

GEO1007 - Geographical Imaginations

20 credits year long

Core for BSc and BA Geography students (first year at time of research)

Weekly lectures and fortnightly seminars

“Geographers should have a critical and reflexive sense of the nature of the discipline as dynamic, plural and contested. They should be aware of its development and changing relationships with other fields of enquiry.”

(Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2007, p. 4)

Getting student views

Your task is to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of your chosen curriculum and to update the topics taught. You should:

- Make clear what you think geography is about. i.e. outlines your vision of the subject.**
- Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the specific school or university curriculum you have chosen, arguing why changes are needed.**
- Justify what you have changed (ie decided to add in and decided to leave out).**
- You should include references to academic and policy literature.**

Getting student views

Selected 91 essays from two cohorts (2009 and 2010)

Mark of 60% or higher

48 BA - 43 BSc

Focus groups

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cf. academic literature

Findings 2

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Practical Skills Gap

Fieldwork:

“...fieldwork is fundamental, not only as a learning process for students to rely on their own knowledge and research, but also as an introduction to the process of self-taught learning that universities rely on.”

(Student B30)

“Fieldwork also helps develop basic skills that can be applied to real life situations including: organisation, planning, group work etc.”

(Student B38)

Practical Skills Gap

New/Specialist skills: GIS, lab work, IT, report writing:

“ICT skills are vitally important...That is not to say that computers should be the primary method of teaching... However the acquisition and development of increasingly complex ICT skills is extremely important.”

(Student A28)

Solutions?

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Bridging Cognitive Skills Gap

More perspectives taught:

“...at A-level nowhere in the curriculum does it encourage students to challenge what they are being told, and this is what radical geography would bring to the curriculum if it were studied in more detail.”

(Student A4)

Conclusions (a)

- **Students have sophisticated understanding of transitions**
- **A different perspective to academics**
- **Should be a larger part of the debate**

Conclusions (b)

Constraints and ways forward:

Politicised nature of A-levels

Multiple exam boards

Pressure on teachers

Structure changes - teach less!

Changes at university