Geography in Higher Education in the UK

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ABSTRACT Geography is firmly established as a separate discipline within British higher education, a position founded on its strength in the country’s school system throughout the twentieth century. This position has enabled the discipline to prosper and it has been at the core of many intellectual developments. With changes in the nature of universities, however, that position has increasingly to be rethought.

KEY WORDS: Geography, United Kingdom

British geography’s emerging place

Geography as a subject has a long history in the UK, but it was only clearly recognised as a separate academic discipline at the end of the nineteenth century. Before that, elements of geography were taught in the country’s universities and there was a short-lived appointment of a Professor at University College London in the 1830s – the decade that also saw the foundation of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS). But it was in the country’s schools that the foundations of the academic discipline were laid. Officers of the RGS identified a need for geography to be taught there, as part of the formation of an educated citizenry, for whom knowledge about the world – and, especially, of Britain’s position at the centre of the largest empire within that world – was deemed necessary. In 1884 it commissioned a report from its newly appointed Inspector of Geographical Education, J Scott Keltie (Wise, 1986; Jay, 1986). He surveyed geography teaching across Great Britain and several European countries and unfavourably contrasted the British situation with what he had observed and learned of elsewhere (Keltie, 1886). Much British geography teaching was deemed of poor quality, especially in the so-called Public (i.e. independent) Schools, a problem he linked to negative attitudes towards the subject because of its absence as a discrete discipline in the country’s universities. He called

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for the RGS to ‘supply the necessary impulse to induce the bodies that rule or direct the course of British education to take up geography in an intelligent spirit’ (cited in Wise, 1986, 372).

This was in the aftermath of a period of great transformation in the organization and curricula of British universities. A new set of Universities had been established in or near to the expanding industrial and commercial centres, for the first time broadening the system beyond the old Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, and a few other institutions such as Aberdeen, Edinburgh and St Andrews in Scotland and Dublin in Ireland (now outside the United Kingdom1) that could also trace their origins to the Middle Ages and retained elements of a monastic pre-industrial structure, such as small collegiate communities and a calendar based on ecclesiastical terms. In addition, everywhere epistemological and institutional structures were undergoing profound shifts.

In the first place ‘new’ Universities were established in London in 1826, Durham in 1832 and Belfast (Queen’s College) in 1850. Through the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century ‘civic universities’ were established in Birmingham, Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds, Liverpool and Sheffield (these were christened ‘redbricks’ because of their architecture). The British University system was thus greatly expanded and altered. The Federal University in Wales (established in 1893), which brought together colleges (in Aberystwyth, Bangor, Swansea and Cardiff for example) who retained a great degree of autonomy on the basis of a similar Federal Structure in London (which had hiterto had validated most degrees awarded in Wales), shares many features with the redbricks. At the same time, dozens of new technical colleges and institutes were established across the UK: many of these were incorporated in the British University system in the second half of the twentieth century.

The redbrick universities initially led the way in terms of enhanced roles for industrial and commercial capital and state funding (often through the local municipalities in the large cities) of higher education. As capital and (often local) government came to play expanded roles so the physical structure of what was signified by the term ‘University’ was transformed, through large new buildings, increasingly equipped with lecture theatres (with new projection facilities, such as lantern slide projectors), expanded bureaucracies and facilities such as central libraries. In tandem with this, the ‘structures of feeling’ inside Universities shifted towards more instrumental, modern and practical norms. Although this was uneven and Oxbridge was able to retain its place at the apex of the greatly expanded system, everywhere the intellectual and social atmosphere at Universities underwent significant shifts. Withers and Mayhew (2002, 11-12) chart what this meant for the place of geography:

The modern university formations in which most academics today operate in Europe and North America (with their concomitant conception of disciplines) are those which were codified in the century after 1850, as the humanist reworking of the Aristotelian curriculum which had served the universities since their formation broke down. The modern conception of a university discipline, and therefore of what it means for geography to be a presence in the universities, has usually involved several criteria: a separate degree scheme run in an identifiable and

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1. Outside the United Kingdom.
autonomous department, academics trained in that subject and researching an aspect of it and students receiving formal qualifications for the subject. Such a structure simply did not exist prior to the 1870s in British universities in geography or indeed any other modern discipline, as at each point – institutions, people, degrees and training – the early modern university structure had a different *modus vivendi*.

The RGS was the key agent in seeking a place for geography within the emerging and expanded university curriculum of the nineteenth century. The RGS’s work to promote geography in schools thus paralleled by campaigns to have it established in Cambridge and Oxford Universities. These were offered money to pay for initial appointments, which led to the establishment of teaching in the discipline, but not full degree courses: among those appointed at Oxford to teach the new Diploma in Geography (aimed at school teachers, including those already in post who wanted a qualification in the discipline) was (later Sir) Halford Mackinder, one of the discipline’s pioneers whose papers defining its scope and addressing imperial geopolitics became classics (Mackinder, 1887, 1904). He was also one of the founders in 1893 of the Geographical Association (GA), whose prime purpose was to promote geography teaching in schools (Balchin, 1993). The GA and RGS both lobbied for the discipline to occupy a central place throughout the British school curriculum and in the developing public examination systems (Walford, 2001; Rawling, 2001). Many academic geographers played central roles in the Association’s affairs for much of the twentieth century, and ensured strong links between the discipline in schools and universities (though these have weakened in recent years, see Bonnet, 2003; Stannard, 2003).

This strength of geography in the country’s schools stimulated demand for teachers of the discipline with degree-level qualifications – considered necessary in the (selective) grammar (high) schools – and thus ensured a flow of students to the universities. As new institutions were established so cases were made, by the RGS and others, for the inclusion of geography teaching in their curricula – in some places initially as subsidiary courses for students of other disciplines, such as economics, geology and history. So from the first modern appointment of a Reader in Geography (Mackinder at Oxford from 1887, whose department was established in 1899), to departments at a Cambridge (from 1888) and Manchester (from 1892), geography gained a foothold in some key institutions. There were six university (established) chairs in the discipline by 1920 and departments were established in all of the redbricks (Slater, 1988). By the end of the 1930s, there was a geography department in virtually every UK University, each offering a full honours degree. Most departments were very small (eight staff was large) and many struggled to sustain academic credibility relative to the sciences and longer-established humanities, but they provided the foundation for later rapid growth (on this period, see Johnston, 2003a).

From the 1950s on, an increasing proportion of UK students entered Universities. With many of them studying geography in their final years at school, this generated a growing demand for places on degree courses, and the University departments expanded accordingly. Geography became a relatively well-established discipline, alongside those with which it had traditionally been linked – economics, geology and history – and often pre-dating by a decade or more the establishment of departments.
and degrees in other social sciences, such as politics and sociology. Increasing numbers took postgraduate qualifications as a preliminary to academic careers, in which research became increasingly important as a means of advancement. A research culture was established, assisted by the establishment of Natural Environment and Social Science Research Councils, which funded postgraduate studentships and research projects.

The last third of the twentieth century witnessed massive expansion of the UK university system: new institutions were established – some as universities and others as polytechnics (all of which became universities in the early 1990s). Geography was not introduced as a separate discipline/department in all of these, but it was present in some form in many and continued to absorb a substantial proportion of the growing student population. By the end of the century, there were over 7000 places available annually on undergraduate degree programmes across the country, more than 170 separate postgraduate courses offering some 3000 places, and well over 1000 students registered for research degrees. To sustain these, there were more than 1600 academic staff, the majority of whom were active researchers.

Geography has therefore remained relatively buoyant as a subject studied in British Universities, although (as we detail below) concerns are currently being voiced about the consequences of geography’s relative erosion as a discrete school subject for the longer-term future of University geography. Geography has a presence (though sometimes now as part of merged departments with other subjects) in most of the ‘traditional’ Universities as well as many of the ‘New Universities’ (i.e. former Polytechnics and Colleges of Higher Education, previously teaching-focused institutions, with little or no remit to conduct research, which acquired University status after 1992). It is absent from a few of the Universities established in the 1960s (East Anglia, Essex, Kent, York and Warwick), however (see Johnston, 2004a), and a few other highly-ranked institutions (Cardiff and Imperial College for example), but has a significant presence across the range of UK Universities. A geography programme was also present at the Open University from the outset of its work: a distance-learning institution established in the 1960s, it has no formal entry requirements for its undergraduate programmes and has since come to award more degrees each year than any other British institution.

The presence of geography at so many Universities there gives British geographers a significant role within the wider Anglophone discipline. Whilst the sum total of academic geographers in Britain cannot match that in the United States, the higher proportion of British academics who are geographers and their presence within so many institutions (including many of the more prestigious and research-intensive ones) arguably gives British geography a relative significance internationally shared with few other disciplines in the social and natural sciences: as Thrift (2002, 294) commented:

Geography is one of the few disciplines that is not dominated scientifically by the United States. Because US geography is weaker than many other US disciplines on the world stage, there is a certain room to breathe and develop other styles of academic work in geography.

British Geography’s Contents
British geography has benefited enormously from the discipline’s strengths in the country’s school system, providing a substantial stream of students already trained in the discipline’s basic material and who wish to study it to degree level. Few graduates now return to the schools to sustain the discipline there, however, instead finding employment in a very wide range of professions, but sufficient do so to ensure that the flow continues – despite pressures on the curriculum detailed later. A large number of academic geographers is thus supported by these undergraduate numbers, and their evolving research programmes have played major roles in defining the discipline’s contents – which have become increasingly broad – internationally.

The core of geographical study until the 1960s was the region: geography was seen as a synthetic discipline which integrated material about the environment, people and their interactions into descriptive accounts of different parts of the earth (regions). Some material was drawn from other disciplines, with the remainder produced by the geographers’ specialist studies of particular subject matter – such as landforms and their evolution, climate and weather, and land use. That focus on the regional synthesis as the ultimate goal of geographical study continued to be promoted into the 1960s (as in the various editions of Wooldridge & East, 1958, which provided the clearest statement of the discipline’s raison d’être), and degree programmes (especially their final years) were dominated by regional courses. Individual geographers became increasingly immersed in their specialist interests, however, and paid less attention to the regional synthesis. Within a decade, the specialisms came to dominate the research culture and, eventually, regional geography was marginalised in most degree curricula.

With specialism came fragmentation, as part of a growing trend within academia: with more researchers specialisation became necessary in order to keep pace with the amount of work published and the skills needed to advance research agenda. Within geography, this trend was initially strongest among physical geographers, who were initially divided among biogeographers (including those who studied soils), climatologists and geomorphologists, with later more specialist subdivisions still – such as glaciologists and hydrologists. Human geographers followed, as separate branches of economic geography, historical geography, urban geography etc. were increasingly recognised, supported by specialist journals. Courses in these specialisms soon dominated most degree programmes (with associated textbooks), and the discipline appeared increasingly fragmented as the core concept of the regional synthesis virtually disappeared from the curriculum (on which, see Clout, 2003).

This shift was fundamentally affected in the 1960s-1970s by a major change in the nature of much geographical research. The late 1950s saw the beginnings of what became known as a ‘quantitative and theoretical revolution’ within geography in North America, and this was soon influencing UK geography too, in part because of trans-Atlantic contacts and in part through local developments: the latter were focused initially on the Universities of Cambridge and Bristol, but as their graduates were recruited to many other departments in a period of rapid growth of student and staff numbers, so the revolution rapidly spread throughout the country (Whitehand, 1970). It had two main elements, both associated with the adoption of what was seen as a ‘scientific approach’, not only to physical geography but also to those parts of human geography identified with the social sciences. The first was a search for order, for
generalisations (even laws) about how the environment works and the spatial imprint of human societies on that environment; the second was the use of quantitative methods to analyse data and provide the firm base on which to make those general statements (Johnston, 2003b). Both were soon reflected in degree programmes, with courses on the philosophy of geography (for which Harvey’s, 1969, book was an initial stimulus) and quantitative methods (in some cases associated with computer programming).

This ‘new’ approach to geographical research called for changes in its practices: no longer could an individual collect, manipulate and analyse all of the data needed to address major scientific research questions, and landscape interpretation (by both physical and human geographers) based on observation, synthesis and interpretation was deemed insufficient. Organised research projects involving groups of workers were needed, as in other disciplines, and these required separate funding. Geographers gained access to this in the 1960s through their recognition as competent natural and social scientists. For physical geographers, establishment of the Natural Environment Research Council in the early 1960s provided funding to support both graduate students and research teams (staffed by postdoctoral researchers) thanks to recognition of their work achieved by leading academics such as David Linton and Keith Clayton (a geomorphologist trained by Linton at Sheffield and, after working in the geography department at the London School of Economics, appointed as a founding professor in one of the country’s first inter-disciplinary schools of environmental science at the new University of East Anglia in 1962). Human geographers were initially excluded from the parallel Social Science Research Council – later renamed Economic and Social Research Council – and there were some who did not want to be affiliated with it (Chisholm, 2001). However, after detailed lobbying by a small group, that decision was rescinded and geographers now have a central role in the ESRC’s work as well as getting much support for research projects and studentships (Johnston, 2004b). More recently, human geographers have won support from the new Arts and Humanities Research Council, as well as from a number of charities which support their research fields – such as the Leverhulme Trust and the Nuffield, Wellcome and Rowntree Foundations – and the European Union: physical geographers have also been successful in a wide range of international collaborative programmes (on which see Thrift & Walling, 2000).

The changes in practices induced by the ‘quantitative revolution’ remain at the core of much contemporary geography (Jackson et al, 2006), though approaches and methods have changed greatly, not least as a result of developments in the means of acquiring, collating, displaying and analysing data based on information technology. Geographers have played major roles in the development of such media – especially remote sensing and geographical information systems (GIS) – as well as in the means of analysing spatial data. However, although some significant centres have emerged (at University and Birkbeck Colleges London, Edinburgh, Lancaster, Leeds and Leicester for example), GIS in the UK is less often seen as a key strategy to attract students and enhance the standing of the discipline, than it has elsewhere, notably the United States (Johnston, 2002; Johnston & Sidaway, 2004).

From the early 1970s on, the training that most students received in quantitative methods and positivist ‘scientific methods’ has been balanced by similar instruction in other philosophies and their research practices (often referred to as
qualitative methods). This shift reflects the expansion of work in human geography stimulated in part by reactions to the ‘quantitative revolution’ – by both ‘radical’ and ‘humanistic’ geographers – in the 1970s but increasingly by geographers’ engagement with a wide range of social and cultural theory, including feminism. As more human geographers became involved in what became known as the ‘cultural turn’, so courses were introduced in these new areas of study – which stimulated the production of a new generation of textbooks on approaches to the discipline and its practices (e.g. Cloke et al, 1991, 2005; Clifford & Valentine, 2003). This sustained encounter with social theory has also been a transatlantic affair, with many of its origins in the late 1960s’ intellectual scene in the United States, where a combination of the anti-war movement, urban uprisings (especially growing out of the struggle for civil rights) and later feminism all impacted on academic geography. In the British case however, critical work in cultural and social geography became particularly influential, notwithstanding periodic debates about the relevance and applicability of such research, vis-à-vis more applied aspects of geography (e.g. Hamnett, 2003; Unwin, 2005). Lacking the strong tradition of cultural geography influenced by Carl Sauer that remained prominent in the United States, British geographers in the 1980s and 1990s tended to look to radical cultural theory (developed in British sociology, literary and cultural studies) as a source of inspiration and possibility, including attempts to influence political agenda and action (for a retrospective survey, see Naylor, Ryan, Cook & Crouch, 2000). Smith (2005, 889) notes the important roles British geographers have played in the post-1970s restructuring of the discipline:

Perhaps in part because of … geographers’ new insistence on grappling with politics … the discipline today is much more integrated into mainstream political debates, especially in Britain, and closer perchance to the temptations of Blairism. There, unlike in the United States, the radicalised generation of the 1970s has some access to the ruling government; in the US most academics don’t even have access to the opposition.

Inevitably this further expansion has meant increasing specialism, evident at both postgraduate and undergraduate level both within and across departments. In terms of undergraduate education, a Romanian graduate student pursuing postgraduate studies in a leading British department states his surprise at the levels of choice available to undergraduate students within examination papers, for example, contrasting this with his undergraduate experience which comprised the assimilation of a corpus of geographical knowledge (Simandan, 2002, 286):

On coming to Bristol, I realized that it is more acceptable not to know things that former Romanian colleagues would find outrageous not to know by heart. Instead, at Bristol there is a premium on wide reading, on developing the ability of being critical, of having analytical presence and originality.

To cope with the growing breadth of subject matter, and to provide initial research training in a wide range of practices, many British geography departments – especially those with the strongest research records – have instituted taught masters’ degrees. (Formerly, a master’s qualification – like a doctorate – was obtained by writing a thesis only, without any course work or other assessment.) Most of these (of which the MSc in Society and Space at Bristol was one of the first) specialise in
particular aspects of the discipline – some in various forms of cultural geography; others in GIS and its application.

Alongside this growing breadth of work in human geography, almost all British departments contain a substantial number of physical geographers (unlike the United States, where in many departments there is little or no physical geography taught). Although physical and human geographers tend to have separate publication strategies (Johnston, 2003c) and conference networks (Ferguson, 2003), they collaborate in the provision of undergraduate degree courses – usually allowing students to specialise in either physical or human geography in the later years. For their research, Thrift (2002, 291) notes that increasingly physical geographers work in specialist teams:

In Britain…there are now a series of science groups who are regularly getting their work in to the pages of Nature or Science in subjects as diverse as glaciology, geomorphology, Quaternary studies, and the like. This success is built on the basis of a different model from the one of everything model which tended to operate in the past. Now departments are trying to build up science groups of five or six good people and appropriate technicians who can then seek out large amounts of research money with which to fund equipment, postdoctoral fellows and postgraduates.

Some of their work has resulted in those teams achieving high reputations and standing within the earth (system) science research communities, with a number of physical geographers playing leading roles in agenda setting in environmental science through the National Environment Research Council and international bodies.

Although the economies of scale are less marked, similar tendencies have been evident in human geography research, with the formation of specialist research groups/clusters in most departments. These tendencies are undoubtedly reinforced by the selective research funding of the Research Assessment Exercises, the meta-framework within which all British Universities and disciplines have operated since the late 1980s (see below). As a consequence, many departments restrict the range of subdisciplines in both human and physical geography to which they will appoint staff (Shelton, 2005), and their undergraduate course offerings reflect this: some departments have no courses in geomorphology or urban geography, for example,

Geography has flourished through the twentieth century in the UK, therefore, very largely based on its strong presence in high school curricula. Although the discipline has been affected by the ‘managerial’ changes that beset UK higher education from the 1970s on, it has been to a considerable extent sheltered from the effects of these by its apparent unproblematic status for university managers. Because it could recruit students (at a time when demand for science degrees was declining sharply and – in the 1980s especially – several social sciences were also languishing), it was not the subject of a national review aimed at consolidating degree provision and research in a relatively small number of institutions. But the changes discussed below have necessarily impacted on geographical practices and politics.

Driving Geography in the Future
Welcome to the arcane world of the research assessment exercise (RAE), a uniquely British cross between cricket and killer sudoku, which today publishes the rules of the next contest, in 2008 (MacLeod, 2006, 10).

UK Geography was a very buoyant discipline in the UK at the end of the twentieth century, therefore. But it was under pressure as the university system changed and the future of geography there depends on its response to those pressures.

The impetus for change in the British university system dates back to the 1970s when funding not only for growth but also for continued work was cut back during a period of deep economic recession and political turbulence in which established norms for public institutions were increasingly modified: this peaked in the early 1980s with major cuts leading to many job losses, not least in geography. There was a parallel debate on the nature of universities and their societal role. Until then, the generally accepted model of the university was that formalised in the nineteenth century as a place where knowledge is produced, stored and disseminated, through scholarship that is relatively autonomous from commercial pressures and interests. Although universities did provide specialist training for certain professions – notably medicine – their primary goal was education, developing the individual’s potential rather than inculcating specific skills. This model was increasingly rejected – especially by governments, which provided the great bulk of university funding. (Tuition until the 1970s was very largely free with reasonably generous, means-tested, grants to cover students’ living costs. In the last few years, modest fees have been charged in English and Welsh and Northern Irish universities, although payment is deferred through low interest loans and set centrally for all universities at just over £1000 per year. They are scheduled to increase to several thousand pounds per year in the next few years.) Instead, universities were promoted as central to a country’s economic growth strategies, nurturing both the generic and specific skills needed for individuals to prosper – and, in turn, for their country’s economy to thrive – in what was increasingly viewed as ‘knowledge-based society’.

Rapid expansion of universities from the late 1980s applied this model, with a number of significant changes to their mode of working many of which can be encapsulated in a single term – managerialism. Increasingly universities were seen and operated in ways similar to other organisations: students became ‘consumers’ required to pay an increasing proportion of the costs of their education (because of the personal – mainly financial – benefits that they would accrue); and teaching-research staff became ‘human resources’, to be deployed according to strategies designed to fulfil the institutional mission. Part of that mission involved altering the funding base: supplementing the reliance on government grants for their income, universities explored a range of sources by marketing their services – consultancies and refresher courses for companies; research contracts; selected postgraduate courses for higher fees (as in the proliferation of MBAs); attracting overseas students (who after 1979 were charged much higher fees designed to ensure that they paid the estimated ‘full cost’ of their courses); and the commercial exploitation of innovation. All of this activity had to be monitored and evaluated to ensure ‘quality for money’ in an all-pervading ‘audit and accountability culture’ (Johnston, 1994).

One element of this growing culture of managerialism has affected all disciplines more than any other: the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). This was
designed and implemented in the mid-1980s by academics on the University Grants Committee (a, now-dissolved, semi-independent body which distributed the government grant to universities) as a means of responding to government claims that there was no system of accountability for the large amounts of money given to the universities to support fundamental research. (This was often put at about one-third of the total public grant to universities.) The implicit (sometimes explicit) claim was that the government was getting a poor return on that investment, allied to arguments that not enough research in UK universities was focused on increasing the country’s economic wealth and competitiveness. The government made it clear that it wished to see its money concentrated on institutions and departments that were centres of research excellence delivering value for money.

The first RAE (in 1986) graded departments into four categories – outstanding, above average, average, and unsatisfactory – and the amount of money distributed for research in universities was modified so that the universities got more for their higher-graded departments than those in lower grades, on a shallow sliding scale. Over the next four RAEs, that money was increasingly focused on departments with the highest grades, evaluated on an ever-lengthening scale of peer-reviewed excellence. At the most recent exercise (2001) the scale ranged through 1/2/3a/3b/4/5/5*, with a later decision creating a 6* grade for those which were rated 5*/5 at the last two exercises in the sequence. A different system of evaluation is planned for the 2008 RAE, but with the same intention of concentrating money (see Johnston, 2005a, 2005b; details of how geography departments are to be evaluated are in rae2008, 2006). Under the funding system used after the 2001 exercise, of 62 geography departments evaluated only 30 in England got a grade 4 or higher: those with lesser grades (3a/3b/2/1) received no research funds, which are allocated according to the number of full-time staff, weighted postgraduate students and research staff. The 30 departments shared £23.06million in the 2004-2005 academic year, with the five departments graded 5* received £7.4million (32 per cent), or £51,244 per volume measure and £53,869 per full-time staff member. The 15 grade 4 departments, on the other hand, shared just £4.5million, or £13,645 per volume measure (£14,197 per staff member). With just under 10 per cent of the total staff in those 30 departments, those with the 5* grades obtained 32 per cent of the income. In general, the largest departments got the greatest rewards: the 15 grade 4 departments averaged 21.2 staff members; the 10 grade 5 averaged 25.8; and the five graded 5* averaged 27.6. (These data are taken from Johnston, 2006.)

On the day that the rules for the 2008 RAE were published (in rae2008, 2006), the British daily Guardian newspaper described an audit system that was becoming increasingly fine-tuned across disciplines and elaborate in constructing and cross-checking evaluations:

In a triumph of academic ingenuity, every active researcher in the UK will have their work over the past six years assessed by 900 fellow academics and experts – including international observers – sitting in 67 panels. In addition there are 15 coordinating panels to ensure consistency between subjects....The new scoring system for 2008 is trying to do two jobs. First it is trying to discriminate better at the to end. In 2001 more than half of all academics ended up in departments rated in the top two categories....There was an outcry from universities because the government said there wasn’t enough money to fund everyone as they expected.
Many departments improved their scores...but saw their income fall....[Secondly] RAE 2008 will try to avoid the “cliff-edge” effect between grades by allotting departments a profile [for research outputs, environment and esteem]....This should also help to identify pockets of excellence in otherwise average departments and fund them accordingly. (MacLeod, 2006, 10)

Many credit the RAES with improving both the productivity and quality of university research in the UK, with injecting dynamism and strategic goals into a system that was relatively static, and with creating opportunities for a new generation of critical and innovative academics. However, it is also widely felt that their influence has been at best contradictory, and at worst has malign aspects (on which see Johnston, 2006). Among the negative views, the most important are that the RAES have changed the balance between teaching and research, favouring the latter. Both individuals, for their career prospects, and departments, for their RAE prospects, have decided to give priority to research in their allocations of time and other resources – the latter because of the prospect of additional income if they improve research grades. Research – especially the type of research that is likely to be favourably evaluated by RAE panels (the power of whose members has come under considerable criticism: Short, 2002; Smith, 2005) – is usually seen as the highest priority. (Some of the implications for individuals, including the impacts on collegiality within departments, are discussed in Sidaway, 1997: more generally, see Harvie, 2000.)

RAEs have profoundly shaped the format of research and how it is reported. Although panels and their members have been careful to state otherwise, there is a widespread tendency to give precedence to publishing in refereed journals, and a strong sense of a status ranking of journals, with papers in some being evaluated more highly than those published elsewhere. Further, it is also widely assumed that ‘performance indicators’ – such as citation counts – are used in the evaluation process. The result is that academics seek to publish in the perceived ‘high status’ journals and also to produce papers rather than research monographs or, especially, write textbooks.

Evidence shows that this process advantages large over small departments, because of the economies of scope and scale (see Johnston, Jones & Gould, 1995). With few exceptions, departments have to provide a full degree course in their discipline. Staff in small departments may have to cover a wider range of subject matter than their contemporaries in larger departments, with consequent impacts on their research time. Further, small numbers of staff mean that the possibility of building research teams of tenured academics with cognate interests, who can create a research environment that is well resourced and attractive to postgraduate workers, is much less than it is in a large department. Reflecting this, most departments now give precedence to their research strategies in making appointments. Job specifications emphasise contributions to an agreed research specialism/group rather than filling a teaching slot: it is assumed that with enough individuals a sufficiently wide range of courses can be offered, albeit focused on the department’s research specialisms. Furthermore, the RAE exercises have made it almost obligatory that departments present their research programmes as collaborative activities, which in many cases has meant creating ‘groups’ which in some cases are little more than ‘paper operations’ aligning individuals together who have little in common. Because departments are assessed, inter-departmental links within an institution are not necessarily favoured – which
department gets the grade, status and money? – and inter-institution links even less so. Although collegiality is a claimed core characteristic of academic life, increasingly competition – between individuals, between departments within institutions and among departments across institutions – is evident. This has stimulated a ‘transfer market’, largely though not entirely for senior (i.e. professorial) staff, who have been enticed – through salary offers plus favourable terms of appointment (notably reduced teaching and administrative loads) and the provision of other resources (e.g. release of other posts) – to move to the highly-rated departments. The rich and most research intensive universities have been ‘buying cvs’ to sustain and enhance their competitive edge over others which, in the main, lack the resources to make counter offers. Concerns have also been voiced about the ways that large grants have come to be valued as ends in themselves (when much of the most critical and influential work in geography has been conducted outside formal research projects: Hoggart, 1999).

Research was not the only aspect extensively affected by the ‘new managerialism’ of UK universities, but the impact of the RAEs has been much greater than other aspects of the ‘audit and assessment culture’. For example, a Quality Assurance of Teaching (QAT) programme was introduced in the early 1990s, with every department having to respond to requests for a great deal of information about its teaching practices and many of them being subject to assessment visits at which individual teaching sessions (lectures, practicals, tutorials etc) were observed and assessed. The outcome was a classification of each department’s teaching as excellent, satisfactory or unsatisfactory (those assessed as unsatisfactory were later re-assessed). No money followed this assessment, however: the classification was intended to provide information for potential students when considering where to study – though it clearly also brought status which was used in a variety of ways by those departments judged as excellent (Chalkley, 1996). No further assessments have been undertaken or planned, but the QAT exercise crystallised the greater attention on teaching practices which now characterises UK universities.

In part as a reaction to the RAEs, and to a considerable extent independent of the QAT exercise, increased attention has been paid to teaching and learning strategies within departments: indeed, most institutions conduct regular reviews of the teaching in their departments – in many cases involving external assessors. This growing concern about the nature and quality of teaching within geography has stimulated interest in what has become known as the ‘scholarship of teaching’ (Healey, 2003) and the development of networks concerned with teaching and assessment strategies (such as the Higher Education Study Group of the Royal Geographical Society/Institute of British Geographers and the Geography Discipline Network based at the University of Gloucestershire): as a result of pressure from such bodies, research into pedagogy has been accepted as eligible for submission in recent RAEs. Promotion of pedagogic practice is a major function of the Higher Education Academy – funded by the four national higher education bodies – which has established a series of National Subject Centres as part of a Learning and Teaching Support Network aimed at raising the profile of learning and teaching initiatives in UK higher education and the effective dissemination of approaches that will ‘improve courses and every student’s learning experience’. That for Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences is located in the School of Geography at the University of Plymouth. Through a variety of activities, it currently focuses on four priority areas: sharing good practice in fieldwork; promoting key skills of value in life-long learning;
embedding careers guidance in the curriculum; and encouraging wide adoption of new learning technologies. There is also a Centre for Active Learning in Geography, Environment and Related Disciplines, funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England and located at the University of Gloucestershire.

To provide a common basis for departmental reviews, the national Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education commissioned a series of Subject Benchmark Statements in the mid-1990s, designed to ‘describe the nature and characteristics of programmes … [and] represent general expectations about the standards for the award of qualifications at a given level and articulate the attributes and capabilities that those possessing such qualifications should be able to demonstrate’. The Royal Geographical Society/Institute of British Geographers facilitated the production of the subject benchmark statement for geography (Chalkley and Craig, 2000). It had four goals: (1) to provide a framework within which geography degree programmes could be structured and new ones created; (2) to help external examiners validate student achievement standards; (3) to inform potential students and employers regarding the nature of expected attainments from geography programmes; and (4) to provide academic reviewers with guidance for judging standards. The document is not prescriptive regarding the contents of a degree programme – stressing the plurality of approaches within geography and the importance of local decisions regarding course content and organisation. Instead, it sets out the general aims of such a programme and the main areas of knowledge and understanding that should be covered (environments; landscapes; spatial variation; place; systems; scale; change; difference and inequality; representation; modes of analysis and interpretation; observational strategies; and informed concern about the earth and its people). The intellectual skills – both generic and discipline-specific – that should be acquired are listed, as are the various learning processes and contexts, and the expected standards and levels of achievement.

These various managerialism initiatives have very substantially changed the nature of geography departments in the UK, therefore. Since the Polytechnics and Colleges of Higher Education gained University status through the 1990s, the country’s university system does not have a formal upper layer of ‘research universities’, a lower layer of ‘teaching-only institutions’, and an intermediate layer where research and (undergraduate) teaching are more balanced. Nor are most institutions designing missions to fit into one of those layers: instead – in part because the funding mechanisms drive them in that way – all aspire to be at least in the intermediate layer; many aspire to be in the upper layer. Thus the pressure to do and publish research is strong almost everywhere: much more is being done and published – as is clear in the plethora of geographical and associated journals that has been launched (more so in the UK than elsewhere) over the last two decades. At the same time, much is being done to improve the student learning experience and promote good practice in teaching, learning and assessment.

This changing university culture has had a number of specific impacts on geography and geographers. The first is that it has promoted specialism, which has had one very substantial consequence. The gap between most human and physical geographers has widened, as the latter become increasingly aligned with the model of research organisation in large teams typical of much environmental science. Their peers from whom they seek esteem – which leads to wider recognition, grant-
searching efforts etc. – are increasingly outwith geography, as illustrated by their publication practices (most publish very little in geographical journals: Johnston, 2003c). Human geographers, on the other hand, although developing some interdisciplinary contacts (mainly in newer areas rather than the ‘traditional’ social science and humanities disciplines) are more self-contained, though there are substantial divisions within the sub-discipline, many of them ideological and methodological, as discussed above. For some, this means that the society-environment interface (once portrayed as geography’s raison d’être) is rarely the key focus (ironically at a time of heightened concern about the environmental impacts of human activity), because of the relatively weak intellectual links between human and physical geographers (as against the institutional links which, for political reasons, keeps them together in geography departments). This fragmentation into a series of ‘disconnected bits’ has led one commentator to bemoan that (Clout 2004, 820):

…since many of our specialists cannot understand what specialists in other parts of geography are doing, nor do they see any justification for the work of their ‘neighbours’. In an equally worrying way, those with area-studies interests (i.e. doing what outsiders expect geographers to do) are widely considered to be beyond the pale. This state of affairs is echoed in schools, where 16-18-year-old students take physical geography in one year and human geography in the other (often with a different teacher). … I think this state of affairs bodes ill for the future, as numbers of Geography entries for examinations at 16-18 start to fall (being overwhelmed by interest in Business Studies and the new fascination for Psychology) and numbers of applicants for university places in Geography start to do likewise. At university, ‘Geography’ is seen as no more than an unholy alliance of disconnected bits, despite our rhetoric; bits that can be plucked out and merged with other disciplines by ‘rationalizing’ vice-chancellors.

Concerns about fragmentation are not new, for human and physical geographers have separate intellectual projects, but a common political project – sustaining the parts by defending the ‘whole’ (Johnston, 2002). The relationship between geography and area studies has also been designated as weakening for a long time and the quantitative revolution and reorientation of British geography towards science in the 1960s and 1970s also saw a relative weakening of foreign language and area specializations amongst British geographers and their students. Overseas contacts were increasingly orientated to North America (Johnston & Sidaway, 2004, Whitehand & Edmondson 1997) and the growth of European Union initiatives for pan-European research since the 1980s has been a very limited countervailing tendency (although European Union programmes for student exchange – ERASMUS and SOCRATES – have fostered student exchanges). The loss of the specialist department at London’s School of Oriental and African Studies (which was merged into the department at Kings College London in 2001) seems to indicate that this tendency to weaken the link with area studies is accelerating. More widely across the UK university system, a major consequence of the new managerialism has been the willingness to close degree courses and departments, usually for financial grounds. In many cases, rather than outright departmental closures, institutions have merged departments into larger units, with the hope of benefiting from economies of (managerial) scale and scope and fostering new research directions through the interaction of scholars formerly relatively isolated in their ‘own’ departments. For
geographers (at least those in most institutions, especially the universities created prior to the 1990s expansion) this has not been particularly problematic until relatively recently. The continued flow of undergraduate students has sustained most departments, and much research (especially in human geography) is relatively inexpensive and can be undertaken without the large sums of money which follow success in the RAE – though the pressures on time and resources are great.

This has been changing recently. Although geography remains one of the most popular subjects in schools, the number taking the leaving examinations which precede university entrance has been falling – in part because of the growing popularity of other disciplines, such as media studies, politics and psychology. And the numbers taking physical science disciplines have fallen significantly, creating difficulties in recruiting students who want to specialise in physical geography or have the scientific base that they can be attracted to it once enrolled in a degree programme – most of which allow extensive choice among the various sub-disciplines. There have also been difficulties sustaining geography’s presence in the national high school curriculum (which was established in the 1990s and replaced a variety of regionally-determined curricula controlled by local education authorities, who now found their powers and influence almost entirely removed: Rawling, 2001), which is increasingly exacerbating recruitment difficulties in some institutions. As a result some geography departments are being closed/merged.

In some institutions where recruitment of undergraduate geography students remains buoyant (with application ratios of more than ten students per place, for example), the geography department has been used as the core for mergers with others that have difficulties recruiting students – notably in earth sciences. This again means a loss of separate identity for the discipline and creates new working milieux for geographers – not only in research but also in the allocation of resources and the politics involved. Most of these mergers are too recent for much evaluation of their impact on the discipline – will geographers working in them no longer identify as geographers, for example? – and its practices. But they are one part of a changing environment in which geographers are working. These tendencies, along with a lessened involvement on the part of academic geographers to be directly connected with and contribute to shaping the school curriculum (see Bonnet, 2003; Stannard, 2003), are all very evident, although their longer-term consequences remain unclear.

One problem regarding their discipline’s visibility and standing that has concerned geographers over several decades is its impact on ‘public policy’ – broadly defined. (This can be illustrated by two presidential addresses delivered to geographical societies in the 1970s example – Coppock, 1974; Steel, 1974 – and in a wide-ranging debate at the start of the 21st century – e.g. Martin, 2001; Dorling & Shaw, 2002; Massey, 2002). Geographers – both those practising as academics and those trained in the discipline but no longer formally identified as geographers – have done a great deal of applied work, although much of this has not gained wide public attention (for a review, see Bennett & Wilson, 2004). Contract research work in the public and private sectors certainly increased substantially from the 1980s on as universities were encouraged to ‘market’ their expertise more widely. Much of the work done by geographers was relatively low-key, but major successful research centres/companies were established, such as GMap Ltd (using GIS technology to
solve location-allocation problems) at the University of Leeds and the Flood Hazard Research Centre at the University of Middlesex.9

Where geographers have perhaps had less impact – or at least less visibility – is in commenting on public policy through the media, and in some cases influencing national political policy debate through such interventions: very few geographers have attained the ‘status’ of public intellectual. Nor is there much evidence of geographers strongly influencing public policy directions through their presence in the ‘corridors of power’ – although it is easy to underestimate that, because much of the influence is outwith the public domain (as in the major contributions made by geographers based at the Universities of Leeds and Southampton respectively to the formats for release of data from the 1991 and 2001 national censuses of population and dwellings). Nevertheless, UK academic geographers are able to ensure a greater level of ‘geographical literacy’ through the population through their teaching of tens of thousands of undergraduates each year and their role in training those who become geography teachers in the country’s schools: most UK schoolchildren are exposed to a greater sophistication of geographical knowledge than is the case in many other countries.

Conclusions

For the last few decades their ability to recruit students insulated UK geography departments from many of the ill financial winds blowing through British universities in the late twentieth century, and they could pursue their individual and collective research agenda relatively securely. The RAEs and associated managerial shifts changed that, and geographers are now subject to the same level of scrutiny – and public display of the outcomes – as all others. And as the nature of universities changes, with greater concentration on their individual (financially-solvent) strengths, geography is facing the threats that other disciplines encountered earlier. While geography remains buoyant in many places, and its research achievements continue to impress and set critical agenda, its identity is being eroded and its longer-term future seems less secure than it did even a decade ago (on which see the Foreword by Cooke and Gardner in Herbert & Matthews, 2004).

As elsewhere, the future seems to hold heightened uncertainty for many disciplines in UK universities – geography included. Commenting on the Australian situation (where reform in the Universities has been particularly rapid and extensive), Marginson (2004) notes how the traditional ‘core business’ of universities, that of teaching and research, was to some extent displaced by a heightened focus on their own standing and interest as institutions. This has seen (as in the UK), an expansion of opportunities, the abolition of the formal binary division (between teaching- and research-focused institutions), a new emphasis on international linkages and the need for public relevance and accountability. At the same time, however, the ways that these have been implemented means that:

Universities were not always focused on the core business of teaching and research; and the medium in which they made that contribution, the academic disciplines, was to some extent destabilised and displaced amid the mergers and rapid growth, the rationalisation of degrees and programs, the sudden
changes in mission and decision structures, the explosive growth in international education, and the more managed research environment. Unless they could gain autonomous resources by selling themselves, individual disciplines began to lose purchase on their own agendas. Trans-institutional links were compromised by competition among universities. Traditional academic governance – and the academic cultures it protected – was weakened by centrally controlled budgets, uniform performance management, standardised data requirements and the rise of marketing, international competition and an energetic new layer of entrepreneurs and leaders.’ (Marginson, 2002, 221)

Almost all Australian geography departments have been merged with others over the last fifteen years (Holmes, 2003; Johnston, 2006). Although single honours degrees in geography persist and there is vibrant research, the discipline’s distinctiveness this no longer resides in the traditional sole subject university geography department. Is this also the future for British geography?

British geography is comparatively strong and vibrant, and independent departments with their own degree programmes are thriving in a substantial number of universities – including those generally found occupying the top 20 places in most ‘league tables’ of university excellence produced by and for the media. But these outcomes of its ability to entrench itself in the country’s university system through the twentieth century cannot be taken for granted. As universities are restructured to meet managerial goals the relationships between disciplines, students, funding agencies, and research funding bodies are being refined, presenting continual challenges to those seeking to defend and promote a discipline/subject whose core concerns are at the heart of many debates about sustainable futures. A discipline with a distinguished recent history and record of achievements faces a series of institutional challenges and turbulence. Its strength and vibrancy, whose parameters we have charted here, mean that it is relatively well placed to weather the storms and maintain some key aspects of its identity but also to continue to provide a large number of scholars who are in the vanguard of agenda-setting in geographical research and education. Moreover, many of the challenges that geography faces merit casting into the longer-term historical perspectives with which this paper opened. In that light, it is worth turning again to critical work on disciplinary histories. Thus:

The early modern ‘university is still held to the aim its etymology suggests: to provide an education in the whole world (universitas) of learning not a particular discipline, this to be recognized in the form of a degree in the ‘arts’, both humanities and sciences in modern parlance. As such, we should not expect the early modern university to teach geography separately, this being fundamentally at odds with its ideal of universal learning. Yet we should expect that geography was taught to the extent that it was germane to a degree in the arts. The space of the early modern university was different from that of the modern, yet…it afforded coherent contexts in which geography was taught…geography was being taught in academic institutions in the 1580s yet was not departmentalized until the 1880s (Withers and Mayhew 2002, 13).

These historians of geographic thought point out that geography has had important connections with lots of other subjects and a variety of meanings and geographies
according to institutional settings, collective actions and individual strategies. Moreover, for Withers and Mayhew (2001, 26):

Such plurality in geography’s past…can surely encourage us to question the scope, purpose and intellectual affiliations of geography. It can, in short, generate new modes of self reflection, new forms of critical human geography, which expand our vistas about what the discipline can be by freeing us from misapprehensions concerning what the discipline has been about.

As universities face new imperatives to restructure and fine-tune their relevance, roles, costs and revenue bases, and as sites of learning proliferate and new configurations of capital and state forms emerge (‘globalization’), geography should apply its own sense of multiple and heterodox histories and critical perspective on such changes to foster institutional opportunities. That way the very forces and transformations that geography has been so well placed to chart – and which threaten established norms and expectations in many disciplines - might be directed in imaginative and progressive ways.

Notes

1 The reference to Dublin (which became the capital of an independent Ireland after 1922) reminds us that any account of Geography in the British system needs to take into account the broader imperial role of universities. Of course, as the main text briefly describes, the subject partly owes its consolidation in British universities to imperial needs. More widely British universities and Geography therein had a global presence through Empire. In the case of the University of London, for example, not only did twelve universities in England but also several in Canada and many in other Commonwealth countries (notably in East and West Africa) began life as associate colleges of the University, offering its external degrees under licence. In recent decades a post-imperial phase of ‘globalization’ has again seen British universities seeking to expand their global roles, not only through marketing to attract overseas students (who since 1979 must pay much higher fees) but also through joint ventures, links and external (including online) programmes.

2 In a number of cases, a geography department was based on one in a Teacher Training College (each separate Local Education Authority had at least one until the 1980s) which offered BEd degrees and which was incorporated into the Polytechnic.

3 Beyond specialist technical and vocational subjects, the graduate job market in the UK is relatively open. Graduates are recruited to management training and accountancy for example, on the basis of aptitude tests, degree results and the reputation of their University, rather than on the basis of the subject studied. However, the skills imparted through a degree in geography (which requires a combination of analytical skills, numeracy and fluency in writing) mean that geographers fare relatively well in the graduate job market.

4 However GIS is neither taught in all UK departments nor as central to strategies to promote the discipline as it has become in the United States (as indicated in Murphy’s paper in this collection).

5 Students resident in Scotland pay no fees at Scottish Universities and moves are afoot to grant the Welsh Assembly similar powers to determine fee levels in Wales in the future.

6 In the 1990s, the Universities Funding Council (successor to the University Grants Committee) was replaced by four separate funding bodies for the main constituent territories of the UK – England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. These have their own mechanisms for distributing the research money, but have combined to conduct the RAIs. Those, and the different arrangements for tuition fees in Scotland (see note 5), means that the trajectory of Universities there may diverge more from those of the other British territories in the future.

7 http://www.gees.ac.uk/

8 Available at http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/honours/geography.asp.

9 http://www.eurodirect.co.uk/Pages/GMAP_Consulting.html and http://www.fhrc.mdx.ac.uk/.
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