

## Geography Education Across the Atlantic at the Geographical Association

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Geographical Association (GA) is an international association of over 10,000 geography educators headquartered in Sheffield, England. The National Council for Geographic Education (NCGE) and the GA have similar goals. The GA's annual conferences provide an excellent opportunity to begin geography education partnerships between the NCGE and the GA. An exhibit and workshop on geographic information systems at the 2001 Geographical Association conference at the University of Sussex, England, afforded the opportunity to network with teachers and pave the way for future collaboration.

### **Introduction**

The Geographical Association (GA) is an international association for geography educators headquartered in Sheffield, England. Its membership is larger than that of the NCGE, at approximately 10,000, reflecting the more prominent role that the discipline of geography had throughout the twentieth century in the UK as compared to the USA. The GA provides information and resources to teachers and students to advance the study and teaching of geography and to promote its contribution to education. Like the NCGE, the GA is dedicated to encouraging the development of geography as a subject. It believes that geography makes both a distinctive and a wide contribution to education and that it is an essential component in preparing young people for life in the 21st century. The GA is also committed to providing support to all those who are engaged with geography—whether out of personal interest or as part of their professional work. Like the NCGE, the GA emphasizes teaching and learning in primary and secondary education, but is greatly enhanced by the interest of and participation by university researchers and professors.

The GA is highly respected as one of the leading subject teaching associations in the country. It is regularly consulted on a wide range of issues concerning geography in education. Members receive journals on a regular basis, and like the NCGE, the GA publishes books and other resources to support geography teaching at every level. These journals include *Geography*, *Primary Geographer*, *Teaching Geography*, and a quarterly newsletter entitled “GA News.” The association also provides curriculum advice, opportunities for professional development, conferences, and other networking venues. Project-based activities include the Worldwide Quiz and Geography Action Week—both of which enjoy a good reputation for quality and school involvement. Geography Action Weeks is held in the UK as well as in the USA, with similar goals.

### ***Geography Education in the United Kingdom***

Geography is much more important in the British educational system than in American education. This is reflected in the number of educators who are GA members. Geography is a “foundation subject,” compulsory from Year (Grade) 1 to 9, after which it is optional. Nevertheless, geography remains a popular option after Year 9, and is taken by approximately 60% of students. Nearly all geography students at the university level have studied geography throughout primary and secondary school.

Geography education in the USA has been subsumed in the social studies since the 1920s and has only periodically been recognized as essential to our education and society. Fortunately, since the 1980s, geographic expertise is increasingly sought after by educational institutions, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, business, and researchers. In the UK, geography education never lost its prominence from the days when the Royal Geographical Society was sending explorers to the South Pole and elsewhere. GA educational projects and materials seem much more integrated into the UK general curriculum than is the case elsewhere in the world.

England and Wales have had a National Curriculum in place since 1991; Scotland has its own curriculum. The National Curriculum is somewhat analogous to national standards in the USA, but is both tested and mandatory. Local Education Authorities (LEAs)—the UK’s equivalent to the American school districts—have curriculum advisors in different subjects. The core curriculum subjects are English, science, and mathematics, taken by all students. During the conference, concern was voiced that geography might not be as popular as it was during the 1980s.

At age 11, students go to secondary school until they are 16 years old. The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examination is taken at the age of 16 (Year 11) before entering the Sixth Form or leaving to study at an Adult Education College for A (Advanced) Levels, Years 12 and 13. The A level grades are the basis for admittance to a university.

Because the GCSE is so important, the two vendors on either side of my exhibit were completely focused on marketing test materials. This test is roughly analogous to the ACT or SAT, but it is given during the middle, rather than at the end, of high school.

At age 18, many students in England go to University, graduating when they are 21 after a three-year degree program. Tuition was free until just a few years ago in the UK. In Scotland, at age 16, some students go to University. However, university education there usually begins after age 17 for a four-year degree.

One gets the sense from speaking with the educators in the United Kingdom and from reading the literature that their educational system has been undergoing rapid change since the 1970s. At the same time that educators are still adjusting to the National Curriculum, the National Curriculum itself is evolving. Adding to the mix is the fact that the educational systems among England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland have distinctive differences.

### **Geographical Association Conferences**

The 2001 GA conference was held at the University of Sussex, south of London in the county of East Sussex, in Brighton. The 2002 GA conference was held at the University of Manchester, and the 2003 conference will be held somewhat between the two, at the University of Derby.

Approximately 800 people attended GA conferences in 2001 and 2002. The GA and the NCGE's conferences are about the same size, but the NCGE attracts a larger percentage of its membership to its conferences. The NCGE already offers a number of GA publications to its members. GA President Jeremy Krause invited me to speak to the GA membership at its Board meeting during 2002, to describe several avenues for partnership between the GA and the NCGE. I also met with education staff from the Royal Geographical Society, a professional geographical society that is over 200 years old. They merged with the Institute of British Geographers during the 1990s, forming a society that is analogous to a combination of the National Geographic Society and the Association of American Geographers in the USA.

I have conducted workshops focused on "Exploring the World With a Geographic Information System" at recent GA conferences. Using computers in geography education has been an emphasis of ICT (Instructional Computing and Technology) lessons and training since the 1970s. Beginning in the 1980s, lesson "packs" were developed, for example, to combine remote sensing and agricultural use and practice. These initiatives no doubt contribute to the high interest in using GIS in the curriculum to teach physical and cultural geography. As in the USA, teachers in the UK have a keen interest in using GIS in the classroom. Part of the reason for the interest is that its use adheres to the National Curriculum, which emphasizes real-world data in a problem-solving, inquiry-based environment. GIS software used in schools includes a limited amount of *MapInfo* and *ArcView*, as well as *AEGIS*, a specific GIS software marketed toward educators at a reasonable price. In the USA, we take for granted the free federal data from the USGS, US Census Bureau, EPA, NOAA, and other government agencies. However, in most other countries of the world, including the UK, much government spatial and tabular information is copyrighted and costly, slowing the use of GIS in the classroom. Recent announcements by the Ordnance Survey, the country's major government mapping organization, to provide low-cost spatial data for schools is therefore welcome news. The Remote Sensing Society (similar to the American Society for Photogrammetry and Remote Sensing) distributed free aerial photo CDs of the UK during the conference. The Wildgoose company displayed aerial photographs in digital form with special educational pricing.

As at NCGE conferences, GA conferences include a wide variety of interesting exhibits. Exhibitors include the Ordnance Survey, the Royal Geographical Society, the Remote Sensing Society, as well as private aerial photo companies, curriculum

developers, textbook companies such as Taylor and Francis, and MetOffice, the UK meteorological agency. The GA itself operates exhibits with its wealth of curricular resources; some were in the Welsh language.

As at NCGE conferences, the GA exhibit halls included large firms, but also one-and-two person companies. One difference was that 20% of the exhibitors were private and nonprofit organizations that run “field studies centers,” advertising the merits of their sites for teachers to bring their students to for a week or more. This reflects the requirement of fieldwork for all geography students. The field study centers include fascinating sea cliff and highlands sites in Wales and Scotland—even an entire island! Through operating a USGS exhibit and handing out maps, teaching materials, CDs, and books, I was able to speak with hundreds of the conference attendees.

### ***Observations and Recommendations***

The numbers of teachers, consultants, and others who mentioned that they do volunteer work for the GA is amazing, considering the time commitment that teaching already demands. Like the NCGE, the GA is run by its members and its work is determined and monitored by a structure of committees that focus on and develop segments of the subject. These committees are supported by a Headquarters staff based in Sheffield, England. The GA is an international association, but its regional and local structures provide significant opportunities for the views of the geographical community to be heard and represented. The GA is locally active, maintaining over 40 branches that stimulate local activity throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Working over the past three years with GA members has shown me that the challenges facing geography education in the UK, despite its longstanding leadership in the world, are similar to those faced by NCGE members in the USA. Geography education everywhere faces stiff competition from testing standards, other subjects, and funding. Therefore, given our common goals and similar challenges, I recommend that NCGE members engage in dialogue with GA members. Because physical geography is very strong in the UK, I believe that NCGE members who have not had the opportunity to work with physical geographers would benefit. Furthermore, UK geography curriculum is also much more engaged with world issues than is some American geography teaching, and we might benefit by studying their approach. Still, local studies and data are still valued and important to GA educators.

The NCGE could partner with the GA on teacher training, research, and curricular resources. The GA is non-partisan and unbiased, concerned with geographic education and literacy, just as the NCGE is. I recommend that all NCGE members consider using the resources of the GA in their teaching, becoming a GA member, attending a GA conference, and building partnerships with teachers in the Geographical Association.



Exhibitors at the Geographical Association conferences include field studies centers, government agencies, curriculum developers, publishing companies, testing companies, map companies, nonprofit organizations, and the Geographical Association itself.



The University of Derby, site of the 2003 Geographical Association conference.

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