

Regional geography in the undergraduate curriculum: a review and case study.

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Summary - Crynodeb

Regional geography was, until the 1970s, an important component of undergraduate geography programmes. Due largely to increased specialization within geography, regional geography was subsequently pushed to the margins of the discipline. This paper briefly reviews the changing status of regional geography. Some authors argue that regional geography is the main public perception of geography, but that it has been undervalued by geographers resulting in limited engagement with regional issues and participation in global debates, such as globalisation. Regional geography can provide a context for geographical concepts and help students appreciate and understand interconnections. A UK case study illustrates one approach to reinstating regional geography at the core of the curriculum, with student views supporting pedagogic benefits of regional geography. Whilst regional geography appears to be slowly returning, other disciplines are developing similar sub-disciplines, such as place-based learning focused on place, community and sustainability. Clearly these are central to geography, but to what extent are geographers involved?

Tan ddiwedd y 1970au roedd daearyddiaeth ranbarthol yn elfen bwysig o raglenni daearyddiaeth israddedig. Yn bennaf oherwydd arbenigo cynyddol o fewn daearyddiaeth, wedi hynny gwrthwyd daearyddiaeth ranbarthol i gyrion y ddisgyblaeth. Mae'r papur hwn yn adolygu'n gryno statws newidiol daearyddiaeth ranbarthol. Mae rhai awduron yn dadlau mai daearyddiaeth ranbarthol yw prif ganfyddiad y cyhoedd o ddaearyddiaeth, ond ei bod wedi'i thanbriso gan ddaearyddwyr gan arwain at ymgysylltu cyfyngedig â materion rhanbarthol a chyfranogi mewn dadleuon byd-eang, megis globaleiddio. Gall daearyddiaeth ranbarthol ddarparu cyd-destun ar gyfer cysyniadau daearyddol a helpu myfyrwyr i werthfawrogi a deall cydgysylltiadau. Mae astudiaeth achos o'r Deyrnas Unedig yn rhoi enghraifft o un dull o adfer daearyddiaeth ranbarthol wrth wraidd y cwricwlwm, gyda barn myfyrwyr yn cefnogi buddion pedagogaid daearyddiaeth ranbarthol. Ymddengys fod daearyddiaeth ranbarthol yn dychwelyd yn araf, ond ar yr un pryd mae disgyblaethau eraill yn datblygu is-ddisgyblaethau tebyg, megis dysgu seiliedig ar le sy'n canolbwyntio ar le, cymuned a chynaliadwyedd. Mae'n eglur bod y rhain yn ganolog i ddaearyddiaeth, ond i ba raddau y mae daearyddwyr yn ymwneud â hyn?

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Introduction

Until the 1960s, regional geography formed the core of the majority of undergraduate geography programmes in Higher Education in the United Kingdom (Sidaway & Johnston 2007). Geography at the time was seen as a 'synthetic discipline' that integrated material into 'encyclopedic' descriptive regional accounts and many geographers specialized in the study of a region, often encompassing both the physical and human dimensions. Undergraduate degree programmes were dominated by regional courses, often producing integrated geographers, many of whom found careers in local government planning

departments in the booming development period of post-war Europe. However, during the 1950s and 1960s a 'quantitative and theoretical revolution' occurred within the discipline that influenced individual geographers, the majority of whom became immersed in specialist interests; not only splitting into physical-human branches, but further within these. This revolution ultimately led to the fragmentation of geography into sub-disciplines by mid 1970s. As a result, regional geography became, and has largely remained, marginalised in geography curricula in most British universities, as well as in most other countries.

The demise of regional geography, and its marginalization by the mid-1970s, was contested by some. Notably, Hart (1982 p. 18) viewed regional geography almost as the glue that binds the then emerging sub-disciplines, and stated that "we need the concept of the region in order to understand why we need the diverse and variegated systematic subfields of geography". However, such sentiment was largely ignored and regional geography was effectively lost from, or hidden in, university curricula. However, recently there has been a reflection and growing realisation that geography gave up regional geography without fully analysing and understanding its status and (central) position within the discipline, and its significance in relation to geography and the wider world. For example, Murphy (2003 p. 3) states that "our discipline [geography] moved away from regional geography without adequate consideration of either what might constitute good regional geography or what is lost when geography programs fail to produce strong regionalists ... this has undermined the disciplines ability to contribute to discussions about developments in different parts of the world, has limited geography's involvement with communities of scholars and practitioners focused on regional issues, and has worked against the expansion of geography programs in colleges and universities".

A consequence of this 'move away' from regional geography has been the inability of geographers to contribute to emerging global debates (Wei 2006). For example, Dicken (2004) lamented the 'missing geographers' in the globalisation debate and relates this directly to the decline of regional geography in the university curriculum. He goes on to call for a 'revitalization of regional geography' in order to increase the relevance of, and contribution made by geography to society. To some extent, regional geographers persist, but prefer to call themselves systematic geographers, such as economic or urban geographers. But Dicken (2004) argues that "the identity of geography is forever associated with regional geography, whether you like it or not"!

In terms of the public face of geography, it has been argued that "regional geography is perhaps the best link between academic geography and general society" (Wade 2006 p. 188), as "the branch of the discipline [geography] that most closely conforms to this general [public] understanding is regional geography" (Murphy & O'Loughlin 2009 p. 246). Indeed, examining recent issues of popular geography magazines, such as *National Geographic* and *Geographical Magazine*, one is struck by the dominance of regional and sub-regional (place-based) themed articles. Since there are few self-proclaimed regional geographers, the role of regional expert seems to be occupied by non-geographers. Once again, this is evident in the media where journalists outnumber geographers in popular geographical publications. Furthermore, in comparison with other academic disciplines, geography seems to be neglected in the media. For example, academic historians have a strong media presence, but there are comparatively few academic geographers on TV, and those that are often labeled differently e.g. geologist, oceanographer, social scientist. It could be argued that this is symptomatic of the absence of a unifying geographical theme, such as regional geography, and that geography is now too fragmented to be understood by the public as a discipline. Indeed, having worked with the media, my experience is that the media appears to be averse to geography!

Geography graduates, who one might expect to be amongst the principal promoters of geography, often find it a challenge to express what geography is and what it means to be a geographer; frequently citing that they specialised in physical or human geography sub-disciplines. This fragmentation precludes an holistic appreciation of the discipline, and a revitalisation of regional geography, as suggested by Dicken (2004), might provide an overarching framework within which students could contextualise their studies. The aim of this paper is to briefly review the current status of regional geography within Higher Education and to discuss the results of a survey of students at a British university who have experienced a deliberate re-introduction of regional geography in the undergraduate curriculum.

Regional Geography in Higher Education

Since the 1970s, regional geography has been pushed to the periphery of geography degree courses in many universities. Recently, however, there has been a growing re-appreciation of the central importance of regional geography (e.g. Riding & Jones, 2017). Murphy & O'Loughlin (2009) state that "strengthening regional research and training is arguably one of the most important tasks facing the discipline of geography today" (p. 245) and that "all of this points to the importance of continuing to promote the revival of a robust, broad-ranging, but analytically sophisticated regional geography ... departments have an important role to play in this regard, as they are in a position to develop pedagogic programs with regional depth" (p. 247). There is also a suggestion that regional geography can contribute significantly to the internationalisation agenda currently being pursued by Higher Education, at least in the UK, and Murphy & O'Loughlin (2009) suggest that geography departments "can also take advantage of the interests of many undergraduates in different regions of the world by developing broad-ranging courses that help them understand what it means to think about those regions geographically" (p. 247). Encouragingly, they point out that the recognition of this "has led to a modest revival of interest in regional geography, as reflected in expanded regional offerings at some universities" (p. 245).

A number of authors suggest positive pedagogic reasons to support the inclusion of regional geography in the curriculum. Wade (2006 p. 187) argues that "introductory systematic or conceptual courses ... often illustrate 'geographic problems' through seemingly random examples taken out of necessary temporal and spatial contexts" and that placing them in a regional context provides a more integrated and cohesive approach that might also help students in understanding threshold concepts (Fouberg, 2013). Indeed, Hart (1982, p. 21) enthusiastically suggests that "the region is basically a pedagogic device for organizing information for the most effective presentation, comprehension, and retention. It is a truly marvelous pedagogic device, not in the narrow and restricted sense of what transpires within the four walls of a classroom, but in the far greater sense of communicating information, exciting enthusiasm, and stimulating curiosity".

Wade (2006, 188) also sets out a number of educational benefits from a regional geography approach. Regional geography, he argues, provides an "excellent introduction to the vast human [and physical] diversity of the world" and introduces "concepts through examples of problems and issues in real places". In terms of broadening and enriching curriculum and student learning, regional geography "educates students about places they may be unfamiliar with" and provides "a more thorough understanding and deeper appreciation for places at various scales". Fieldwork, for example, may in this way be focused through the lens of regional geography, dealing with human and physical topics side-by-side in the context of 'real places' that might allow for deeper learning. Furthermore, looking beyond undergraduate studies, Wade (2006 p. 188) suggests that a grounding in regional geography might "help graduate students prepare for research and fieldwork by broadening their knowledge of the relevant literature about that region or their particular area of study", which may also apply to graduate employment situations.

Despite reasonable pedagogic arguments and identified educational benefits, there are some problems in teaching and learning regional geography (Wei, 2006). With regard to scholarly underpinning, there is a lack of affordable recent geographical textbooks dealing with regions; for example, Hobbs' (2008) *World Regional Geography* is available but very expensive! Furthermore, there are few regional geography textbooks available; for example, Minshull (1967) has been recently re-released as a paperback version, then Johnson et al. (1990) and, most recently, the 1998 translation from the French of Claval's (1993) *Introduction to Regional Geography*. It appears that a lack of recent regional geography textbooks reflects a lack of authors wishing to write such texts and/or publishers willing to publish such works. From my own experience, I recently offered a publisher a proposed textbook on the geography of a region and was rejected, the publisher citing a lack of an identifiable market. Therefore, there may be an impasse whereby the development of regional geography courses is challenged by the lack of supporting texts, yet publishers are unwilling to publish such texts until courses are running and the student demand is clear. However, as Wei (2006) also points out, the lack of scholarly underpinning is manifest in that geographers do not regularly attend regional or area-based conferences. With regard to other learning and teaching resources, the internet now provides some rich resources for regional geography, such as Google Earth (e.g. Haslett, 2009; Chilcott & Haslett, 2010; Haslett et al., 2011; Schaaf et al., 2012).

In summary, regional geography declined in undergraduate geography programmes from the 1970s onwards; however, it has been suggested that this occurred without proper consideration of the value of regional geography to the discipline. Recently, the pedagogic and educational benefits of regional geography in the undergraduate curriculum have been raised, although not without practical and scholarly challenges, and examples exist where attempts to reinstate regional geography have been made. Indeed, Riding & Jones (2017) consider that the region will always be a concept that is central to geography.

A Case Study

One such example of an attempt to reinstate regional geography as a core in a Geography degree programme in a British university is that of the Department of Geography at Bath Spa University where I was Head of Department until 2008. During the 1990s, the portfolio of modules included some excellent optional 20-credit regional geography modules at all levels of a three-year undergraduate programme: *Southwest in Focus* (year 1), *Geography of Modern Africa* (year 2), and *Geography of the European Union* (year 3). In addition, an optional, extra-modular residential field trip to Brittany was inherently regional and ran between years 2 and 3. Therefore, students could, if they opted for them, study four regional geography courses as part of their degree.

In 2002, during a departmental restructuring of the curriculum, a decision was taken to emphasise the value of regional geography through establishing two core modules that all students had to take, which also provided a focus for resource allocation. In year 1, in their first semester, students would study a new module *Geography: A Regional Introduction*, incorporating the previous optional module *Southwest in Focus*. Then, in year 3, the Brittany field trip was transformed into the module *Brittany: A Regional Geography*, supplemented with two new optional regionally-focused field courses in Boston (USA) and Naples (Italy). The pedagogic basis of these modules was that students studied global concepts in a regional context, which developed between modules, becoming more inquiry-based as they progressed.

Students who had taken these modules were surveyed after graduating in 2010 on their views of studying regional geography and fieldwork in a regional context (n = 20 responses; see Figure 1). With regard to Wade's (2006) criticisms of teaching geographical concepts through "random examples", responses are relatively clear that studying these in a regional context enables the student to appreciate and understand interconnections and interlinkages more readily:

- "Seeing concepts within a region allows you to look at the interconnection and relationships between systems."
- "Within the region it was valuable to learn geographical concepts and ideas".
- "we were able to study different aspects of physical geography ... and also gave a greater understanding into the human geography ... of the region ..."
- "It did help a lot as in the classroom these two [human and physical] are often very separate and can be difficult to link together in your head. Seeing one location and all the topics at the same time, definitely helps your understanding of the links."
- "Hugely, physical and human geography are interlinked. I particularly appreciated tourism in the region linked to the areas outstanding natural beauty".
- Fieldwork "means that you are able to properly visualise the concept as you are able to put it into context rather than just reading about it. Global climate is an example of this where we were able to look at the effects of sea level change."

Some students felt that regional geography engaged them, being exciting to study and encouraging deeper learning:

- "By studying a region close to home it gives an excitement of knowing more about your local area."
- "Fieldwork ... keeps your attention and encourages you to look further into the subject."

The lack of regional geography learning resources and supporting material, as identified by Wei (2006), is recognised by one student who comments on the lack of a dedicated regional geography textbook:

- "I think that resources were better in the other modules as there would be one main textbook per module, whereas with the regional module we were changing between many depending on the concept."

Graduates were also asked if studying a region influenced any future decisions they might or have made. Two students said that studying a region had influenced future decisions in terms of their own interest in regions (Wade, 2006) and also career choices:

- "Good understanding prompted [subsequent] visits to the region."
- "Completed PGCE in geography. I am now a geography teacher."

From this case study, it appears that the pedagogic and educational benefits suggested by a number of authors (e.g. Wade 2006; Wei 2006) are recognized by the students in their understanding of geographical concepts and appreciation of the interconnectedness of human and physical geography.

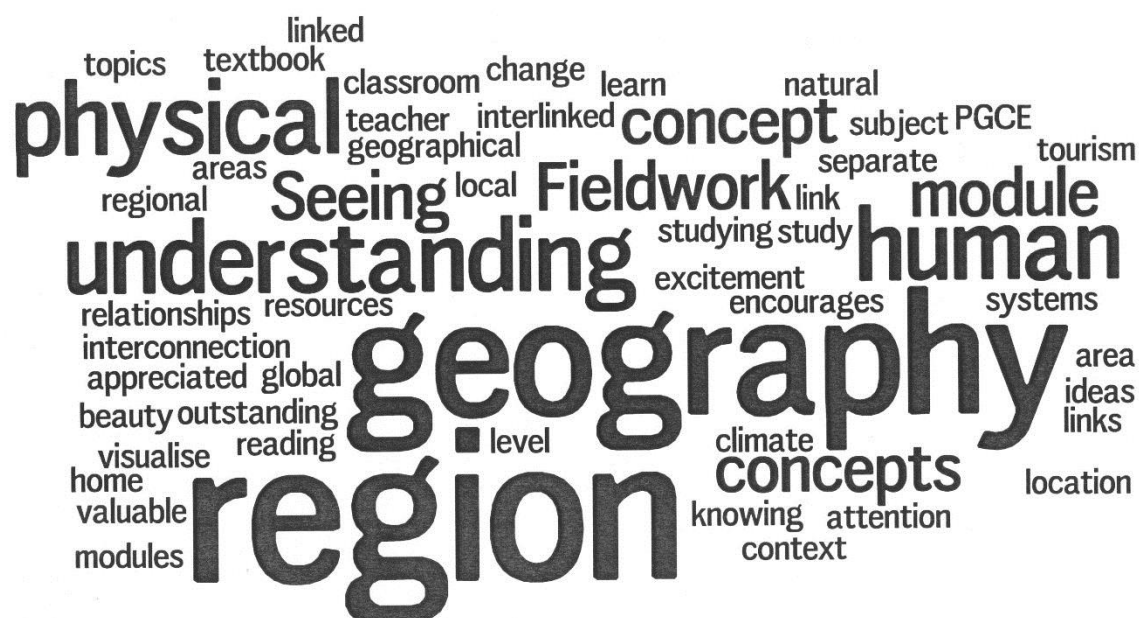


Figure 1 - A 'word cloud' representing student perceptions of studying regional geography modules as a compulsory part of their undergraduate geography curriculum.

A future for regional geography?

In addition to this Bath Spa University case study, other institutions are also refocusing curricula on regional geography, such as the signs of re-emergence of regional geography in New Zealand (e.g. Pawson et al., 2010). However, as Dicken (2004) states in relation to globalisation, academics from other disciplines are replacing geographers, and also creating sub-disciplines similar to regional geography, and geographers risk missing out. For example, place-based learning has been establishing itself over the past 30-40 years, coinciding approximately with the demise of regional geography. Place-based learning "is (1) an emerging 'movement' which generally orientates or 'situates' learning on the learners' own 'place' or home locality; (2) typically oriented towards the local community and/or environment whilst emphasizing the connections to the wider world; (3) 'hands-on', collaborative, participatory and project-based; and, tends to explore relevant 'real-world' issues with a view to understanding and taking action" (London South Bank University, 2010).

Although place-based learning clearly differs in many respects from regional geography, it nevertheless deals with issues such as place, community and sustainability, topics that are arguably at the centre of modern geography but, like globalisation, have geographers missed the boat on leading this too?

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