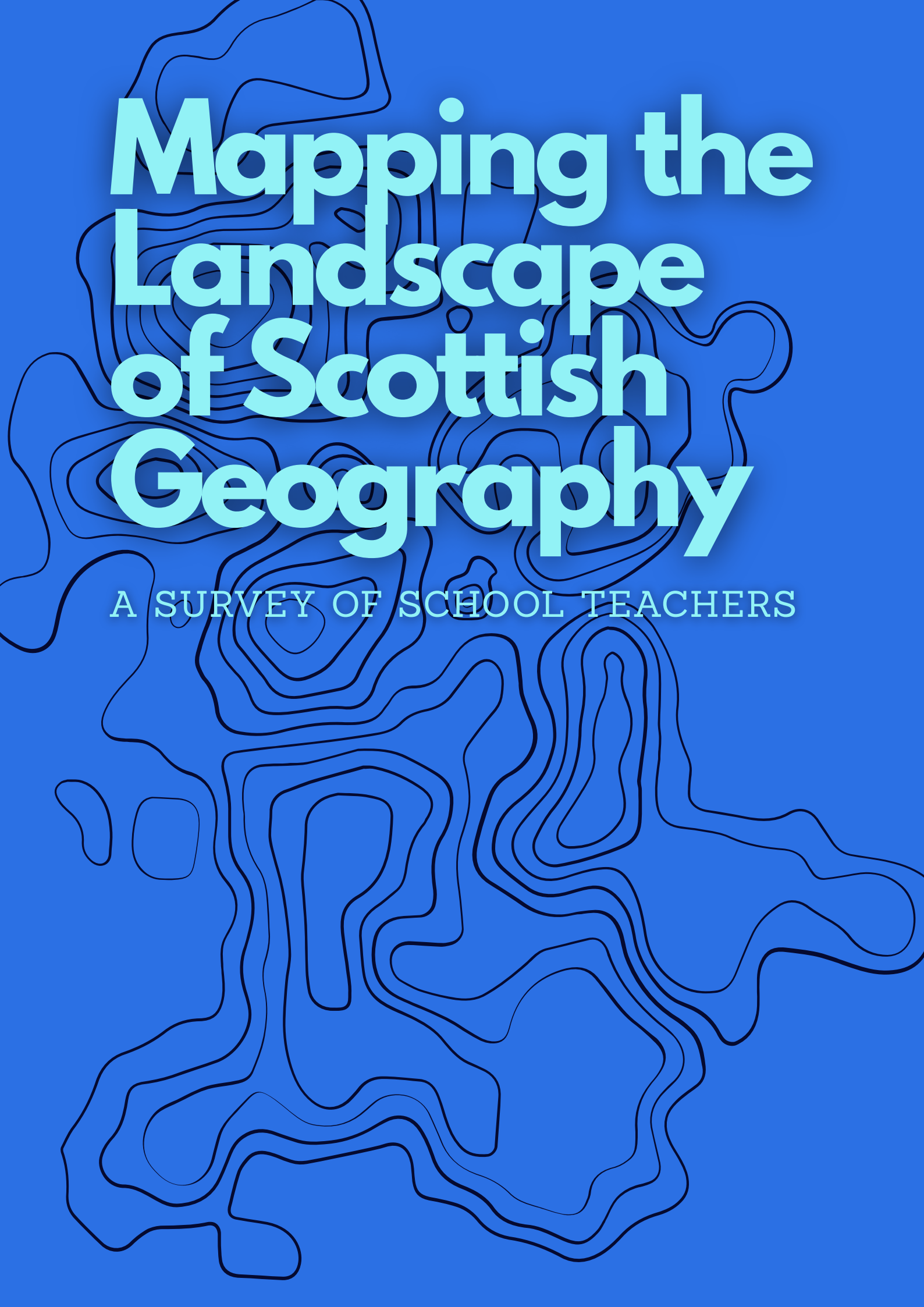


The background of the entire page is a solid blue color. Overlaid on this background is a white line-art pattern representing a topographic map. The pattern consists of numerous irregular, concentric, and wavy lines that create a sense of depth and terrain, similar to contour lines on a map. These lines are more densely packed in some areas and more spread out in others, creating a complex, organic shape that fills the frame.

Mapping the Landscape of Scottish Geography

A SURVEY OF SCHOOL TEACHERS

Key Findings

Geography matters! Teachers reflected on the subject specific knowledge and skills geography education develops in young people, and the contribution geography makes to a person's education more broadly.

Teachers reported that children and young people often raised concerns with them about **social, political economic and environmental injustices**, both in Scotland and globally.

Geography education plays an important role in supporting young people to learn about, and engage with, **key issues of our time**, including climate change, geopolitics, migration, sustainability. However, teachers reported that **Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) is, in places, outdated, lacks relevance** and is constraining geography education.

Teachers also raised concerns that **standardised public assessments often shaped what is taught** in schools and that some of the geographical knowledge, language and skills being taught and assessed are outdated, and in some cases, problematic or unjust.

Fieldwork is a fundamental dimension of geography education, which has numerous educational, social and health benefits for children and young people. However, many teachers face barriers to planning and leading fieldwork including time, support from senior leaders, costs, and curriculum pressures. To mitigate this and engage children with local geographies, some teachers are using the school grounds and local area creatively for fieldwork and outdoor learning.

Most respondents to the survey were secondary teachers, which may be because geography is not named as a discrete subject in the Broad General Education (BGE).

The positioning of geography in the theme '**people, place and environment**' in the BGE **may be shaping how geography is defined** with young people.

Subject associations and learned societies can, and do, provide a valuable source of support, networking, and Career Long Professional Learning (CLPL), but more could be done to engage all teachers - including primary educators - in these spaces.

Teachers may not represent the diversity of modern Scotland. Of those who chose to answer questions about identity, all identified as white, 71% Scottish and 92% heterosexual. 38% of respondents had 20 or more years' experience.

Introduction to the survey

This report shares the findings from a survey that aimed to map the landscape of geography in Scottish education. The survey – led by Professor Jo Sharp (Geographer Royal for Scotland and Professor of Geography at the University of St Andrews) - was collaboratively designed and analysed by a team of academic geographers, geography teacher educators and primary and secondary teachers (a full list of contributors can be found at the end of this document). The survey sought to reach all teachers of geography in Scottish primary and secondary schools to gain a more nuanced knowledge of geography education in, and across, Scotland. The survey had 58 questions and was open between 3rd March to 5th April 2025. We received 105 responses from teachers across the country. Six responses came from Primary level teachers.

The survey was structured through four sections:

1. Who teaches geography, and where?
2. What does geography mean to you?
3. Fieldwork in geography
4. Teaching political/contested issues in geography

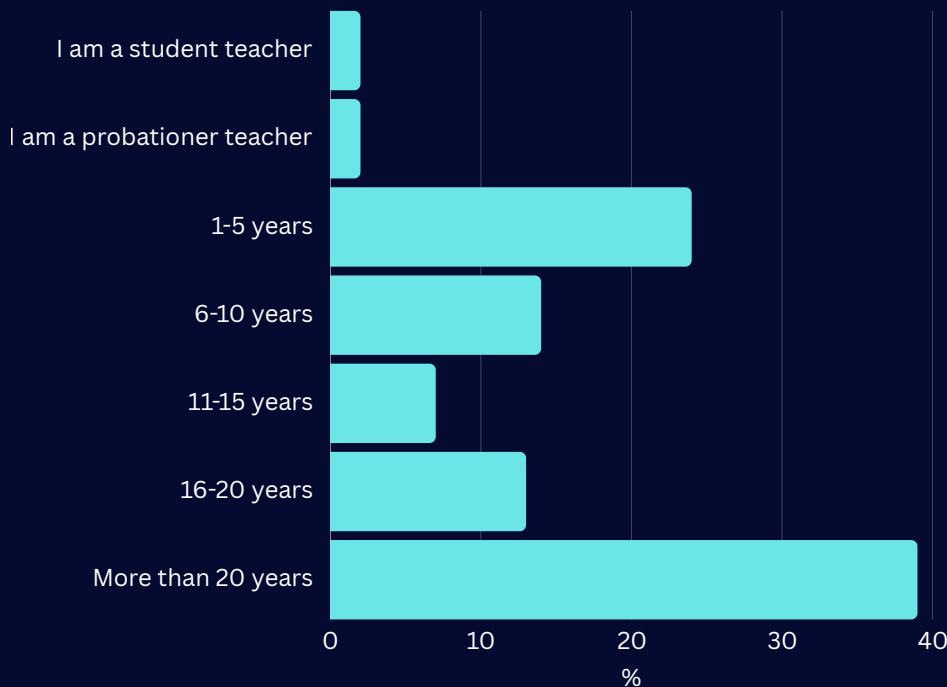
The survey was distributed via SAGT and RSGS mailing lists, social media and networks connected to teacher education. Data were collected via Qualtrics. Research ethics clearance was obtained through the University of St Andrews.

List of acronyms

- RSGS – Royal Scottish Geographical Society
SAGT – Scottish Association for Geography Teachers
CfE – Curriculum for Excellence
BGE – Broad General Education
LfS – Learning for Sustainability
SQA – Scottish Qualification Authority
ES – Education Scotland

About the respondents

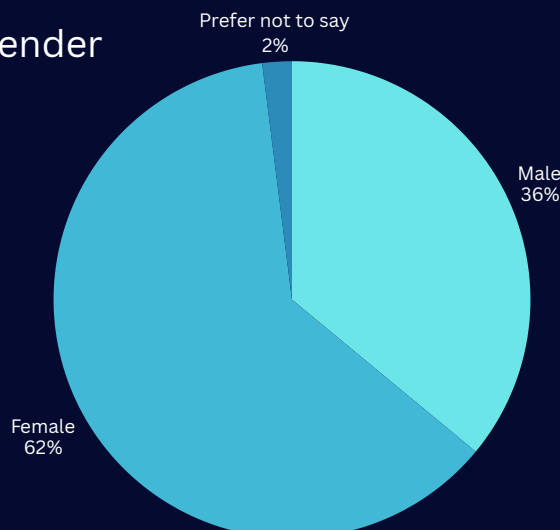
How long have you been a teacher?



A range of teachers responded to the survey, with the majority (38%) having been a teacher for over twenty years

All respondents who entered their ethnicity were white (Scottish 71%; English, Welsh, Northern Irish 8%; British 17%; EU 2%). 77% did their undergraduate degrees in Scottish Universities, 17% in England, and the remainder in other parts of the UK and the Open University. 80% of those who had additional teaching qualifications had these from Scottish institutions (with the remainder from English ones).

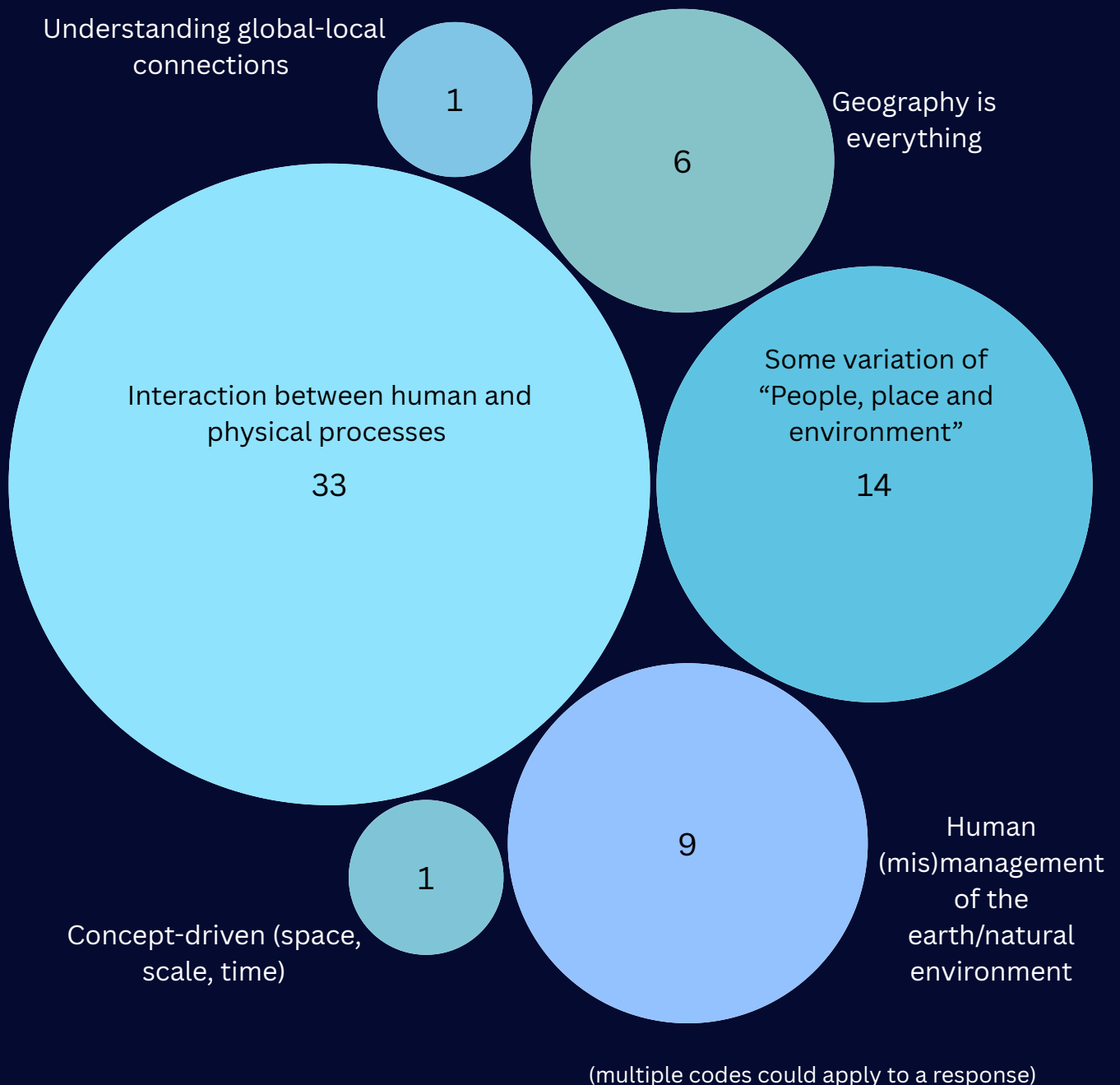
Gender



50 respondents answered the question about sexual orientation. Of these, 92% were heterosexual, 4% were bisexual, 2% chose 'other' and 2% 'Prefer not to say'.

Teaching Geography

We asked respondents how they defined 'geography' in the classroom



This suggests that the BGE's construction of geography as part of the 'people, place and environment' strand of social studies is shaping how many teachers are defining geography with children. Only one of the definitions started with concepts like space, time and scale, themes which are much more central in University geography programmes.

Views on Curriculum for Excellence

We asked participants what three elements - if any - of the National Geography/Social Studies curriculum they valued most highly



Theme	No of responses	eg
Global issues	40	Environmental issues, care for the environment, learning for sustainability, climate change, global inequality, citizenship
Human geography	37	Urban change, development indicators, population, health, understanding inequalities, application to real world.
Skills	36	Map work, problem solving, extended writing, presenting data, investigation in the field
Physical geography	32	Landscape of Scotland, weather, physical landscapes, natural hazards and disasters, glaciation, rainforests.
Nature of the school subject	11	Content learning, assignments, case studies, breadth and flexibility, understanding of the world
Human-physical interactions	6	How we use natural resources, rural land-use and development
Concepts	5	Place, scale
No response	54	

Some respondents commented further on the aspects of CfE they valued:

Developing children's knowledge(s) and understanding.	Supporting children to understand their lives and places; supporting children to make connections between the global and the local
Developing children's skills and attributes	Developing children's media and political literacy; encouraging curiosity; encouraging empathy; supporting futures thinking; employability.
Nature of geography	Real world relevance; bringing the subject to life; subject identity.
Teaching	Teacher confidence in particular topics

Views on Curriculum for Excellence

We asked participants what three elements - if any - of the National Geography/Social Studies curriculum they valued least highly



Specific topics	Urban (16) rural (12) development (7) agriculture/farming (6) soils (6) weather/atmosphere (6) glaciation (5) biosphere (3) limestone landscapes (3) physical features (3) OS/paper maps (3)	Have not been updated to reflect changes in these environments Because of dated language Over-emphasis on OS map use - dated
Nature of the curricula	Outdated (13) Assessment (5)	'Slow rate of change! We still have a curriculum that is not that removed from the 1990s whilst universities are taking a more dynamic and holistic approach'. 'Global issues need to be updated to reflect current global <u>issues</u>'.

Some respondents provided further comment on the aspects of CfE they valued least:

Key Points

Lack of connection: lack of relevance;
out of date; children disengaged;
teachers disengaged.

Constraining curricula: too much
screen time; rote learning; overlaps;
too vague or too complex.

I am working hard to decolonise my curriculum, embed LfS and challenge stereotypes, and yet I find I am working within a framework that does not allow for this.

These elements require little problem solving and are about learning facts and answering exam questions. Pupils find rural geography boring or irrelevant - even the farmers!

I just find it incredibly dull! If I'm not enthused I don't think pupils will find it interesting.

We asked respondents 'If you could change one element of the National Geography/Social Studies curriculum, what would that be?'

The two most common answers (by some margin):

1. Update it! Curriculum is not relevant
2. Move from memory test exams to assignments that support learning

Also:

Climate change should be compulsory

Remove repetition/overlaps

We asked respondents, if they could add one thing to the National Geography/Social Studies curriculum, what would that be?

Theme	N	Examples
Human geography	14	More human, colonialism, human rights, crime, geopolitics, gender, place and identity, industry
Physical geography	14	Geology, environmental science – Scotland's role in fossil fuels now renewables; planning, waste management, farming, biodiversity.
Curricula	12	Better connections to the world (oil spills, natural disasters, renewables); 'A lot of the global issues are so interesting and would be amazing if we could expand, rather than be restricted to a <u>6 mark</u> question'; Skills based paper that 'includes enquiry skills, including sources of information'; On going assessment – dedicated research.
Sustainability	11	This is going to play increasing part in society but not included enough; could use GIS and tech in mapping and modelling
Skills	4	GIS; fieldwork
Nothing	4	Course is already too full.

'There has been very minimal change in the Geography curriculum since I was at school. Our uptake in Geography is massively falling on a national scale. This is because students do not feel or understand it is as relevant to their daily lives as modern studies. On top of this, the SQA marking is so prescriptive students are not taking it as it is harder to do well. For example students must say a word such as 'developed' to get the mark despite having an excellent understanding of the subject/topic. It is taking away from the main purpose of the subject as Senior levels'.

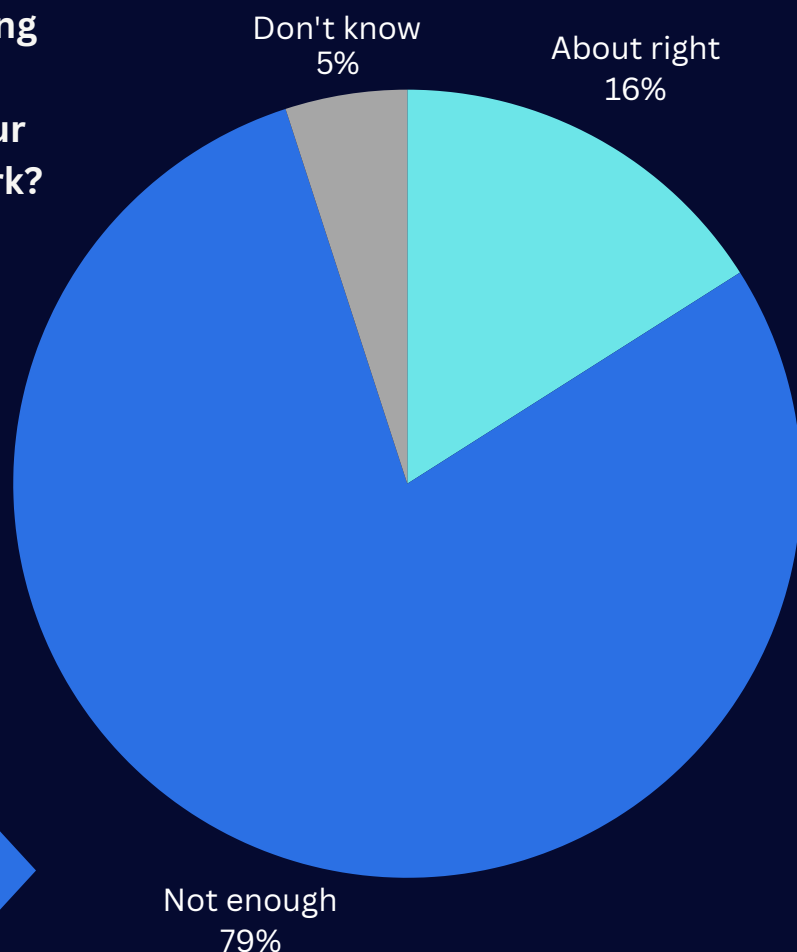
'Farming, I have never taught a class in eight years that are interested in farming changes'.

'allow teachers in urban areas and rural areas to choose a context to focus on (i.e. studying recent change/management in each context)'.

'Create an opportunity for students (and staff!) to really show holistic, creative thinking whilst using the most appropriate up-to-date language!'

Fieldwork: *'the best bit about geography'*

We asked which of the following best describes how you feel about the amount of time your students spend doing fieldwork?



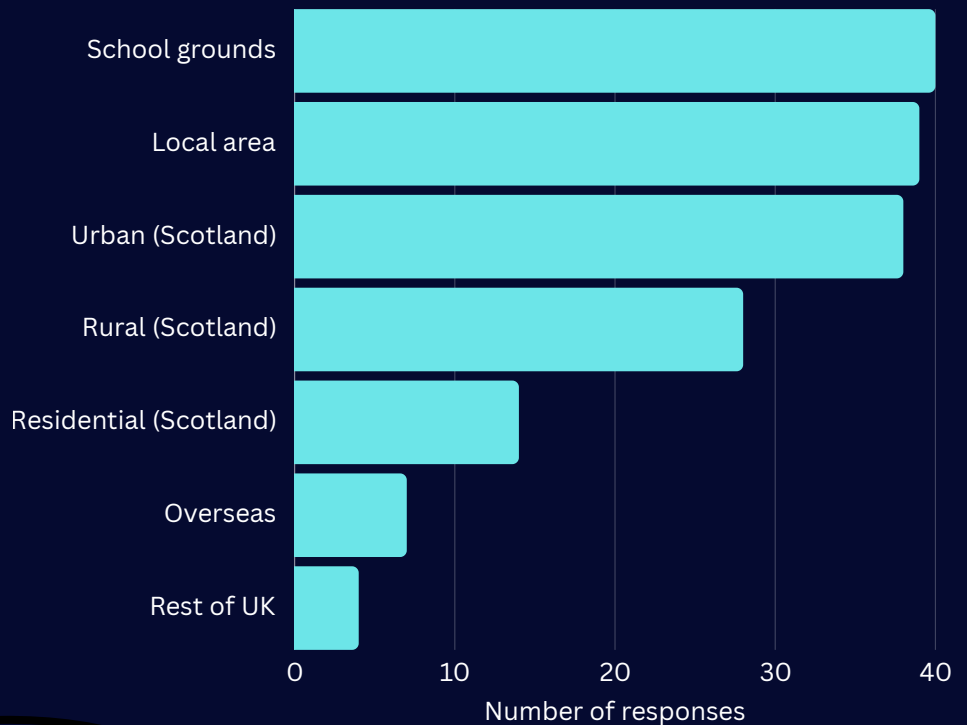
Benefits in order of responses:

1. Increased pupil engagement
2. Geographical skills development
3. Developing ideas of place

'Fieldwork is an absolutely vital part of Geography. It develops so many skills. It provides opportunities for pupils to visit new places and have new experiences. In a world where many spend huge amounts of time in front of a screen and where social divides are increasing, fieldwork provides real life experiences and enables pupils to go to places they may not have the opportunity to outside of school. Fieldwork also builds relationships between pupils and between pupils and their teachers. The benefits both social, educationally and for future life are numerous.'

Where do you lead fieldwork?

We asked, in what context(s) do you lead geography fieldwork (tick all that apply)



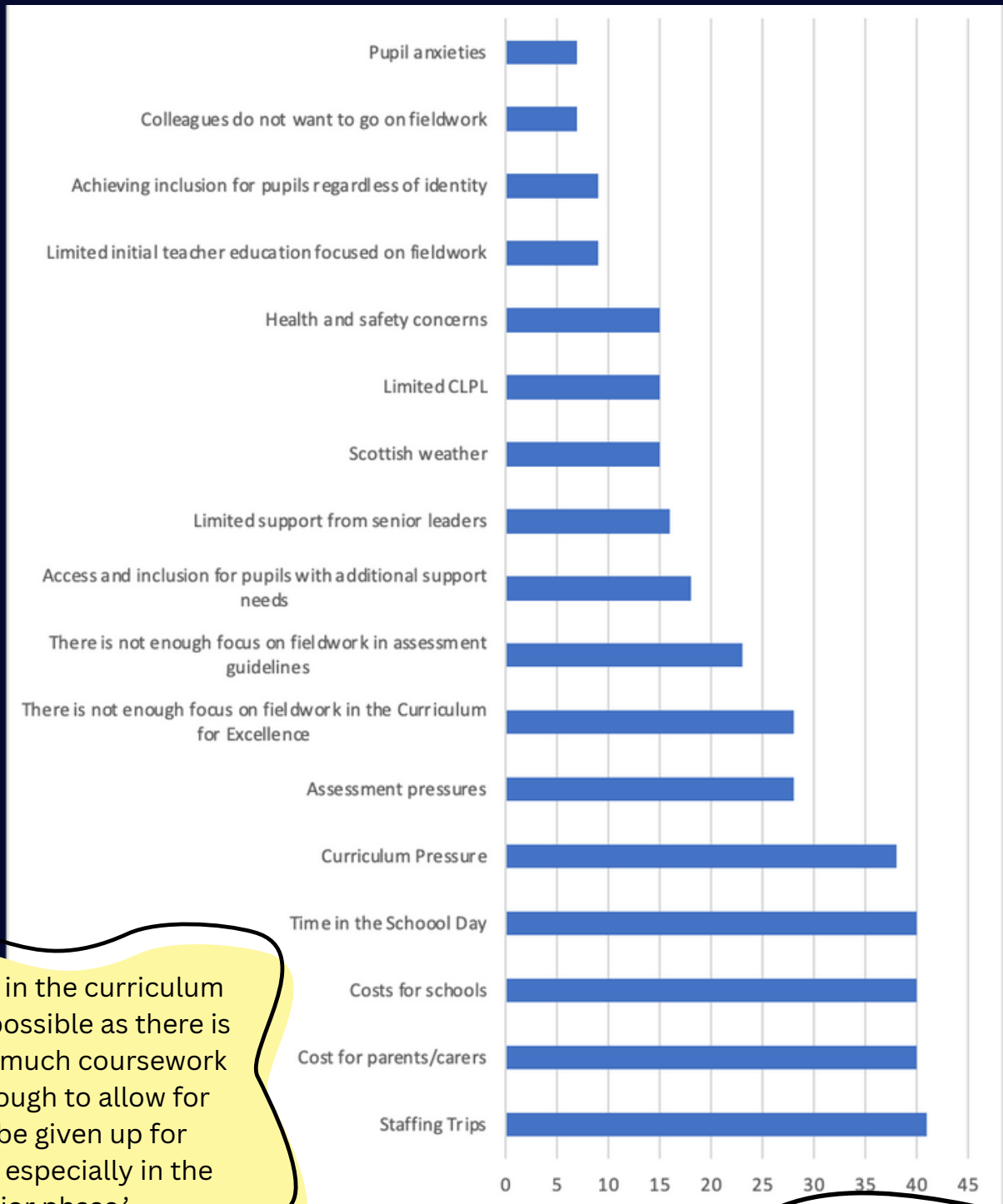
‘I have moved away from fieldwork being just about data collection. Instead I want fieldwork to be about experience, witnessing place, going to new places or seeing an area through new eyes. I suppose I am doing more outdoor learning and less fieldwork.’

The survey highlighted that school grounds and the local environment were the most commonly used spaces for fieldwork. There was also an indication that some schools were embedding new approaches to fieldwork and outdoor learning into their curriculum.

‘Outdoor learning course in S1 gives opportunities for engaging with new spaces, places, concepts for two hours each week (timetabled).’

‘... we are a Cairngorms 2030 school and have built nature connectedness and volunteering into our BGE curriculum.’

Barriers to the inclusion of more fieldwork



‘More time in the curriculum to make it possible as there is simply too much coursework to get through to allow for time to be given up for fieldwork, especially in the senior phase.’

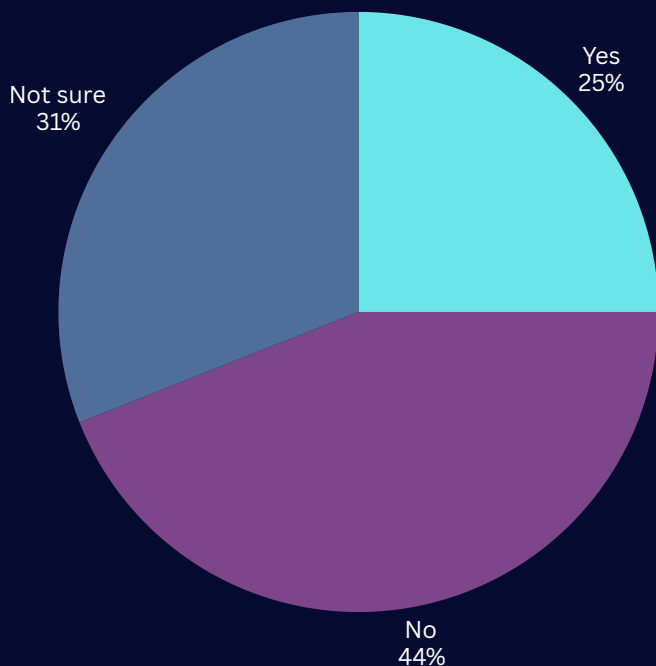
The cost of field trips, staffing and rigid timetabling were identified as significant barriers

‘Transport budget - cost of bus hire is huge - one coach of a fairly local trip will take up more than half of my departments annual budget.’

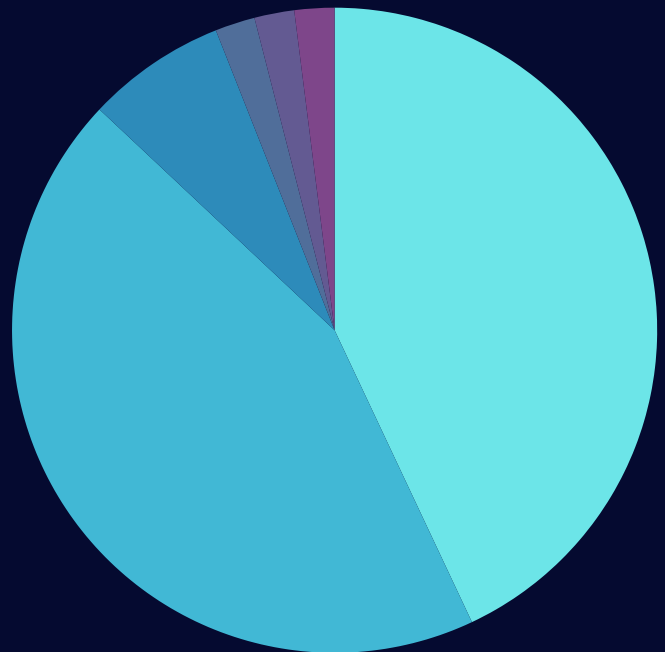
‘Flexibility in the school timetable - hard to take pupils out of class/other subjects’

Engaging with challenging topics

We asked respondents whether they thought that school geography should engage with matters, ideas and/or issues that may be seen as controversial



● Strongly agree ● Agree
● Neither agree nor disagree ● Disagree
● Strongly disagree ● Not sure



We asked: 'Do you think the Curriculum for Excellent supports you to explore the political and contested nature of geographical knowledges, ideas and/or issues?'

'I feel very frustrated by the current Geography curriculum. There is so much relevance to the current state of the world to Geography yet we continue to learn about OS map skills and other areas.'

'Sometimes [the] focus by SQA encourages stereotyping and prejudice'

We asked respondents to explain what they understood as ‘controversial issues’:

Theme	Sub-theme	n
Multiple ways of explaining	Range of views/perspectives	16
	Generation of debate	4
	Difficult /complex	4
	Contested views	4
	Not one correct answer	1
Conflict	Divisive / clash of views	3
	Create discomfort / anxiety/ offence	3
	Needs sensitive handling	2
	Strong view	1
	Emotions	1
Core part of geography	Encourages conversation/asks pupils for their view	3
	What geography is about	3
	Topical	2

And what they think school geography’s role should be in engaging with/addressing issues which concern children/young people:

Theme	Sub-theme	n
Pupil-led learning	Encourage pupils to learn from different/multiple sources/perspectives	6
	Allow pupils to investigate based on their concerns/perspectives	5
Provision for pupils	Provide balance / all sides of issue	4
	Provide the facts	3
	Provide a safe space for discussion and learning	3
	Provide a global focus to learning	3
	Provide tools to challenge mis/dis-information	2
	Encourage pupils to listen respectfully	2
	Up to date and relevant material	1

We asked whether, in the last year, children/young people in your school had asked questions/raised concerns about the following

Climate change	90%
War and/or conflict	86%
Immigration	80%
Poverty and/or inequality globally	70%
(Social) media	58%
Poverty and/or inequality in Scotland	54%
Poverty and/or inequality in their local area	54%
Biodiversity loss	50%
Discrimination in wider society in Scotland	42%
Discrimination in school	40%
Riots and/or civil unrest	38%
Nationalism	36%
Discrimination in their communities	30%
Tensions between people/groups in Scotland	30%

(percentage of respondents answering the question who selected each option)

Key Points

Those who responded to these questions saw the teaching of controversial issues as 'integral' to geography:

- Geography's role in developing global citizenship;
- 'Duty' to provide young people with knowledge to make informed decisions and challenge misinformation;
- Young people need to be supported to learn respectfully to other viewpoints;
- Curriculum needs to be up-to-date and relevant;
- 'Essential as otherwise they will switch off and not choose the subject at S3 and beyond'.

Next steps

In concluding the report, we suggest five key areas for further attention:

1. **Geography in the early years and primary education**. There was a limited response from early years and primary educators to the survey, and to further support educators, there is a need for further work to investigate how geography is taught, learnt, and assessed in these phases.
2. **A relevant and critical curriculum**. We are keen to help to develop stronger links between schools and university geography research and teaching to help to support the on-going availability of up-to-date, relevant and challenging case-study materials for classrooms.
3. **Scotland as a geographically, linguistically, and culturally diverse country**. Geography education can support and empower young people to think and act in the world, and by further investigating how the geographies of Scotland are represented and taught, we can better develop the diverse community of young people's disciplinary literacy and understanding of people and places.
4. **Assessment and geography education**. Teachers reported to us that assessment was shaping the decisions they made about curriculum and pedagogy, and we would like to support the development of forms of assessment that support the pedagogical goals of geography learning and teaching.
5. **Supporting fieldwork and outdoor learning in, and through, geography**. We are keen to support teachers' ambitions to develop varied, regular, relevant and creative fieldwork experiences for *all* children in Scotland.

Project team.

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