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# Navigating personal and disciplinary frontiers: engaging with undergraduate geography students' reflections on their geographical education

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, we engage with undergraduate geography students' reflections on their geography education. We begin by examining the position of geography within education across the British Isles. Following this, we critically consider how geography education is shaped by "the gap" between school and university geography and geographies of education, before reporting on the findings from a survey of 333 undergraduate students studying geography across the British Isles conducted in late 2020. We examine the complex question of who is studying geography at undergraduate level, students' journeys through their geography degree, and their experiences of personal and disciplinary frontiers in education. We conclude by arguing the importance of educators engaging with students' "everyday" geographies, and for further research into progress across education phases in geography to co-construct a rich and rounded geographic education.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Introduction

Education is an inherent part of geography. In schools, universities and other education spaces, students engage with the knowledges, histories and stories of the discipline through lessons, lectures, seminars, fieldwork, field-visiting, and informal conversations. University departments exist, at least in part, because there is interest in learning about the discipline, with geography being recognised as a valuable field of study at individual and societal levels (Catling & Willy, 2018; Hammond & Healy, 2022; Lambert, 2016; Maude, 2016).

Geography is a rich and varied discipline, which has been shaped by a variety of heritages, disciplinary turns and external influences (Bonnett, 2008; Johnston & Sidaway, 2016; Noxolo, 2017). Engaging in education is affective and embodied, as those working and studying in institutions navigate complex entanglements of histories, places and spaces (Hopkins, 2010; Kearns, 2020; Kraftl, 2023). Teaching and learning also exist

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within wider educational ecologies, socio-economic landscapes and policy contexts (Priestley et al., 2016). For example, around social mobility and inclusion, international competition and labour markets (Butler & Hamnett, 2007), and ideas about what constitutes “bestness” in education (Hordern & Brooks, 2023).

Exploring with students how (geographical) knowledges have been produced, preserved and represented can be a dis/comforting, disruptive and affective experience in all phases of education (hooks, 2003; Sammar, 2021). Just as making decisions about what and how to teach can be an intellectually, morally and practically complex task for those who teach geography (Jazeel et al., 2022). Engaging with the experiences and views of those who study geography is important to geographers making decisions about education and engaging in what Lambert and Morgan (2010) term “curriculum making”, as well as in considering students sense of belonging in education (Hunt et al., 2023). Here, it is significant to recognise that experiences of geography education vary due to a complex web of reasons. For example, variations in education systems, students’ identities, and students’ relationships with those who teach geography and the discipline itself.

In this article, we contribute to debates in the field of geography education, through reporting on a survey that asked undergraduate geography students from across the British Isles to reflect upon their geography education to date. The survey had three main aims:

- (1) To examine students’ perspectives as to the value of geography to their education/ a person’s education more broadly.
- (2) To provide an opportunity for students to share their experiences of, and perspectives on, school and university geography.
- (3) To examine students’ views as to the relationships between school and university geography.

In this paper, we focus primarily on the second aim of the survey by offering an analysis of the survey data with a focus on students’ experiences and perspectives of geography in higher education. We begin by examining how geography is “positioned” within education in the British Isles. Following this, we consider the transition that students make between school and university geography, and how geographies of education shape geography education. We then move on to introduce the research and examine the responses to the survey questions through three sections: who studies geography at undergraduate level, students’ perspectives on, and experiences of, geography at university, and personal and disciplinary frontiers. We conclude by acknowledging the potential for future research to contribute to knowledge about students’ progress across education phases and spaces in geography.

### ***Geography education in the British Isles: a snapshot of a complex landscape***

The nature of geography as a discipline varies between places and across time-space (McFarlane, 2022), and as Castree et al. (2007, p. 129) note, “debates about the ‘state of geography’ are as old as the discipline itself”. Never-the-less, these debates remain important in considering both how geography is written and (re)produced, and how geography is experienced and perceived by those who research, teach and study the

discipline. We focus on the British Isles, which is comprised of five countries – England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Ireland – each with complex histories and geographies, and distinct school education systems (Ni Cassaithe & Chapman, 2023). As we examine later in the paper, students (and educators) may move between places at different stages of their education and careers. Thus, whilst education is often conceptualised as spatially embedded, it is important that attention is given to how mobilities shape, and are shaped by, education (R. Brooks & Waters, 2018).

In the United Kingdom (UK) out of 170 universities over 80 presently have staff researching and/or teaching (in) the discipline of geography (Royal Geographical Society [RGS], 2022b) and there are nearly 30,000 students studying geography, with the number of applicants increasing at undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Royal Geographical Society [RGS], 2022c). In Ireland, eight universities offer undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in geography (Geographical Society of Ireland, 2022). Despite the relative strength of geography in universities across the British Isles, there are still insecurities, with some departments having faced closure and/or staffing cuts in recent years (Royal Geographical Society [RGS], 2022a) as they also navigate wider economic challenges faced by the Higher Education sector.

Prior to university, geography is often a part of students' primary and secondary education. Geography is sometimes taught as a discrete subject, or as an element of other subjects/curriculum areas, such as social studies, humanities or earth sciences (Brooks, Qian & Salinas-Silva, 2017; Hammond et al., 2024). Curriculum can be conceptualised as a multi-layered concept, with national curriculum policy being distinct from hidden curricula, or the curriculum that is made by teachers and that comes to life in classrooms or out in the field (Lambert & Morgan, 2010). Whilst every dimension of curricula can influence "students' experiences of education in the present and their future life-worlds" (Holloway & Jöns, 2012, p. 148), national curriculum policies shape the contexts that educators and students work within. This includes affecting the decisions that teachers make when planning and teaching (Rawling, 2020), with the state also being involved in decisions about the nature and location of education provision (Holloway & Jöns, 2012; Hordern & Brooks, 2023). Due to differences in policy, school geography in national curricula and qualifications vary across the British Isles (Table 1), meaning that young people leave school with different experiences of geography education.

### ***Gaps, transitions and geographies of education***

In this section, we examine two intersecting areas which shape geography education in the British Isles: the perceived "gap" between school and university geography and geographies of education. As students move between different education phases, they academically and socially transition (Tate & Hopkins, 2019). Social transitions are complex and varied, and there are multiple journeys into, and through, geography education (RGS Geography and Education Research Group, 2021). Social transitions are important as they can impact on students' experiences of education, sense of belonging to education spaces (Hunt et al., 2023), their lives beyond university and their wellbeing.

**Table 1.** Overview of geography's position in national curricula and qualifications in the British Isles.

Country	Primary education	Secondary education	Additional comments
England	Geography is a discrete subject and compulsory at Key Stage 1 (children aged 5-7) and Key Stage 2 (children aged 7-11) (Department for Education [DfE], 2013)	Geography is a discrete subject and compulsory at Key Stage 3 (young people aged 11-14) (DfE, 2013) Geography is an optional subject at GCSE (General Certificate in Education), and part of the EBacc (English Baccalaureate) (Department for Education [DfE], 2019) for young people aged 14-16. Geography is an optional subject at A-Level for young people aged 16-18.	The number of studying geography at General Certificate in Education (GCSE) and Advanced Level (A level) have been increasing over the last decade (RGS, 2020)
Scotland	Geography is integrated into Social Studies during the Broad General Education phase (Education Scotland, 2022b), which begins in early years (aged 5) and continues to S3 (Secondary 3, when young people are 13-14 years old) (Education Scotland, 2022a)	Geography is a discrete subject in the Senior Phase in Scotland (15-18 years old), and students can opt to study geography National, Higher and Advanced Higher levels.	"Geography is a minority subject in the Scottish school system and is in relative decline. In the year ending 2021, it was the 10th ranked subject in several entries at N5, 11th at Higher, and 11th at Advanced Higher" (Selmes et al., 2022, p. 351).
Wales	Geography is integrated within the Humanities Area of Learning and experience as a compulsory part of the curriculum for children and young people aged 3-16 years old (Welsh Government, 2022)	Geography is an optional GCSE subject for young people aged 14-16, and A-level subject for young people aged 16-18 (Qualification for Wales, 2022).	New GCSEs including for Geography are currently in development for teaching from 2025 (Qualification for Wales, 2021)
Northern Ireland	Geography is integrated within the The World Around Area of Learning in the primary curriculum (CCEA, 2023)	Geography is a compulsory subject strand within the Area of Learning: Environment and Society for young people aged 11-14 Geography is an optional subject for students at GCSE and A-level (CCEA, 2007)	
Ireland	Geography is a discrete subject within the Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE) element (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment NCCA, 1999)	Geography is a discrete subject within the Junior Cycle (NCCA, 2023a) Geography is a discrete subject within the Senior Cycle (15-18) and at Leaving Cert level the subject is optional (NCCA, 2023b).	

Academic transitions may be influenced by “the gap” between school and university geography (e.g. Castree et al., 2007; Clifford, 2002). The nature of the gap is shaped by intersecting factors including: geography curricula and assessments, teacher workloads, (a lack of) specialist teachers, and the “communities of practice” academic geographers and teachers of geography are a part of (Finn et al., 2022). In discourse about “the gap”, there are sustained calls for greater dialogue between those working in school and university geography (e.g. Castree, 2011; Finn et al., 2022), and also appreciation of the distinctive aims and nature of the two sectors (Brooks, Butt & Fargher, 2017). Here, Castree’s (2011, p. 298) reflection that a wide-reaching discussion about the “the stories

[geographers] tell others about geography and the narratives we construct” is helpful. Engaging with the questions Castree (2011) poses – specifically, “what ‘knowledge’, ‘competencies’ and ‘skills’ are characteristic of a geography graduate? What is the substance of a rich and rounded ‘geographic education?’” (p.298) – is valuable to educators in all phases of education as they consider the value and nature of geography education, and a student’s journey through education.

In considering students’ experiences of the relationships between school and university geography, it is important to examine how geographies of education shape education systems, processes and spaces (West et al., 2022). Here, complex and intersecting structural injustices shape who teaches and studies geography in schools and universities (Royal Geographical Society [RGS], 2020; Selmes et al., 2022). As Rose (2020, n.p.) explains when considering geography education in England:

Geography attracts fewer BME students at GCSE and A level than many other subjects, and even fewer at university level, particularly in research intensive universities outside London like mine (though the numbers in both schools and universities are on an upward trend). School geography curricula don’t discuss race as an issue. There are also very few BME lecturers and professors in university geography departments.

Injustices in representation in curricula and resources, spatial variations in education, and inequities in who teaches and studies geography may impact on students’ experiences and their opportunities to progress in education.

The UK is the most economically unequal country in Europe (Dorling, 2018). Whilst attainment is far from the only desirable outcome of education, considering economic inequality is important as education outcomes are better in more equitable countries (Dorling, 2018). Structural and everyday injustices in education access, attainment and support can affect the mobilities, spatialities and the health of (young) people. This is of significance to society, the economy and labour markets, as injustices in education can lead to social exclusion and to socio-political issues that may emerge from a more polarised society (Butler & Hamnett, 2007). Engaging with the “ethno-geographies” (Catling & Martin, 2011) of students is important to educators in considering the decisions that they make about curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, and how they support and empower (young) people through their geography education.

Whilst there are important discussions to be had about education’s “place” in society, not least in (re)considering Bernstein’s (1970, p. 334) provocation that “education cannot compensate for society”, it is clear there are geographies of knowledge and practice in education, with space and place playing roles “in the production and circulation of knowledge” (Livingstone, 2019, p. 459). Attention needs to be given to how geographies of education shape geography education, and vice versa (Finn et al., 2022; Hammond et al., 2023; West et al., 2022).

### **Material and methods: the importance of student voice to research in, and about, geographical education**

To build on existing research on students’ experiences of, and perspectives on, geography education (e.g. Ferreira, 2018; Tate & Swords, 2013), we conducted an online survey. The use of a survey aimed to reach a large number of students, and to ensure that research

could be conducted ethically during the COVID-19 pandemic. Engaging with undergraduate students is of interest due to their unique positionality; being close in proximity to the frontiers of knowledge production in their studies, and (in most cases) to their schooling (Hammond & Healy, 2023). We recognise this limits the scope of voices engaged with, particularly as most school students do not go onto study geography at university (Oakes & Rawlings Smith, 2022) and there is a geography of who studies geography in higher education in the British Isles (Dorling, 2019; RGS, 2020).

The survey comprised of 25 questions and was open between 10 October 2020 and 19 December 2020 to all undergraduate students studying geography across the British Isles. The Royal Geographical Society (RGS) supported the dissemination of the survey by sharing it with Heads of Geography departments in universities, and in correspondence with undergraduate geography societies, RGS Ambassadors, and Young Geographers. The survey was shared directly by the researchers with academics and signposted via X (known at the time as Twitter). Here, we acknowledge that the survey may have been shared by colleagues interested in this area and/or that we had professional relationships with.

Ethical approval was gained from IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society. BERA's (2018) ethical guidelines were adhered to throughout the research and all respondents provided informed consent for their participation. The survey received 403 responses, with 333 students completing the survey or engaging with the majority of questions. Data were coded inductively to allow themes to emerge through the process of analysis. The process of open coding was carried out by one researcher for each question separately on excel and was iterative in nature allowing sets of categories to be refined. The initial descriptive coding was reviewed by a second researcher. Both researchers met to discuss and agree coding for each question.

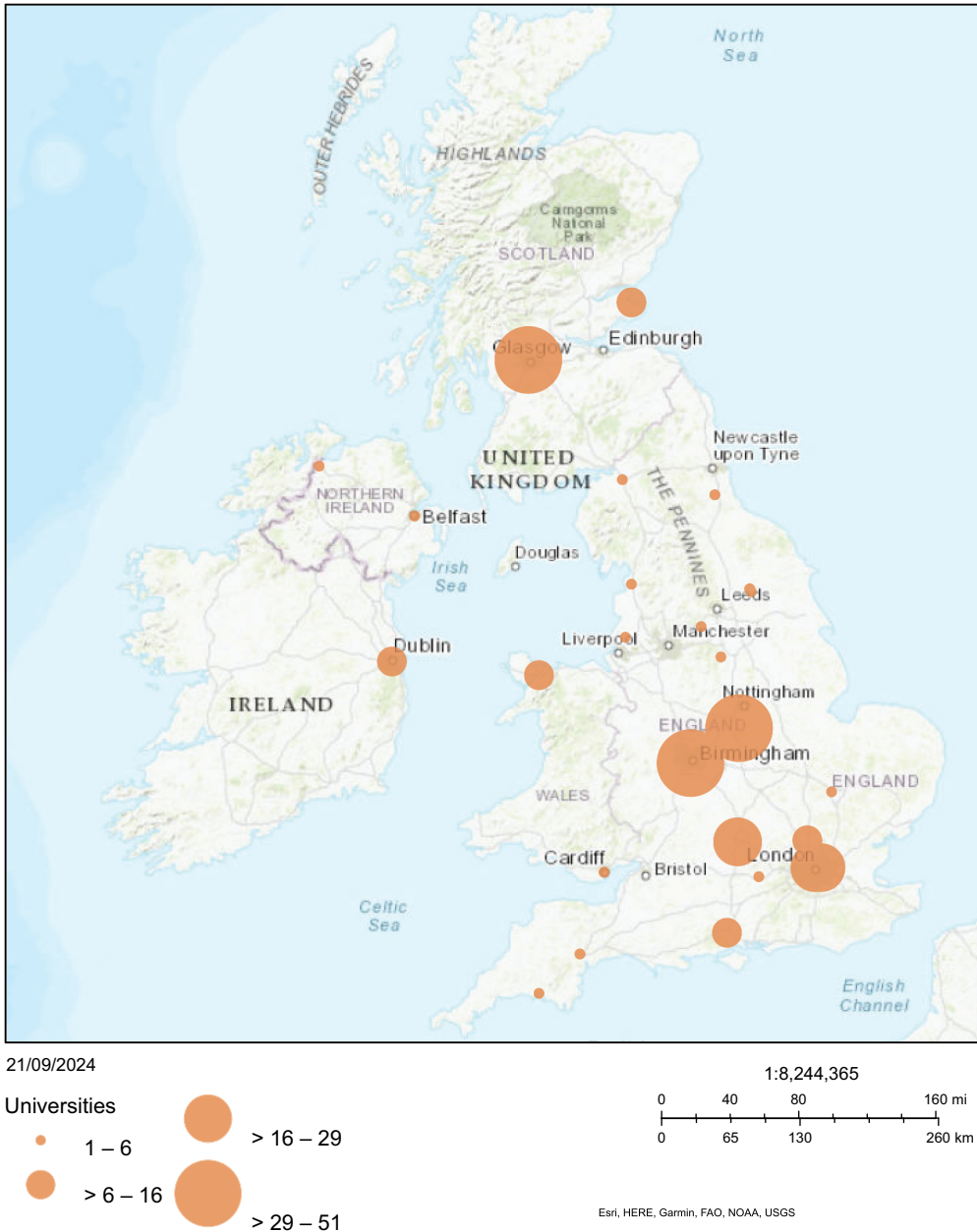
We now move on to discuss the findings of the research. First, we explore the complex question of who is studying geography. In this sub-section, we acknowledge that this survey does not provide a representative sample but provides the contextual detail that we have for the students who completed the survey. Further research would be helpful in order to develop knowledge of the identities, aspirations and experiences of who studies geography, and where. We then engage with students' perspectives on, and experiences through, geography at university. Finally, we consider the personal and disciplinary frontiers experienced in geography education at undergraduate level. Where possible the presentation of this data is connected to existing data sets about who studies geography, and where, in the British Isles.<sup>1</sup> However, this is not always possible given that data sets available do not always provide insights that include all devolved nations of the UK or Ireland.

## Results and discussion

### *Who studies geography at undergraduate level?*

In this sub-section, we provide insights into the undergraduate students who completed the survey, to contextualise their later responses. The survey began by asking students "which university do you attend?" Students from 32 universities responded to this question. Twenty-five of the universities were located in England, two in Scotland, two

## Map of the universities attended by the respondents of the survey



**Figure 1.** Map of the universities attended by the respondents of the survey.

in Wales, two in Northern Ireland and one in Ireland (Figure 1). We note that the representation of universities and therefore students studying beyond England is limited in our survey responses. 15 of the universities were members of the Russell Group, who define themselves as “world-class research-intensive universities” (Russell Group, 2023,



n.p.) and six were Post-92 universities.<sup>2</sup> There were 15 or more responses from eight of the universities (seven of which were members of the Russell Group) and there were three or less responses from 15 universities. Universities have their own histories and there are demographic differences in students between disciplines, with there are geographies of higher education across the British Isles. For example, private school students are over-represented at all Russell Group universities.

Next, we asked respondents to share the title and year of their degree (Appendix 1). Thirty-four percent of students were reading for BA Geography, 32% were reading for BSc Geography and 34% were reading for a joint honours degree, a degree related to geography or a degree with a distinct element (e.g. a year abroad). Ninety-eight percent of respondents were full-time students, and a high proportion (43%) of students were in “Year 1” of their degree (Appendix 2). At the point of data collection, “Year 1” students had recently transitioned from secondary school/another phase of their life and were in the first term of their undergraduate degree. Whilst all cohorts of students were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, “Year 1” students at this point had not experienced university without pandemic restrictions.

To gain a sense of students’ academic qualification and background, we asked participants about what geography qualifications that they gained in school (Appendix 3). The majority of respondents had a pre-university geography qualification; however, 22 students (6.6%) did not undertake any geography qualifications prior to starting university. This highlights that there are diverse journeys into university with some students only having completed compulsory stages of geography education<sup>3</sup>.

62 students (19%) studied in different countries for their school and university education (Appendix 4); this includes 16 students (4.8%) who moved countries within the British Isles. Movement within the British Isles requires consideration of the nature of geography education in schools, and how socio-economic factors and policy interact to influence students’ mobilities. For example, the UK is a multi-state nation and there are variations in government funding for university fees and scholarships, and variation in degree length.

46 students attended school in countries outside of the British Isles. 32 of whom were studying at nine Russell Group universities (three of which were in London), with a further 14 students studying at Birkbeck (University of London), University of Loughborough and the University of St Andrews. Whilst UK students make up 84.3% of the undergraduate population, numbers of international students are increasing (Department for Education [DfE], 2022). There is variation in the proportion of international students at different universities, with University College London having the highest percentage (54.1%) and other universities (e.g. Edge Hill) having less than 1% (Complete University Guide, 2022). Engagement with national and international student movement is significant as “spatial considerations play an important role in students decision making and are inextricably linked to social position” (R. Brooks & Waters, 2011, p. 10). Middle- and upper-class domestic and international students are more likely to move away from their families to study at prestigious universities (R. Brooks & Waters, 2011), which in turn shapes student mobilities and the geographies of classrooms, campuses and places (Waters & Brooks, 2023). Since we collected this data, the impacts of Brexit have begun to shape student mobilities, with first-year EU domiciled enrolments dropping by 53% from 2020/21-2021/22 (HESA, 2022). Here, it is also significant

to note that international students often pay significantly more in fees than domestic students, sometimes shaping the decisions that university leaders make and the economic security of the sector.

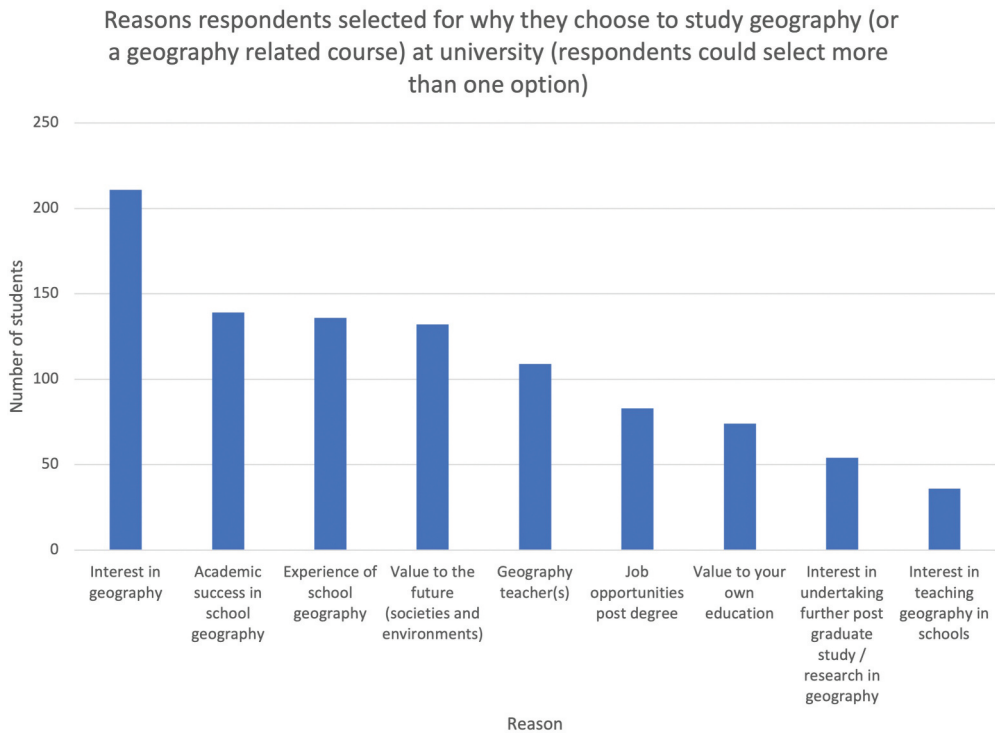
After asking respondents to provide contextual information about their degree, we asked them to share demographic data to consider the sample of respondents to the survey. Females are likely to be overrepresented in our survey population (232 students, 70% of respondents), although more females study geography in the British Isles (Appendix 5). For example, whilst there is variation across the countries, in Scotland 65.7% of undergraduate geography students are female and 34.3% are male (Selmes et al., 2022), 91% of respondents were between the ages of 18–22, so close in temporal proximity to their school education (Appendix 6). The majority of respondents to the survey identified as White (79%) with the next largest ethnic group being Asian (14%) (see Appendix 7 for full ethnicity breakdown). The RGS (2020) “geography of geography” report expresses that the majority of entrants to undergraduate geography in England were categorised as White (88%) with the next largest ethnic group being Asian students (5%); this is a similar pattern to Scotland where 94.6% of undergraduate geographers were White in 2021 (Selmes et al., 2022).

### ***Engaging with students’ perspectives on and experiences through geography at university***

We now turn to the main aim of the research by engaging with students’ perspectives and experiences on their geography education. Understanding the reasons why students chose to study geography at university provides insight into their reflections and views on geography and education.

Analysis found that respondents focussed on reasons that connect to their experiences of geography to date, as well as to futures beyond university (Figure 2). The largest response (63%) was “interest in geography”, with 40% of respondents selecting that geography is of “value to the future (societies and environments)”, suggesting that most of the respondents perceived an intrinsic value to studying geography. Students’ focus on the intrinsic value of geography education is significant in a context in which there has been the development of a culture of performativity and measurement in education that has shaped national and supranational education policies, and the practices of educators in contexts such as schools (Biesta, 2010).

Motivations for studying geography may also be shaped by wider social norms and education ecologies, including national policies and funding options, which may construct higher education as a public good or be connected to “future worker” discourses (Brooks et al., 2023). Only 25% of respondents chose geography for reasons related to “job opportunities post degree”, suggesting a more limited focus on the extrinsic aims of education. However, individuals may have varying degrees of freedom to make choices in, and about, their education due to intersecting factors including cultural and family expectations, as well as structural factors such as the nature of the education system and the impacts of poverty affecting agency. For example, as R. Brooks and Waters (2011), pp. 108–109) examine when reflecting on literature about students studying internationally, there is often an “absence of overtly ‘career-linked’ objectives for many individuals”, with



**Figure 2.** Reasons respondents selected for why they choose to study geography (or a geography related course) at university.

students often focussing on the experience and a desire to put off the responsibilities that come with employment.

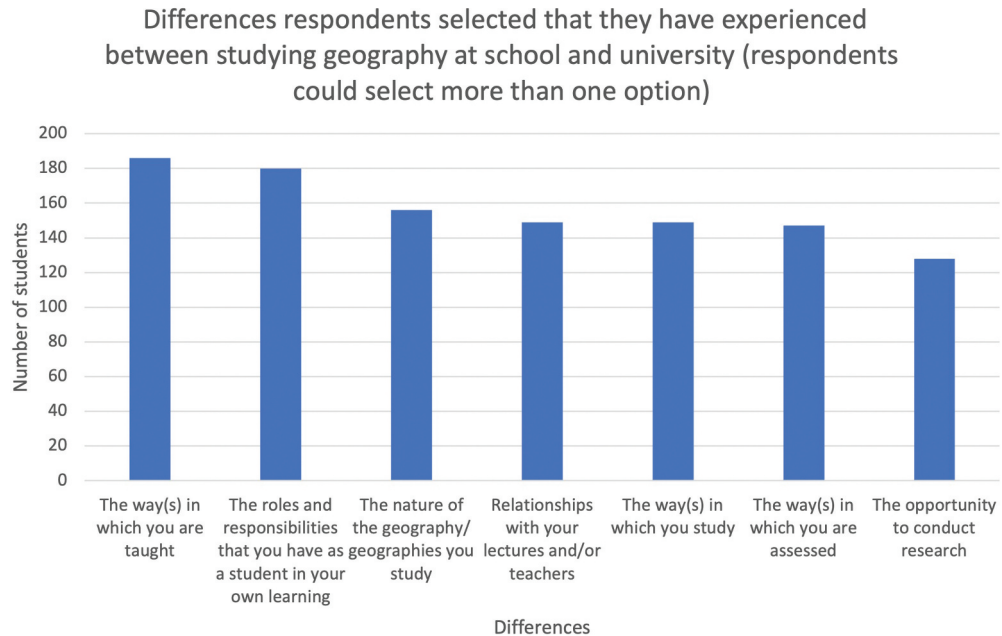
To gain a sense of respondents' differing perspectives on school and university geography, we asked them to select three words to describe them (Table 2). Analysis identified overlap in the words chosen to represent school and university geography, suggesting that respondents perceived a degree of similarity and connection between them. For example, "interesting", "engaging", "fun", "diverse", "relevant" and "broad" all appear within the top 15 words chosen to describe school and university geography. However, it is notable that some words with opposing meanings were chosen to describe school geography (e.g. "broad"/"diverse" versus "limited"/"repetitive"), reflecting that perspectives vary as might be expected between students. The frequent use of "easy"/"simple"/"basic" for school geography, and "challenging" to describe geography at university may indicate a sense of intellectual rigour that develops across education phases and/or the impacts of performativity on school-based education. The choice of words can also be seen to illuminate possible differences in *what* is taught and *how* it is taught in different spaces, with words such as "interdisciplinary" and "critical" being used to describe geography at university.

We asked students "what differences have you experienced studying geography at school and university?" (Figure 3) to examine respondents' perspectives on "the gap" (Table 3). The most common response was "the way(s) in which you are taught" with 186

**Table 2.** The 15 most frequent words used by respondents to describe geography at school and university.

Word used to describe geography at school	Count	Word used to describe geography at university	Count
Interesting	86	Interesting	86
Fun	62	Broad	36
Engaging	18	Challenging	35
Easy	16	Diverse	24
Structured	15	Relevant	19
Basic	13	Exciting	16
Exciting	12	Engaging	16
Simple	12	Fun	14
Broad	11	Varied	13
Limited	11	Current	12
Relevant	9	Thought-provoking	10
Enjoyable	8	Useful	8
Repetitive	7	Interdisciplinary	8
Useful	7	Practical	7
Diverse	6	Critical	7

The survey asked respondents to select three words to describe school geography and further three to describe university geography.



**Figure 3.** Differences respondents selected that they have experienced between studying geography at school and university.

respondents (56%) selecting this option. 180 respondents (54%) also selected “the roles and responsibilities that you have in your own learning”, this can be seen to reflect a pedagogical gap between school and university geography and the ways in which students become more independent in their learning between these phases of education (Butt, 2019b).

**Table 3.** Themes in relation to differences experienced between studying geography at school and university, including illustrative quotes.

Theme	Number of responses	Illustrative quotation
The nature of geography/geographies studied	23	Geography is more advanced and in-depth at university and covers more than just the typical concepts to cover all types of geography: feminist, Marxist, social, political, cultural, development, environmental...
The nature of relationships with educators varies	13	Far more support from school teachers but also taught a more basic version of geography.
Greater focus on research	8	Much more research-based learning and evaluation
School and university geography are different	7	School facilitates learning and utilisation of material while university facilitates furthering the field while teaching seems to be a second thought
Practical applications of geography are clearer in school	5	The practical aspect of geography and its usefulness in geopolitics or urban geographies is drowned out by the subsequent interest in reading about Marxist or feminist geographers interpretation of geographic ideas
More freedom/independence in what and how you study at university	4	The fact there is no syllabus to learn from, you can essentially learn about whatever you like!
No singular syllabus or core textbook at university	3	I feel like I was learning geography at school through shadows on a cave wall only the cave wall was a smart board.
Class size (larger in university)	3	I went to a school with only 6 people in my geography class so it felt more personal and I had a better relationship with my teachers. At uni you're just a random face in a crowd and so you're left to your own devices a lot more.
Field trips	1	Field trips at school were rare, less so opportunities to actually get your hands dirty – deemed too dangerous.
Nature of assessment (similar in school and university)	1	Fundamentally assessments are the same.
Did not study geography pre-university	1	

Respondents had varied perspectives on the extent to which school and university geography are linked, with responses from “Not linked at all” (2 students at 0) through to “Closely linked” (5 students at 100), and a median response of 0.65 (falling between “Somewhat linked” and “Closely linked”). This suggests some consensus with Castree et al. (2007) framing whereby school and university geography are “like distant relations: there is a family connection but it is fairly weak” (p.130). Understanding students’ perception of the links might influence the ways in which students draw upon their prior geographical knowledge, and the ways in which students negotiate and are affected by the differences between school and university geography. Respondents had differing perspectives on how prepared they felt for academic transition, with responses from “Not prepared” (3 students at 0) through to “Completely prepared” (4 students at 100), and a median response of 0.66 (falling between “Partially prepared” and “Completely prepared”). Where respondents commented on their preparedness for the changes between school and university geography (Table 4), analysis found that respondents focussed on the differences that they experienced.

Recognising that “the opportunity to openly contribute to academic debate in a safe environment in which different perspectives are respected is an important element of what hooks (2003) terms democratic education” (Hammond & Healy, 2023, p. 104), we asked students about the extent to which they felt they had a voice in geographical education. Respondents on average appear to feel like they had more of a voice in university geography (median response: 63, falling between “Neither agree or disagree”

**Table 4.** Themes in relation to how prepared respondents were for the changes in studying geography between school and university.

Theme	Number of responses	Illustrative quotation
Not prepared in terms of the changing expectations of studying geography	15	Taking sole responsibility for my learning has been very daunting.
Well prepared in terms of support from school including expectations for independent learning and foundations from school geography	10	Although A-level Geography was much more basic than university, you learnt so many core skills such as Research Methods and familiarity with common geographical terms/processes.
Expectations around reading	9	Overall, a lot more reading, sometimes I don't feel I am reading enough but I don't have time to read more as fall behind in other modules.
Expectations around writing.	5	Writing essays were very difficult in first year
Impact of Covid-19-pandemic – experience of not taking A-level examinations and changes to university teaching	5	I really didn't know what to expect starting uni, particularly having not sat my A levels and the uni being very unclear about what teaching would be like during a pandemic.
Later years of school geographical study being more significant to than earlier phases of geographical education	5	IB was a step up from GCSE level and I think I was capable to adapt to the qualification. Luckily at IB level, there are lots of aspects that prepare you for university like the extended essay, the referencing rules and particularly geography, I was able to explore fieldwork both independently and collaboratively.
Scope of content at university	5	Some topics I had not come across before and so took me a while to get my head around them. In first year of uni I really struggled when physical geography started looking more like chemistry. Or when human lecturers started talking about neo-liberalism or Marxist approaches as I had not learnt about them before which is a crucial understanding for human geography at university.
Contribution of other A-levels or qualifications to preparedness	5	Any preparation that I did come to university with largely came from studying other sciences at A-level (Maths and Biology). Both subjects were more applicable to my degree programme than the Geography A-Level, ironically.
Influence of gap year(s)	3	I think if I had left A-levels and gone to university straight away then i would have felt more prepared but coming from 2 years of full time work to then being a full time student again was a struggle at first.
Research about the university courses	3	I had visited various unis and spoken to their geography departments and done a lot of research on each course.
Shift to questioning and critiquing geographical work	3	Since starting university, I have had to learn to question and critique the work of academics, rather than just treat their theories and conclusions as absolutely correct, something we were not taught to do at school.
Personally ready for the change	2	I was just so ready to move to university and be able to experience all that geography had to offer as a discipline.

to “Agree”) than school geography (median response: 57, falling between “Neither agree or disagree” to “Agree”).

Analysis suggests that students conceptualised voice in several different ways indicating that students have their own interpretations of what voice means to them in the context of their studies. We share the four largest themes identified. First, 15 respondents

considered the relationships between voice and agency in education focussed on making choices in their studies, valuing the opportunity to choose modules or areas of geography they intend to study. Respondents who expressed that they had more limited voice at university often made reference to a limited number of modules, or capacity to only specialise in the later years of their degree. Respondents highlighted that their choices are shaped by the research interests of their lecturers. Whilst critical interplay between research and teaching can be rich and valuable for students and academics alike (Jazeel, 2019), some respondents considered potential issues with this. For example, one respondent commented “most lecturers base their modules on their research or PhD work, so asking for other case studies or examples feels like a waste of time”.

Second, 10 respondents consider the relationships between wider education ecologies (including qualifications) and how voice and choice are constrained by these systems (Hammond & Healy, 2023). For example, one respondent commented, “both geography at school and university are quite prescriptive, i.e. the exams and assessment styles”, highlighting how experiences of education may well be shaped by measurement and performativity structures and processes. The risk here is that technical validity replaces normative validity that “targets and indicators of quality become mistaken for quality itself” (Biesta, 2010, p. 13).

Third, six respondents reflected on how formalised social and academic infrastructure can support or constrain voice (e.g. student committees). For example, one respondent commented:

School geography was less your own opinion on a matter and more what are the facts, like individuality wasn't a part of the marking criteria whereas, because the marking criteria at university includes independent thought you can actually express how you feel about the matter and your own thoughts

When reflecting on how student voice was engaged with through formal systems, respondents also commented on the limitations of social infrastructure (e.g. the length of time for actions to be taken in response to feedback in universities).

Fourth, 10 respondents reflected on the relationships between education spaces and voice. For example, one respondent commented:

As class sizes at school were much smaller, it was easier for your voice to be heard, and you also knew all of your classmates making it more comfortable to raise your voice. At uni however, you are a single person amongst hundreds, and there is also a worry about being judged for raising your voice, as from a state school, the other students who are from much better off backgrounds will judge you for what you say.

Here, analysis identifies that students can find it challenging being in new academic and social spaces, and that it can sometimes be hard to share ideas in lectures. It is of note that there were two references made to the COVID-19 pandemic, with (a lack of) voice connected to the nature of digital spaces in education, especially if they were perceived to be formal spaces where content was recorded.

Next, we asked respondents whether they felt that their geographies have been considered and represented in geography education at university. In a context where structural and everyday injustices pervade geography, education and society (Rose, 2020), we wanted to explore whether students felt they were engaged with as people. For university geography, the median response was 64 (falling between “Neither agree or disagree” to “Agree”). 50 respondents chose to share additional comments, which

consider the ways in which race, income, sexuality and gender, language, and locality are represented and explored in geography education. Nine respondents expressed that they had felt more represented as they moved into university geography, for example:

University geography has a much better focus on minorities and their geographies and, as such I feel this has allowed me to be much better represented. This is also a new focus on decolonising the discipline, which has lots of work to do, but is evident that it is taking place, which is great to see as a BAME student.

This respondent shows some awareness of discourse in the discipline around decolonisation (see for example Noxolo, 2020; McKittrick, 2021).

Nine participants reflected on how the geographies of some have been overrepresented in geography education at school and university. For example:

As a white British and middle class female, I feel as if I have been very well represented, to the point of over representation. Geography in school is definitely a white, western and male perspective and whilst I was not aware of this at the time, looking back I am fully aware and able to critique the way geography is taught. Whereas at university I learned about geography's origins and how this representation has been unrepresentative of all people.

This respondent reflects on how studying geography and engaging with the histories of the discipline at university has supported them to critically engage with (their own) education and the processes and practices of cultural hegemony that are (re)produced through institutions such as schools (Said, 1978).

Other respondents raised concerns about the (nature of the) geographies taught, raising questions about the processes of social selection which underpin curriculum choices (Lambert & Morgan, 2010). For example, when reflecting on their own education across two different countries, one respondent expressed:

There is an inherent bias in English-language geography that makes it very Western-centric. The texts and readings made available to us in university stems very much from western authors. With regards to geographical education in Singapore, even though many of the concepts originate from Western thought, there has been significant effort made to contextualise the concepts to and Asian region.

This respondent can be seen to be engaging with the politics of knowledge production and teaching, in a context that Jazeel and McFarlane (2010, p.110) describe as “the afterlife of colonial and Eurocentric power relations”. This perspective was widely echoed, with another respondent expressing “. . .there is definitely more of a consideration for diversity and equal representation at university than at school, however both still have a long way to go.”

Two respondents commented on the relationships between geography education and the nature of education spaces. For example:

At school and to some extent in college we weren't given the opportunity to see the geographies of myself. I am part of the LGBT+ community and I feel that to be taught the geographies of this movement and the equality we are fighting for would be of great value to young people to learn and I could have the potential to shape the future in terms of increased acceptance and reduced hate crimes and homophobia. Whereas in university we have the freedom to mention, when relevant, such examples and these examples are valued by peers because they are so interesting and powerful.



**Table 5.** The five top themes identified through analysis of what respondents found most valuable and least valuable about their geographical education in school.

What did you find most valuable about your geographical education in school?	Number of students	What did you find least valuable about your geographical education in school?	Number of students
Knowledge and skills which provide a grounding for the future (education, everyday life, and employment) – considering how geographical education can support a person in their life and future.	55	Narrow curricula (selective geographies taught and a lack of choice)	62
The discipline of geography – considering how geography is represented, communicated, and understood in different spaces (Nature of the discipline)	45	Assessment – referring to modes of assessment and the impacts of assessment on teaching, learning, and experiences of geography education	46
The discipline of geography – considering how geography is represented, communicated, and understood in different spaces (Nature of school geography)	45	Teachers unengaged in and/or with geography or teaching geography	37
Knowledge and skills which provide a grounding for the future (education, everyday life, and employment) – considering how geographical education can support a person in their life and future (fieldwork)	4	Nothing was not valuable/N/A – A response was provided, which either indicated that the respondent wrote N/A or expressed that nothing about their education in school was not valuable	25
Knowledge and skills which provide a grounding for the future (education, everyday life, and employment) – considering how geographical education can support a person in their life and future. (Independently research, especially in areas of personal interest)	37	Gaps and borders between school and university geography	23

This respondent can be seen to value the sharing and contextualising of (their own) geographies and identities in what they perceive to be a safe space. Education spaces are socially (re)produced by those who work and study within them, and as hooks (2003, p. 36) explains building community requires “vigilant awareness of the work we must continually do to undermine all the socialisation that leads us to behave in ways that perpetuate domination” - a process which requires active expansion of, and engagement with, different social worlds.

To gain a sense of students’ experiences of education, as well as the complex ecologies that shape students’ education, we asked respondents about their perspectives about the most and least valuable about their geography education in schools (Table 5; Hammond & Healy, 2023). Analysis identified that the area that students found the most valuable was futures orientated, with 27% of respondents valuing “knowledge and skills that can provide a grounding for the future”. Here, responses included reflection on students’ “next steps” in terms of their education and careers, and their everyday lives, suggesting that students perceive there to be intrinsic and extrinsic value in studying geography. With responses varying from “the way it opened my eyes to thinking about things on a variety of temporal and spatial scales”, suggesting that geography had changed this student’s ways of seeing and thinking about the world, to responses such as “Knowing that I could go onto teach the subject”.

### Personal and disciplinary frontiers

In this final section of the discussion, we focus on personal and disciplinary frontiers through engaging with respondents' plans for after their degree, and their ideas about how geography education can be improved.

A total of 108 respondents were undecided about what they wanted to do after their degree (Figure 4). Of the 108 responses, 46% were in year 1 of their degree, 27% in year 2, 17% in year 3 and 9% in year 4, which unsurprisingly suggests that students become clearer about what they wish to do after their degree as they progress through it. The respondents' career decidedness indicates that employability might not have been a primary concern for these students when they chose their degree subject (see also Table 1); this is an important area for future research given that students' aspirations for, and decisions about the futures they wish to shape may be influenced by place-based factors, wider socio-political trends, family and personal values, and intersectional factors which influence agency and choice (which we are unable to explore within the constraints of our data set). This also raises questions about the role that students' undergraduate geography education might play in shaping their ideas about what they want to do after their degree, which could connect to wider debates about the intrinsic and extrinsic value of education for students. Fifty-six students (17%) wished to continue with their studies in geography. Within the category of "other", there are a diversity of career paths indicated, including students who plan to undertake a law conversion and join the military. Some respondents were more specific about their next steps; for example, one student wants to "work in a social project focused on climate and social justice, ideally in an informal education scenario".

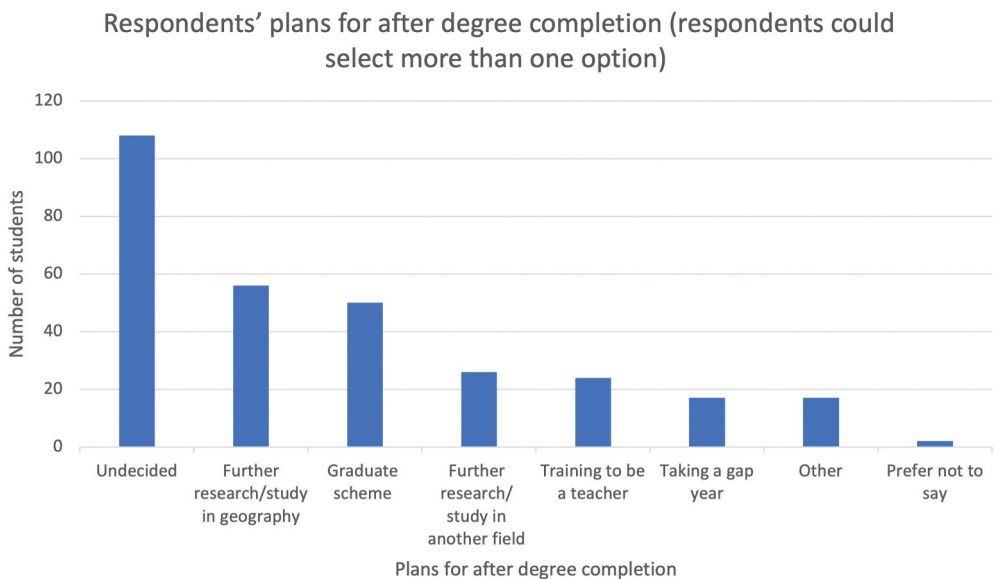


Figure 4. Respondents' plans for after degree completion.

**Table 6.** Respondents' suggestions for improving geographical education at school and/or university.

Theme	Sub theme	Number of students
Development of choice and curricula at school and/or university	Increasing choice of topics at school and university	25
	Inclusion of contemporary geographical issues and opportunity for real-life application	13
	Decolonialising modules (as a taught modules and principle)	13
	More fieldwork	12
	Develop approaches to assessment	9
	Examine the history of geography	8
	Integrate opportunities to develop critical thinking	7
	Academic writing	3
	More statistics	1
	Less labs	1
	Changes to approach to teaching and learning at university	Clearer communication about geography course, assessment and related activities
More cross disciplinary thinking and studying		15
Opportunities for discussion/interaction/more contact time (including seminars)		10
Better connections/relationships with academics (formal and informal)		10
Link to employment/careers		7
More support for student learning – including opportunity to watch lectures back, support for students to take notes from lectures and engage with reading		5
Choice of supervisor		3
Less political		2
Less group learning		1
Changes to approach to teaching and learning at school		Increasing academic independence at school
	Ensure teachers engage with recent geographies	14
Transitions and connections	Connect school and university geography (curriculum and transition)	20
	Recognition of diverse transitions for mature students	1
"Who" makes up the academic geography community	Desire for greater diversity in the staff and student body	8

Table 6 provides insights into the ways that respondents feel that geography education could be improved at school and/or university. Some improvements were connected to the context and restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic: "While my tutors have adapted very well, it is unfortunate that the majority of our teaching is now online due to Covid . . . The only improvement at this time would be to get back into the classrooms and labs." Respondents offered insights and examples about possible improvements. For example, in relation developing approaches to assessment and real-life application, one respondent suggested that "Each area of study comes with an assessment style that reflects real life scenarios for people in working world (e.g. Studying atmosphere features assessments that reflect the job of a meteorologist) that way students understand the relevance of each study area to society. . .".

Respondents had the opportunity to comment on their experiences of studying geography (Table 7). Some of the points relate closely to themes already discussed, and so we focus on themes that have been less explored thus far. First, respondents shared that their "passionate" and "inspiring" teachers had been influential to their choice to study geography at university. Second, six students shared experiences connected to the university response to the pandemic, which related to feeling that their experiences had been limited due to online teaching and learning. Third, two respondents made references to the challenges of learning

**Table 7.** Themes in relation to additional points shared about students' experience of studying geography at school and/or university.

Theme	Number of responses
The importance of teachers and academics/university geography department staff	19
Enjoyment	16
The power and potential of geography	14
University response to the pandemic	6
Impact of assessment	4
Fieldwork	4
Gap between school and university	3
Supporting students' needs and futures	3
Impacts of difficult/upsetting geographies (e.g. eco anxiety)	2
Statistics is not helpful	2
University geography is more challenging	2
University geography could be more challenging	2

about “the current state of world and what the future holds in the Anthropocene” whereby one student said they “can often come away from learning with eco-anxiety”.

Finally, we asked, “what (if any) contributions do you think geography makes to a person’s education?” Here analysis identified five key themes: (i) knowledge from their geographical education, (ii) skills from the geographical education, (iii) capacity to develop empathy through the affective dimensions of the subject (iv) capacity to engage with diverse perspectives, and (v) the contribution to providing insights into their personal futures, and consider possibilities for societal futures (Hammond & Healy, 2022).

## Conclusion

Geography education in universities across the British Isles is shaped by complex and multi-scalar disciplinary and institutional histories, (sometimes conflicting) policy contexts, social and economic landscapes and agendas, education spaces, and who teaches, researches and studies geography. In this paper, we have examined undergraduate geography students’ motivations for, experience of, and perspectives on, studying geography. We have contributed to debates about the intersections between geographies of education and geography education, revealing that students’ “every-day” geographies matter in, and to, geography education. This is significant in considering whether students feel that they are represented and valued in their education, along with their aspirations for shaping their futures. As many of the respondents to the survey share, critical engagement with social and spatial injustices is important to educators in making decisions about what they teach, how and why in geography.

It is well acknowledged that progression across education phases and spaces in geography is under-researched (Butt, 2019a), especially when students move between places. The perspectives examined in this paper demonstrate the significance of considering the narratives that students construct as they progress through their geography education given that such perspectives are likely to affect students’ academic and social pathways through their undergraduate education. There are questions about what we can learn from

understanding how students' perceptions of the intrinsic and extrinsic value of studying geography might change throughout and after their undergraduate education.

Cross-phase and longitudinal research that engages with students, along with early years practitioners, teachers and academics could offer further insight into experiences of education and (what shapes) the choices students and educators make. The value of this ultimately lies in responding to Castree's (2011, p. 298) question "what is the substance of a rich and rounded 'geographic education'?", and from that, considering how we build a social infrastructure that supports the development and enactment of this rich and rounded geographic education, and the futures this may lead to. This important work requires critical consideration of the relationships and interactions between different actors, and the experiences and perspectives of individuals and the wider educational ecologies, and the socio-economic and political processes that shape education.

## Notes

1. Other studies in this area have noted the limitations around reporting on the "geography of geography" due to lack of comparative data sets across devolved nations of the UK (RGS, 2020).
2. These institutions are former colleges of higher education and polytechnics that were given university status in 1992.
3. i.e. compulsory phases of geography education typically end at around 14 years of age and may not include geography being taught as a discrete subject (Table 1).

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## Data availability statement

Research data are not available to be shared.

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