

A-Level Geography Workshop – a funding report

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Background

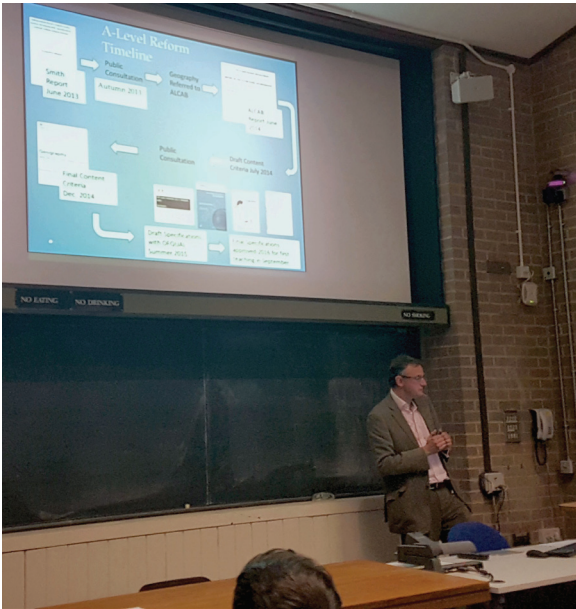
In September 2016 a new Geography A-Level curriculum was launched. The advisory panel was headed by Professor Martin Evans, then Head of Geography@Manchester. Of the core content, four of the six themes are not unlike the current AS and A2 syllabi with a balance of human and physical geography focusing on global governance and global systems, landscape systems and water cycling. The real changes are the introduction of carbon cycling, dryland Geography and 'changing places' i.e. cultural geography (Department of Education, 2014). Geography teachers will have learnt cultural geography at university if they studied from the late 1990s onwards, but unlike tangible skills in map reading, it is not necessarily something that geography teachers will have engaged with since their formal learning years. Depending upon Examination Boards some teachers are unfamiliar with arid environment geography. Theory heavy material is traditionally difficult to teach, especially if it is unfamiliar to the teacher themselves. Geography@Manchester is a research centre for cultural geography, dryland geography and carbon cycling, as well as global systems, global governance landscape systems and water and carbon cycling (amongst others). In effort to make university geography more accessible to all, £500 was secured from Manchester Geographical Society to assist North-West Geographers to deliver the new material in a mutually beneficial educational relationship. In addition to the practical sharing of research to feed into the new

curriculum, the funding was part of a core investment to build better relationships between Geography@Manchester and local Geography schools, particularly those in low participation networks, to the benefit of the discipline.

The event

On Friday 24th June, 2016, 48 Geography teachers arrived at Geography@Manchester. Additional funding was sought from the RCUK-Schools University Partnership Initiative which removed the need to charge a fee to attend. Professor Martin Evans delivered an overview of the key changes to the A-Level curriculum with some consideration as to why these changes had come about. The morning was then spent in parallel lecture sessions with Dr. Abi Stone delivering the core material about drylands geography, Dr. Gareth Clay delivering sessions about carbon cycling and Chris Perkins delivering material about changing places.

After a networking lunch the teachers self-grouped themselves into two parallel workshops delivered by Narinder Mann (former Geography teacher at Aquinas – now he has joined UoM) and Helen Chambers (Geography teacher and head of the North West Geography Consortium) to discuss how to translate the learning of the morning into tangible classroom lessons. Invited guests also had the opportunity to explore Geography@Manchester, particularly our laboratories. The event was supported by the Royal Geographical Society who assisted in advertising the event.



Left: Professor Martin Evans introducing the key changes behind the new curriculum.

Right: Dr. Gareth Clay delivering the carbon cycle session.

Analysis and future plans

All resources from the day, including recordings of the lectures, were supported open access on line: <http://www.supi.manchester.ac.uk/forteachers/2016-a-level-geography-resources/> Drawing on teacher feedback Gareth also developed a simple classroom exercise which could be used to support the carbon cycling element of the curriculum and Narinder developed a field exercise – both of which are freely available via the site.

The feedback was overwhelmingly positive with all attendees really enjoying and valuing the day. It became clear that teachers particularly relished the opportunity to talk to each other, especially if they were from smaller schools where they were the only Geography teacher or taught multiple modules. Discussions are ongoing

between Geography@Manchester and the RGS to offer regular networking sessions for teachers to facilitate further discussion including online virtual conversations between teachers supported by academics for the subject knowledge. We now have a mailing group (which was deemed to be the preferred form of communication). This has been particularly useful to advertise further opportunities to teachers such as the University of Manchester Community Festival and open days and for me to test ideas – for example some teachers were asked to consider whether Gareth’s exercise was pitched at the right level. It was particularly interesting to see how much impact this session had with relatively little funding (that largely covered refreshments and expenses) and Manchester Geographical Society is thanked for enabling it.

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