The professional needs and views of teachers of geography

A national research report by the Geographical Association
Contents

Executive summary 3
Introduction 4
The listening exercise: aims and methodology 4
Survey findings and discussion 6
Focus group findings and discussion 8
Recommendations 14
References 15

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We would also like to thank the many GA members who took the time to complete the survey and/or participate in a focus group, without which this report would not be so informative.
Executive summary

This report presents the findings from a two-phase listening exercise: an online survey followed by focus group discussions. Framed around the Geographical Association’s (GA) vision to ‘create a vibrant and diverse subject community inspiring high-quality geographical teaching and learning’, the exercise enabled the Association to better understand the professional needs of geography educators and the challenges they currently face so that it can respond with appropriate support.

This report:
• outlines the approach to the data collection methods
• presents the findings from both phases of the research
• discusses their implications
• makes recommendations.

Some 417 respondents completed the online survey; and more than 60 geography educators (representing all phases of the teaching community) took part in focus groups.

The online survey

The survey respondents were asked to provide some personal information, including their teaching phase, how long they had been teaching and type of institution they taught at. Approximately three-quarters were either practising teachers in schools, or were involved in Initial Teacher Education (ITE); more than 70% worked in state-maintained schools; and the majority of the remainder worked in universities.

Respondents were then asked about their use of support from the GA and for feedback on its services. The overall level of satisfaction based on respondents’ experience of GA membership was extremely high. GA member services that do not require teachers to expend additional time or resource were used most frequently; and services that are either tailored to each user or allow users to curate their experience were particularly highly valued by those who used them. Differences in support uses and preferences were apparent, depending on the respondent’s years of experience and teaching phase. The most frequent suggestions for additional services from the GA were for improved or adapted support for local networks, increased use of video materials, quality-assured teacher schemes/plans and flexible approaches to GA Continuing Professional Development (CPD) sessions.

The focus group discussions

In relation to the first theme – the impact of Covid-19 on geography education – participant experiences varied widely depending on their professional and personal circumstances, and teachers who trained during the academic years 2019–20 and 2020–21 were particularly affected.

Attempts by schools to deliver online teaching to students were hampered by a digital divide; and the return to face-to-face teaching in schools was not seen as ‘business as usual’.

Subject-specialist issues (theme 2) emerged as a key concern. In the primary phase, time available to acquire and sustain subject expertise was an acute limiting factor. In the secondary phase, there were calls for ‘subject-specific support’ for Early Career Teachers (ECTs), non-specialists and geography teachers who teach outside their specialisms.

One further knock-on effect of Covid-19 (see theme 1) was that because a catch-up narrative prevails, participants could see GCSE and A level fieldwork becoming yet more marginalised.

When discussing the value geography teachers attach to their subject association (theme 3) participants regarded the GA as ‘a provider of strong advocacy’ for the geography subject community, teachers of geography and the place of geography in the curriculum. Discussions around the use of GA journals, websites, publications, Annual Conference and CPD sessions identified ways in which this support could be tailored more effectively to individual needs. Focus group participants also suggested that the GA could extend its membership offer by making more (and novel use) of its social media presence.

One of the most consistent issues to emerge from the discussions was the ardent desire by geography educators to ‘connect with one another’ (theme 4: networking, knowledge exchange and professional development). Participants expressed a range of views on the varied nature of local GA branch activities, the value of developing both face-to-face and online CPD, the opportunities afforded by Annual Conference and online networking/sharing between geography educators. A number of ideas for further developing teacher networking were put forward.

Theme 5 concerns equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in geography education. Focus group participants were keen for the GA to take a public stance on global and societal issues and encourage equity and diversity within its own composition and in teaching and learning geography. The discussions ranged from the GA’s role internationally and in delivering other key contemporary educational issues such as climate change.

Evidence from the listening exercise was used to compile a list of recommendations for policy makers, the GA itself, and school and ITE geography practitioners and leaders (see page 14).

1 GA (2020a), p. 1
Introduction

This report presents the findings from a two-phase listening exercise designed to seek the views and experiences of Geographical Association (GA) members about their profession, subject and subject association. The exercise was framed around the GA’s vision to ‘create a vibrant and diverse subject community inspiring high-quality geographical teaching and learning’.\(^2\) Given that Covid-19 has ‘led to huge disruptions to the education system’,\(^3\) there can be no better time for the GA to engage with teachers of geography to understand their professional needs and the challenges they currently face and to respond with appropriate support.

First, this report outlines the GA’s approach to the data collection using an online survey and focus groups with teachers of geography. It then presents the findings from both phases of research and discusses their implications for the support and further development of geography education and educators. Finally, the report makes recommendations for policy makers, the GA, and school leaders and teachers of geography at all phases.

As a membership organisation, the GA will use the research evidence presented here to inform any future planning decisions while pursuing its charitable mission to benefit its members and help mobilise its Strategic Plan 2020–25.\(^4\)

The listening exercise: aims and methodology

The Geographical Association’s (GA) listening exercise was initiated in September 2020 with a large-scale online survey of members followed by a number of focus group discussions with geography educators. It was designed to help the GA make progress in terms of three of its strategic objectives.

1.3 Represent the views of members and influence geography education policy and practice.
2.2 Encourage teachers of geography to join the GA and participate in their subject community.
2.3 Promote greater diversity in geography education and the Association.\(^5\)

In strategic terms, the listening exercise was intended to:
• signal the GA’s determination to further strengthen the connections between itself and its membership
• foreground its role in amplifying the voices of members
• demonstrate its desire to empower teachers of geography, by supporting them with the professional and practical challenges they face
• encourage membership of the GA
• gather data on members, so that the GA can baseline aspects such as experience and diversity and better serve members’ needs.

In practical terms, the exercise was designed to:
• explore the context and characteristics of teachers and schools
• understand the subject-specific professional challenges teachers of geography face
• learn what support GA members value.

The intention was for focus group participants to benefit from the opportunity to talk with others about their current professional position, their recent experiences and their hopes for the future. As Kinder suggests:

‘Knowing that others face similar (or different) circumstances and challenges to ourselves not only feels good, but widens our knowledge of professional practice and allows a degree of “benchmarking” against which we may adjust our own expectations and future decisions’.\(^6\)

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\(^2\) GA (2020a), p. 1
\(^3\) Rushton et al. (2021), p. 1
\(^4\) GA (2020a)
\(^5\) GA (2020a)
\(^6\) Kinder (2017), p. 332
The online survey

In November 2020, an invitation to participate in an online survey was shared with all GA members for which the Association held personal (rather than institutional) contact details. Awareness of the survey was also raised at the same time through GA social media. A total of 417 respondents (representing 7.6% of subscribing memberships at the time) completed the online survey between late November and early December 2020. Analysis of the survey data took place during spring 2021. (The survey questions can be downloaded from the GA website.7)

The online survey invited respondents to consider participating in a focus group to talk in more detail about their profession, their teaching role and their perspectives on support provided by the Association. From the 417 survey respondents, 70 educators expressed their willingness to be involved in the second phase of the research.

The focus groups

Eight GA members from its Governing Body and Education Group volunteered to support the listening exercise as focus group facilitators. In May 2021, these facilitators attended an online meeting to be briefed about the listening exercise aims and the initial survey results, which they would subsequently share with the focus groups.

In total, 11 focus groups were held throughout June 2021, involving around 50 participants by phase/segment. These included geography teacher educators, school leaders and teachers of geography from all phases and from a wide variety of locations. In each focus group, the participants and facilitator were joined by a member of GA staff, whose role was to provide technical support and to take notes; and, with participants’ permission, the discussions were recorded. The GA recognised that ITE trainee teachers were under-represented in the original participant list, so additional recruitment from this group was carried out and a focus group with 11 ITE geography teachers took place in July 2021.

The main benefits to participants of the focus groups were to:
- explore their own thinking around their professional challenges, needs and identity, and sources of support
- hear the experiences and views of their peers
- contribute evidence towards a significant research exercise and GA publication
- receive a concise written summary of the key professional characteristics, priorities and support needs of their peers.

Ethics

The GA made use of internal research ethics expertise and followed ethical guidance from the British Educational Research Association8 in planning the listening exercise. The following measures were put in place.

1. Participants were informed about the aims of the listening exercise prior to taking part and informed consent was requested as part of the survey and ahead of the focus groups.
2. All participants received notification of the GA’s Privacy Policy9 in advance of their focus group session.
3. At the beginning of each session, focus group facilitators:
   - reassured participants that personal details would not be shared and that any views expressed within the session would not be attributed to any individual10
   - asked if anyone objected to the session being recorded for internal GA use
   - informed participants that a written report summarising the findings would be shared publicly.

The research questions

The focus group questions were designed to be open-ended and encourage dialogue.
- Thinking about your own experience in geography education, what are the main professional priorities, challenges and pressures facing you today?
- Having seen some of the results from the survey, how do you feel the GA might adapt its support for you in dealing with the issues we have discussed? You might like to think about difficulties in using GA support, and any new services or changes that would encourage [appropriate member segment inserted] to join the GA and value their membership.
- The GA was formed by a group of teachers in 1893, to share resources and learn from one another. What are the best ways in which the GA can help you share your ideas with others today?

The focus group facilitators used their professional judgement regarding follow-up questions and prompts, depending on the responses from participants and the overall direction of the discussion. They also ensured that focus groups covered all the questions within the maximum time allotted: 1 hour.

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7 https://www.geography.org.uk/GA-Advocacy-for-Geography#7
8 BERA (2018)
10 In the discussion below, all focus group participants’ comments are anonymised.
Survey findings and discussion

Characteristics of online survey respondents

The survey provided an opportunity to gather data on the experiences and perspectives of members not routinely collected through Geographical Association (GA) membership applications. Around three-quarters of respondents were either practising teachers in schools, or were involved in ITE either as trainee teachers or teacher educators. More than 70% of respondents worked in state-maintained schools, with the majority of the remainder working within HEIs. The teaching experience of the 417 survey respondents was wide ranging with just under one-fifth with less than 5 years’ experience and more than two-fifths with more than 21 years’ experience (Figure 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of years teaching</th>
<th>Percentage of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1–5</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6–10</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11–20</td>
<td>24.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21–30</td>
<td>17.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30+</td>
<td>22.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Teaching experience of survey respondents (years).

Just under 60% of respondents worked in the secondary phase, 13% in the primary phase and 28% worked in either the third phase or in a cross-phase role. Direct comparisons between this self-selecting sample and GA membership as a whole are challenging. Although 37% of all GA journal subscribers take Primary Geography and 62% take Teaching Geography (for secondary practitioners) and/or Geography (the GA’s journal for post-16 and tertiary teachers and students), subscriptions do not necessarily indicate which phase teachers work in: GA members may select any journals of interest to them and those with cross-phase interests tend to subscribe to multiple journals.

In this GA survey, 65% of respondents identified as female, 34% as male, and less than 1% identified as non-binary. In the school workforce survey for England, nearly 76% of teachers are identified as female, 13 although this proportion is closer to 63% in the secondary phase.13

In terms of ethnicity, 90% of the survey respondents self-identified as ‘White British’, compared with around 86% of the teaching workforce in England11 as a whole, suggesting that White British teachers were slightly over-represented in the survey. However, taken together, the data on characteristics suggest that the survey of GA members produced a sample broadly reflective of the wider population of teachers in England.

Use of GA support services

Respondents were asked which GA services (sources of support) they used: (a) most and (b) least. At first sight, the results shown in Figure 2 may appear predictable. Those services provided as part of the GA offer to all members – including journals and website materials – were the most frequently cited as being most used.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GA member benefits that survey respondents used most (highest first)</th>
<th>used least (lowest first)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GA journals</td>
<td>GA Professional Passport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GA Magazine</td>
<td>GA in-school consultancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GA website teaching resources</td>
<td>Geography Quality Mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GA books/printed resources</td>
<td>GA volunteer group membership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GA e-newsletter</td>
<td>Local GA Branch network</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: The five GA member benefits that respondents used most (highest first) and the five they used least (lowest first).

Those services that require additional discretionary ‘spend’ in terms of teacher time and/or school funding, such as GA in-school consultancy or the recently-launched Professional Passport for teachers of geography, were cited as least used. However, there are exceptions to this: standalone GA books/printed resources (purchasable by all, but with a membership discount applied) were cited by half of the respondents as a service they use ‘most frequently’. Another perspective on the data is that subject association support that requires active participation, such as joining a local GA Branch or applying for a Geography Quality Mark, tends to engage fewer members. This may come as no surprise, given the significant workload pressures on teachers.14

A different picture emerges when we consider how frequently respondents identified particular GA services that best meet their needs (Figure 3). The data in Figure 3 imply that those GA services that are used either infrequently or by a relatively small proportion of members are, nonetheless, highly regarded and valued by those who do choose to use them. GA in-school consultancy is a good illustration of this phenomenon. Its bespoke nature requires the school to work with the GA to identify the professional development needs of its teachers and to work with a GA expert to shape the necessary provision or intervention. This is work that takes time, as well as being a chargeable service. While the number of schools using this support is much smaller than for other GA services, the payback on the investment is a reflexive programme of support tailored to their school’s specific needs – which can have value for years to come. Similarly, other services that

11 Department for Education (DfE) (2021)
12 Education Policy Institute (EPI) (2020)
13 DfE (2021)
14 Teacher Workload Advisory Group (2018)
allow users to ‘curate’ their own support or pathway, such as the GA Annual Conference, appear also to be well regarded.

- GA in-school consultancy
- GA Annual Conference
- GA journals
- Geography Education Online (GEO)
- GA Professional Passport

Figure 3: GA services most frequently cited as best meeting members’ needs (highest first).

Returning to the question as to whether the GA is currently meeting the needs of different groups of teachers, the experience profiles of teachers using each service provide valuable data. The three services used disproportionately more frequently by experienced teachers are: printed publications, local GA Branches and GA volunteer groups. Teachers with less experience are more likely to mention services such as website teaching resources, CPD courses lasting one day or less and the Association’s GeogPod podcasts. The preference among less experienced – and therefore by inference younger – teachers for online support will, again, come as little surprise. Preferences for different forms of support also appear to vary by phase. Primary phase respondents are more likely to be frequent users of GA online support and more likely to describe this support as meeting their needs. They are more likely to describe half or one-day CPD as meeting their needs and less likely to say this about the GA’s three-day-long Annual Conference. Primary respondents were also less likely to cite a GA journal as something they used regularly.

Regarding respondents’ suggestions for additional services from the GA, the most frequent comments were around improved or adapted support for local networks, increased use of video materials, quality-assured teacher schemes/plans and flexible approaches to GA CPD sessions, including the provision of recordings of these sessions. Just as interesting were those suggestions that referred to services the GA already offers, which indicates that the Association needs to help each user navigate its offer more effectively in order for members to find what is applicable to them.

These issues were explored further in the focus group discussions, but they do echo research elsewhere on the very broad range of professional needs of teachers, how these change with individual circumstances and career stage and the challenges of meeting this range of needs, systematically and nationally.15,16,17

Levels of satisfaction with GA membership

The level of satisfaction expressed by survey respondents, based on their experience of GA membership, was extremely high. Overall, 87% of respondents rated their GA membership positively, with only 2.5% of respondents expressing ‘some dissatisfaction’ and none being ‘very dissatisfied’. The average level of satisfaction was 4.35, from a possible maximum of 5 (Figure 4). The reasoning underpinning member satisfaction was explored further in the focus group discussions. However, it was illuminating to note the large number of respondents, in replying to the survey question about additional services the GA could offer, who stated they were happy with the current range of support.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of satisfaction</th>
<th>Positive (5 maximum)</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of responses</td>
<td>87.0</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4: Survey respondents’ levels of satisfaction with GA membership.

Closer inspection of the satisfaction data revealed some interesting patterns. Experienced teachers were more likely to be either ‘satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’ with the support they received from the GA (Figure 5). Different explanations are possible for this trend. For example, if dissatisfied teachers tend to discontinue their GA membership, this would have the effect of increasing the proportion of more experienced teachers who value GA membership, effectively ‘filtering out’ over time those for whom membership does not meet their needs. An alternative explanation (explored above and through the focus group discussions) is that teachers have different and specific needs early in their careers, and that the GA is currently meeting these needs less effectively than it meets the needs of experienced teachers. Although the number of respondents expressing dissatisfaction with GA services (i.e. those who were ‘somewhat dissatisfied’ or ‘very dissatisfied’) increased slightly with experience, the actual number in each band (between 0 and 5) was very small, meaning that limited inferences can be made from these data.

Figure 5: Survey respondents’ satisfaction with GA membership by years of experience.

15 https://www.geography.org.uk/Volunteer-groups
16 Institute of Physics (IoP) (2020)
17 Muller et al. (2021)
The satisfaction data also varied by phase of education, with primary phase respondents expressing a lower level of satisfaction with GA membership than others (Figure 6). This pattern was explored above and is further investigated in the focus group discussions to find out whether particular needs were being met.

Figure 6: Survey respondents’ satisfaction with GA membership by phase.

Focus group findings and discussion

Following an inductive approach to data analysis, five key themes were drawn out from the focus group discussions.

2. Subject specialist issues.
3. The value teachers attach to their subject association.
4. Networking, knowledge exchange and professional development.
5. Equity, diversity and inclusion in geography education.

Each of these themes is discussed in turn below, with recommendations suggested in the final section.

The first and second themes align with the GA’s strategic objective to ‘represent the views of members and influence geography education policy and practice’.

The third and fourth themes, which analyse the value teachers attach to their subject association and to connections with their peers (respectively), align with the GA’s objective ‘to encourage teachers of geography to join the Association and participate in their subject community’.

The final theme aligns with the objective ‘to promote greater diversity in geography education and the Association’.

Theme 1: The impact of Covid-19 on geography education

‘There is work to be done by the GA around fieldwork. [Due to the pandemic our] early career teachers have never really had the opportunity to participate in fieldwork, let alone lead it’ (focus group participant).

Disruption to education due to the Covid-19 pandemic has been experienced globally. All focus group participants felt the impact of the pandemic on their work in geography education. However, their experiences varied widely depending on the phase they worked in, whether they were qualified or in training, and whether they worked in a school or a higher education institution (HEI). Personal situations also had a significant effect on their pandemic experiences. Teachers and trainees with caring responsibilities at home, with pastoral or subject leadership responsibilities and those who contracted Covid-19 all found the pandemic particularly challenging.

Covid-19 and ITE

Teachers who trained during the academic years 2019–20 and 2020–21 were also significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The 2019–20 cohort of ITE students experienced the usual training for the first six months of the academic year, but the national lockdown from March 2020 resulted in the termination of most school placements and a switch to remote delivery of the ITE curriculum. ITE students and providers highlighted how the inability to attend school in person impacted on this stage of their teacher training, i.e. at a time when many students would usually be expected to be teaching two-thirds of a timetable and gaining significant practice in lesson planning, lesson delivery, behaviour management, assessment and fieldwork. During the summer of 2020, no external visitors were allowed in schools, which impacted the teacher-recruitment process as candidates were not permitted to physically visit schools, so interviews were held online. The 2020–21 cohort of students were accepted onto ITE courses after remote interviews and their experiences were variable. Some ITE providers returned to face-to-face teaching for small groups in universities and schools, while others continued solely with online provision. Students on undergraduate teaching degrees were impacted in similar ways to postgraduate ITE students.

Covid-19 and online teaching and learning

The move to online teaching and learning for the majority of children and young people in the spring of 2020 required teachers to rapidly improve their digital literacy. A digital divide was evident in the focus group discussions: some teachers,

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18 Objective 1.3, GA (2020a)
19 Objective 2.2, GA (2020a)
20 Objective 2.3, GA (2020a)
21 OECD (2021)
22 Rushton et al. (2021)
23 Worth and McLean (2020)
trainees and school students did not have access to broadband or suitable technology to support the move online, and schools had different strategies to bridge this gap.

Those who were digitally literate and virtually connected, with subject, school, or personal blogs, social media links and/or other means of online communication and networking pre-pandemic, felt better positioned to teach online and to support colleagues with the swift move online. All focus group participants mentioned being able to take advantage of more online events than ever before, giving them access to CPD while saving travel costs and time in their busy schedules. However, even digitally-confident participants raised concerns about the ‘restrictive nature of online teaching’, missed opportunities for group work, enquiry and informal opportunities for learning such as those during form time and extra-curricular activities. These issues were seen as particularly impactful for those new to the profession and the impact of the pandemic will need to be addressed via support for ECTs in their first teaching posts.

Post-Covid-19 lockdowns

The return to face-to-face teaching from autumn 2020 was not experienced as a return to ‘business as usual’. Social distancing measures and the closure of class or year group bubbles with confirmed Covid-19 cases continued to impact on the form, rhythm and interactivity of teaching and learning. With no formal examinations and few practical activities such as fieldwork occurring between March 2020 and July 2021, the usual range of educational experience at the time of the focus group discussions was still seen as ‘being severely narrowed’ for children and young people.

Theme 2: Subject specialist issues

‘...geography teachers need to have their arm strengthened and the GA can help them with that’ (focus group participant).

Subject specialism emerged as a key issue for geography educators across all the focus group discussions.

In the primary phase

In the primary phase, some subject leads for geography conceded openly that they ‘lack the depth of subject knowledge’ required to develop and articulate the rationale and intent of the geography curriculum. For these participants, the time they had available to acquire and sustain subject expertise was a particularly acute limiting factor. Focus group participants working in the primary phase said that they valued guidance from the GA on the scope and purposes of geography and recognised that non-specialists, new subject leads and ECTs would welcome additional guidance on curriculum-making, especially if supported by exemplar schemes of work, learning resources and self-directed subject development materials.

In the secondary phase

In the secondary phase, an equivalent set of needs was identified in discussions, with calls for ‘subject-specific support’ for ECTs, non-specialists and geography teachers who teach outside their specialisms (for example, human geography specialists who teach physical geography units). Such needs arise in part from the sheer breadth of curriculum content included at GCSE and A level, and in part from the culture of performativity that prevails in schools and tends to encourage ‘teaching to the test’.

Through discussions, teacher educators based in schools and universities recognised a trend towards more non-specialists applying for secondary geography ITE courses, suggesting the challenge is likely to become more acute in future. It was suggested that a ‘GA subject audit’ could be developed for teachers, enabling them to highlight their subject strengths while signposting resources and CPD opportunities to support professional development for any specialist knowledge or skill gaps identified.

Secondary phase focus group discussions identified three additional issues at key stage 3 (KS3).

• Participants reported that their departmental subject specialists were more likely to be timetabled to teach examination classes, leaving Year 7 and 8 students more likely to be taught by non-specialists. This evidence accords with the national undersupply of teachers of geography in the secondary phase and the resultant deployment of non-specialists in geography classrooms. It was seen as unrealistic for these teachers to be as passionate or knowledgeable about geography as they are about their specialist subject.

• In relation to the transition from primary school, secondary teachers wanted to know more about the prior education of Year 7 students, especially in schools with a large number of ‘feeder’ primaries. KS3 teachers felt the students’ lack of knowledge made lesson planning difficult, an issue compounded by the high proportion of non-specialists teaching in this key stage.

• Finally, in those schools still operating a three-year GCSE course, participants argued that the teaching time available to really explore geography at KS3 is ‘significantly constrained’.

Ofsted’s influence and the GA’s role

Teachers from both phases commented on the influence of Ofsted’s views on curriculum, pedagogy, assessments and whole-school policies. They asserted that Ofsted’s position on what quality geography ‘looks like’ influences choices and decisions made in schools. However, participants also expressed support for the GA’s work to share examples of ‘a broad range’ of quality geography and to provide independent advice on what constitutes high-quality curriculum development and teaching in geography, which matches Ofsted’s ambition to raise the quality of geography education for all young people. Interestingly, a number of participants...
expressed a need for ‘guidance setting out the underpinning principles of progression in geography’ – a desire that probably reflects requirements in Ofsted’s 2019 Education Inspection Framework around curriculum sequencing. Clearly, few were aware of the GA’s recent work to create and publish professional guidance on this very issue.

**GA professional accreditation**

Participants recognised that the process for schools engaging with the Primary and Secondary Geography Quality Marks (PGQM and SGQM) enabled teachers to reflect on the development of high-quality geography in their schools. However, they noted that the application process requires ‘considerable time and effort’ and that the fee for the Quality Mark can be prohibitive for some schools. Similar views were expressed about the GA’s Professional Passports and Awards, with a suggestion that these could be offered ‘free of charge to student members’ to enable them to begin engaging with GA support and CPD.

**Further professional issues**

Three further professional issues emerged from the focus group discussions.

- The first issue concerned the practice of Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) to commission and use centrally-designed schemes of work. This generated discussion around professional agency and the freedom to utilise areas of specialist knowledge. In essence, teachers were dissatisfied with such a model of curriculum development and expressed a desire for localised curriculum making.

- The second issue has a longer pedigree: some participants reported that a focus on integrating literacy, numeracy and oracy across the school curriculum remains a high priority in their schools. This created challenges for teachers who do not feel confident in integrating skills and cross-curricular dimensions effectively in geography lessons. It also raised questions about the centrality of geography within those lessons.

- The third issue concerned geography fieldwork. Participants recognised that there have always been obstacles to establishing good fieldwork programmes in schools (often from school leaders). In the secondary phase for example, GCSE and A level fieldwork has often tended to be squeezed into Year 10 and Year 12, because schools have not wanted Year 11 and Year 13 students to miss lessons. However, focus group participants reported experiencing increased pressures and difficulties with fieldwork. They felt that despite the ‘strong stance on the importance of fieldwork’ taken by the GA on behalf of the subject community, GCSE and A level fieldwork could become more marginalised in the coming years as a catch-up narrative prevails. Concern was expressed that ‘meaningful fieldwork may not be a priority in school’, but geography without fieldwork would ‘negatively impact’ on students’ experience of and progression in the subject. This view is mirrored in research with teachers exploring what constitutes a good A level geography education. For ECTs, their limited fieldwork experience appeared to be ‘impacting their confidence and subject knowledge to design and lead fieldwork in the future’. This issue is likely to be sustained or even compounded in the short-term, when one takes account of the restricted fieldwork experiences of those undergraduates currently considering entering the teaching profession.

**Theme 3: The value teachers attach to their subject association**

‘There is nothing like being at a face-to-face conference. The Annual GA Conference is a great experience to network and meet people’ (focus group participant).

**GA advocacy**

Participants identified several reasons why they valued their subject association, including the benefits for them personally and/or professionally, for their school and for the broader geography teaching community. They regarded the GA as ‘a provider of strong advocacy’ for the geography subject community, teachers of geography and the place of geography in the curriculum. As an aside, a number of frustrations were expressed about the status of geography in the public perception/popular culture.) Participants felt that the GA listens to members and provides professional responses to new education policies, initiatives and consultations. It was suggested that, as the pace of change in education has increased, some GA responses can seem slow. However, this tended to be accepted when responses were seen as needing to draw on community expertise and to be evidence-informed, measured and of high quality.

**GA journals and website**

The Association’s website was cited as a ‘go-to source’ for information, and resources in digital format. Participants also found the content of GA journals ‘highly relevant’ and valued the teaching strategies, practical ideas and associated resources, especially because these articles are often written by practising teachers.

Teacher educators reported that they use journal articles to introduce student-teachers to the subject association, provide resources on subject knowledge and pedagogy, and draw attention to a range of experts who write about geography.
education theory and classroom practice. The impact of GA journals and website materials was also evidenced; for example, through the references student-teachers make to articles and think pieces in their assignments. Printed copies of the GA’s journals continue to be seen as valuable by many participants. This might explain why, despite being on offer for a number of years, only around one-fifth of GA subscribing members make use of the digital-only versions (see Recommendations).

Publications and other GA resources
Discounted publications were seen as a benefit of membership, and participants were also positive about the school membership option, which gives colleagues and student-teachers access to high-quality teaching resources, critical reflections and journals. The GA’s weekly e-newsletter was praised for ‘signposting current issues, materials and other useful information’, particularly because the Association’s website was seen as less easy to navigate. While web-based resources were often seen as ‘outstanding’, participants found the GA’s website itself often presents them with an ‘overload of materials on some themes’, and that locating new material ‘can be a challenge’. Questions were also raised around how often some resources are accessed and how feasible it is for the full range of material to be kept updated.

Several participants mentioned the Geography Education Online (GEO) website35 and the GeogPod podcast as ‘welcome additions’ to the GA’s range of support. GeogPod36 was valued for its ‘broad spectrum of guests from across the geography community’, including classroom practitioners, teacher educators and academic geographers.

Annual Conference and other CPD
Many focus group participants also highly valued the Association’s Annual Conference and its CPD programme because these provide ‘opportunities for knowledge exchange’ with stakeholders such as examination organisations, Ofsted, academics and classroom practitioners. (For more on this, see Theme 4.) Support was expressed for the free attendance option for the Annual Conference that the GA makes available to its student-teacher members and for young people attending its Future Geographers pathway,37 the latter is designed to enthuse students aged 14 to 18 about geography. Although a good number of participants, particularly those working in small departments, appreciate the opportunity to network at GA events and to have the ‘time and space for informal conversations about classroom practice’, those in the primary phase and those seeking support with specific aspects of practice felt that attending a full day or several days of CPD was unrealistic for someone in their professional position and could even be overwhelming.

Widening the brief
While this focus on the value the participants attach to their subject association reads as a largely positive account, it still provides signals for future action. The GA currently has around 10,000 personal and school memberships, which represents approximately 40% of schools and teachers of geography in the primary and secondary phases in England and Wales. Approximately 10% of members live outside of England and Wales. The Association is always seeking to promote its work beyond its current reach, to teachers new to the profession, those who have not previously engaged (i.e. c.60% of schools and teachers) and those who live further afield.

Making wider links
The GA has well-established relationships with schools and teachers and with ITE providers in HEIs. More recently, it has developed links with school-based ITE providers and geography curriculum leads working in MATs. Focus group participants suggested that the GA’s social media presence could ‘better support the development of wider links and relationships’ if it were to exploit more online platforms and opportunities. It was, however, acknowledged that this would require resources. Participants also recalled how in the recent past GA projects, including Critical Thinking for Achievement, Connecting Classrooms and Young People’s Geographies, enabled schools and teachers to engage with the Association and access some support benefits. It was felt that that similar free-to-access CPD programmes could be designed to support professional needs and to encourage ECTs, classroom practitioners, non-specialists teaching geography and primary teachers of geography to engage with and join the GA as new members.

Overall, however, it was heartening to hear focus group participants making comments such as: ‘we are lucky to have the GA’.

Theme 4: Networking, knowledge exchange and professional development
‘We have found it useful that so much of the work of the GA, in terms of professional development has gone online and being able to access some of the GA branch networks by putting their lectures online has just been fantastic’ (focus group participant).

One of the most prominent and consistent themes to emerge from the focus groups was the ardent desire by geography educators to ‘connect with one another’ – not only as a means to ‘share ideas and practices’, but also as ‘a source of moral support’ and collective resolve. Participants recognised that the GA already has a broad reach and is able to connect teachers with one another via CPD events, social media and local GA Branch activities. It was noted that the rapid proliferation of online networking events over the last 18 months has shown the profession what is possible post-pandemic. These methods were seen as saving time and money as well as being a more inclusive and more sustainable approach to professional

35 https://geographyeducationonline.org/
36 https://www.geography.org.uk/GeogPod-The-GAs-Podcast
37 https://www.geography.org.uk/Future-geographers
learning and teacher development. Online network events from GA volunteer groups were cited as an example of this new landscape.

**Local GA Branches**

Local GA Branches were described by some participants as a ‘good support mechanism’ for geography teachers because they ‘foster local networking opportunities’. However, it was noted that a number of Branches are more active than others and not all were regarded as meeting the specific needs of individuals. During the pandemic, some Branches transitioned effectively to provide online events, which was seen as a positive innovation with potential to attract teachers from further afield. Focus group participants went further by suggesting that this is a ‘moment of opportunity’ to re-examine local GA Branches, to re-engage communities of geographers in schools and universities and to create ‘local micro-hubs’, or what one participant described as ‘nimble networks’ – less formal than Branches and potentially linked to ITE providers, school networks, or other forms of community. It was suggested that ‘more international Branch activity’ could support the networking of geography teachers working outside the United Kingdom, especially for those working in international schools and/or following a British curriculum.

**Continuing professional development**

The GA’s CPD (see also Theme 3 above) offer was seen as wide-ranging and generally responsive to members’ needs. Teachers particularly valued CPD led by subject and practitioner experts that allowed ‘plentiful opportunities for discussion’. They expressed a preference for CPD that supports ‘practical approaches to teaching’, with support materials that can be used in the classroom. However, the professional reassurance provided through GA courses – the confirmation that thinking is ‘on the right lines’ – was equally valued, especially among non-specialists. Online conferences and events, ranging in time commitment and held at different times of the day and week, were cited as ‘helping to develop’ participants’ subject knowledge and skills and supporting discussion around current issues and experiences. Nevertheless, it was noted that the pandemic had increased the number of low-cost webinars and events for educators, making online CPD a more competitive space than previously.

The cost of attending one-day GA CPD events and their associated cover costs were described as ‘a barrier’ to teacher engagement, and a number of participants expressed a strong preference for ‘alternative professional development opportunities’ such as low-cost ‘twilight’ sessions and webinars. Funding for subject-specific CPD was particularly constrained for primary geography leads because primary schools generally prioritise funding around literacy and numeracy. This emerged as an issue of concern, given that primary geography leads had also expressed a need for more support for their subject expertise and confidence.

**The Annual Conference**

The GA Annual Conference and Exhibition was the subject of discussion in more than one focus group. Traditionally, this large, face-to-face event has taken place in the Easter holidays to encourage and assist teacher attendance. The 2020 and 2021 Conferences were both run exclusively online, due to Covid-19 constraints. In addition to live online sessions, both these events offered the option to catch up with recordings post-conference. As with other GA CPD events, this approach was regarded as ‘enabling greater participation’, for example for those with caring responsibilities.

The sheer scale of Annual Conference (with approximately 100 sessions over three days) was seen as ‘overwhelming’ and a ‘barrier to attending’ by some focus group participants because it means committing to a significant amount of time during a school holiday. For these teachers, the availability of session recordings was seen as a particular benefit, because they could watch (and share with colleagues) the sessions during a school holiday. For these teachers, the availability of session recordings was seen as a particular benefit, because they could watch (and share with colleagues) the sessions throughout the year. Attitudes towards Annual Conference varied somewhat dependent on the phase and length of teaching experience. ECTs and primary practitioners tended to express a preference for ‘shorter, more focused’ CPD opportunities, whereas more experienced secondary practitioners ascribed greater value to the networking opportunities afforded by attending one or more days of Conference.

**Online networking/sharing**

Focus group participants saw networking and sharing as an area where the GA could become a more active player in the online geography education community and the discussions produced a range of suggestions for ways in which the GA could innovate to further meet teachers’ needs. Ideas included:

- ‘more TeachMeets’, with brief presentations from and support for ECTs
- ‘drop-in events’ for specific themes and phases with ‘agony aunts’ available to help share experiences and challenges
- stronger support for CPD delegates to ‘network with each other’
- increased use of Twitter parties, Facebook groups, Instagram and other social media platforms
- video clips and blogs to ‘model good classroom practice’.

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38 Opfer and Pedder (2011)
39 Brodie (2021)
40 https://www.geography.org.uk/Setting-up-a-GA-Branch
41 The GA currently supports one international Branch based in Kampala, Uganda.
42 https://www.geography.org.uk/CPD-courses
43 https://www.geography.org.uk/GA-Annual-Conference-and-Exhibition
44 Currently, the GA’s social media accounts include Twitter https://twitter.com/the_ga Facebook https://www.facebook.com/geographicalassociation Instagram https://www.instagram.com/geographicalassociation Flickr https://www.flickr.com/photos/130857923@N07 YouTube https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCn8WodADGAn4zN-K0v6W4kw
Theme 5: Equity, diversity and inclusion in geography education

“We have a more diverse range of teachers joining the profession. There is a challenge to bring in these new voices to the GA and encourage them in ways to share their ideas” (focus group participant).

Increasing concerns around societal and global issues were evident in more than one of the focus group discussions, and several participants were vocal about their desire to ‘take action’, ‘raise awareness’ and ‘facilitate change’ on EDI, anti-racism and ‘decolonising school geography’. There was also some evidence that the GA, like other organisations, should increasingly adopt a public stance in relation to societal and global issues, as it has in Conference sessions and recent journal articles addressing race and decolonising in geography education.

Promoting diversity

Discussions around EDI focused on the need not only for the composition of the GA (particularly its Governing Body and Education Group members) to ‘better reflect the diversity of the education sector and society’ within which it operates, but also for the Association to ‘actively promote greater diversity in all of its work’, particularly through its use of website and advertising materials, its selection of CPD and Annual Conference presenters and its publications’ authors and content. Related discussions centred around the need for the GA to challenge ‘all forms of racism’, to set out anti-racist expectations and objectives for itself and the work it leads on across the subject community, and to consider carefully what the concept of ‘decolonising education’ means for the school geography curriculum: a complex yet important task for a subject whose history is entangled in empire and colonialism.

These discussions took place against a backdrop in which Black and ethnic minority groups are less well represented in teaching than in the workforce as a whole and where undergraduate geography cohorts remain disproportionately white: in 2019, 85.7% of teachers in England identified as White British compared with 78.5% of the working population, as recorded in the 2011 census. In the same year, 89% of UK geography undergraduates identified as white, compared with 74.5% of all undergraduates.

Working internationally

Focus group discussions were not limited to the work of the GA within England, or within the UK. Although the GA has members in over 50 countries globally, it was suggested that geography education themes in the four nations of the UK and in the international context could be better represented on the GA website, and that the GA should reflect on whether its outlook and activities are overall ‘too UK-centric’. A broader range of global perspectives (e.g. in journal articles or at Annual Conference) and ‘strengthened connections’ with geography teachers who work internationally, or on education programmes including the International Baccalaureate, were also seen as important. The use of technology to support and connect with teachers internationally was seen as an obvious opportunity arising from the shift to virtual working spaces.

Other key educational issues

Perhaps unsurprisingly in the run-up to COP26, climate change education emerged as an equally compelling global and societal issue in need of attention. The GA was seen as well placed to lead debates around the climate crisis, education for sustainability and other key geographical issues, and its work in these areas was acknowledged. However, additional ideas were put forward, such as ‘bringing climate change education expertise together in a shared forum’.

The overall conclusion to be drawn from these focus group discussions is that further efforts to ensure that all members of the subject community are aware of the work of the GA, are given multiple opportunities to engage and are offered support for their varied needs, would help create a more sustainable, vibrant, diverse Association that is more representative of all teachers of geography.

45 Ciszek and Logan (2018)
46 See, for example, Pirbhai-Ilich and Martin (2021) and Puttick and Murrey (2021)
47 GA (2020b)
48 DfE (2021)
49 Black Geographers (2020)
Recommendations

For policy makers
1. Respond to the need, identified in this report and in *Subjects Matter* [50], for a national programme of subject-specific CPD for teachers in order to address subject-specialist confidence, skills and knowledge challenges in both primary and secondary phases.
2. Gather and publish data on the proportion of non-specialists teaching geography in the secondary phase.
3. Work with the Geographical Association (GA) to ensure ECTs and those in ITE receive subject-specific professional development as part of a wider programme of pandemic recovery measures.
4. Urgently address the digital divides in the education sector, which apply both to schools and to families.
5. Ensure that requirements for fieldwork are reinstated for examinations in 2023 and reinforce messages around fieldwork requirements within the national curriculum for geography.

For the GA
1. Find more effective ways to signpost GA support to teachers of geography and members, so that individuals are aware of the support that applies to their needs.
2. Create new and innovative ways for teachers of geography to connect with one another through the GA, including through local GA Branches.
3. Promote GA support to teachers of geography new to the profession or unaware of the Association, making increased use of social media and strengthening relationships with Teaching School Hubs, ITE providers and MAT leaders.
4. Accelerate the work to ensure CPD provision is varied, accessible, affordable and wherever possible offered with options for live online and recorded access.
5. Explore ways to quality assure, curate and share teachers’ curriculum and lesson plans, in ways that complement the sharing of practice that currently takes place through journals and CPD.
6. Continue to develop and promote the Association’s authoritative position on central professional matters, including the geography curriculum, progression and assessment.
7. Take steps to address the fragile status of fieldwork within the curriculum, which results in part from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.
8. Improve the navigability of the GA website for users.
9. Introduce a systematic approach to gathering the views of GA members and non-members about the work of the Association.
10. Gather data on the characteristics of GA members at key points in the 2020–25 strategy period in order to gauge progress in terms of diversity.
11. Draw on the work of the GA Governing Body Working Group for Diversity and Inclusion to drive forward initiatives for greater diversity within the Association and support for anti-racist teaching in geography.
12. Continue to develop innovative materials to support the teaching of geography in different contexts from a range of perspectives and focused on global issues including the climate crisis, sustainability and migration.
13. Continue to expand and promote the GA’s digital offer and social media presence in order to broaden the appeal of the Association to all teachers, particularly new teachers, teachers in primary schools and those teaching outside the UK.

For school and ITE geography practitioners and leaders
2. Take advantage of local and national networking opportunities from the GA, including local GA Branches and free online networking events.
3. Make use of the GA’s published guidance and exemplification around primary-secondary transitions and reach out to local primary/secondary schools to explore the idea of a local transition project.
4. Sign up to the GA’s free services, including its weekly e-newsletter, its primary member update and social media accounts in order to keep informed about news and resources in geography education.
5. Use the GA journal online archives to access research and practice relating to the key professional challenges encountered locally in individual schools.
6. Consider switching to digital-only GA membership in order to reduce the environmental impact of membership services.
References


All URLs last accessed 7/1/2022.
GA National Research Reports

The GA’s National Research Reports identify issues in geography education and define, promote and celebrate good practice in geography. The reports are designed to be evidence-based, authoritative and broad in scope, part of the Association’s monitoring of aspects of geographical trends and standards nationally. They have several intended audiences including: practitioners in schools, who want to know how their position compares with the national picture, gain understanding of the issues and find examples or principles of good professional practice; the GA, to help direct its improvement work; and policy makers, by presenting them with evidence of school trends and the impact of earlier policy decisions.