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## Exploring the Judgements of Powerful Outsiders on the Discipline of Geography in Ireland

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**Abstract:** Buoyant student numbers and recent examinations of the state of Geography in Ireland may well be cause for celebration. However, complacency is inappropriate. The future prospects of Geography in the Junior Cycle Student Award (JCSA) remain somewhat uncertain, and the threats to the discipline are pervasive both internationally and nationally. Geography is not well established in the University sector in Ireland. Geography degrees are taught through Mary Immaculate College at the University of Limerick and Dublin City University has only started to award such degrees since the incorporation of St Patrick's College, Drumcondra. At the same time, Geography remains largely unknown in the IoT sector. Evidence from elsewhere has amply demonstrated that Geography is a vulnerable discipline and its academic 'legitimacy' cannot simply be taken for granted. This research explores the vulnerability of the discipline in detail, before continuing to explore how Geography is conceptualised by leading stakeholders in a purposive sample of Irish third-level institutions where Geography is/was not taught. Findings indicate that what little exposure stakeholders had with Geography was overwhelmingly negative. Geography was also considered too broad, having a role as an enabler of other disciplines, rather than as a discipline in its own right. Geography was also perceived as being a rather basic, static, traditional, low status academic discipline. The implications for Geography as a discipline are discussed, and recommendations suggested.

### Geography: A worthy discipline

*'Thirty years ago Hallinan (1981) noted that "Geography is today, more than ever before, an essential part of the core curriculum for every pupil. It, among other things, imparts a wide range of skills, interests,*

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*knowledge and attitudes which enables pupils to develop as responsible people and the lack of which would place each one at a disadvantage”... His words were appropriate when he was writing, and they remain relevant.’ (Waddington, 2011: 28)*

Geographers understand the unique contribution of Geography as an integrating perspective that can facilitate ‘nexus thinking’ (Lee and Dorling, 2016). Such approaches are crucial as we attempt to navigate the future of our increasingly urban, populated, interconnected, fragile, climatologically threatened and mutually dependent world. In tackling dominant issues such as sustainability, globalisation and equality the contribution of Geographers may well prove to be pivotal. However, it must be acknowledged that such perceptions are far from universal. Geography remains a fractured and misunderstood field. A thorough review of the perilous state of the discipline is crucial to understanding the approach behind this research paper.

### **Geography: A vulnerable discipline**

*‘thou should not speak evil of geography...’.*  
(Augelli, 1988: 147)

Internationally, the discipline of Geography has often been described as being in ‘*crisis*’ (Hudson, 1984: 100; Haigh, 1982). Such is the routine nature of this description of the subject that Hudson (1984: 100) asks sardonically: ‘*Has there been a time when geography was not in crisis?*’ Although many commentators may disagree with such a pessimistic interpretation, most will acknowledge its vulnerability (Gibson, 2007). Open, forthright and transparent evaluations are essential to prevent escalating difficulties, and not, as Smith (1988) notes, in order to indulge in Geography’s ‘*collective fetish*’ of exploring Geography’s ‘*alleged inferiority*’ (Abler, 1987: 515). The following proposal put forward by Augelli (1988: 147), although undoubtedly well meant, may censor and silence important debates: ‘*Regardless of their political outlook, geographers, like good Republicans, should adopt a new commandment: thou should not speak evil of geography and geographers simply because you do not happen to agree with them.*’ However, Smith (1988: 160) has also warned of the dangers for Geography when the ‘*discipline is measured in a set of self-reflecting and self-distorting mirrors, as if it needed protection from the outside world*’, adding that ‘*any outward appearance of unity and tranquillity fools only geographers*’. Therefore, a comprehensive assessment of the vulnerability of Geography follows. This is not to be ‘*wallowed in*’, but ‘*washed*’ (Smith, 1988: 161).

Explanations of the perceived weaknesses within Geography are manifold. However, a number of broad concerns can be identified. These include:

- a decline in student numbers;
- a decline in the number of institutions offering Geography;

- its absence at many third level institutions;
- its lack of clarity over the boundaries and nature of the discipline;
- internal divisions;
- its misperception as a 'basic' or abstract subject;
- the impact of GIS;
- the threat of interdisciplinarity;
- the effects of poor teaching;
- a lack of female representation among faculty staff;
- growing managerialism;
- the poor marketing of Geography.

Each of these dimensions of vulnerability are examined below.

### **The decline in the absolute and relative numbers of people studying Geography**

In many English speaking countries outside of the US, Geography has traditionally been both popular and widely taught. However, although numbers are vibrant in some countries, such as Ireland (Kitchin, 2004; Department of Education and Science, 2008), elsewhere things do not look so positive (Kong, 2007a; Sidaway and Johnston, 2007). In Australia, for example, Gibson (2007: 97) states that '*student numbers in senior high school and in many first-year university programmes have declined*'. In England, a country that has traditionally had strong uptake in this field, Geography is currently faced with a decline in uptake (Ofsted, 2008; BBC, 2006), although the introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBac), with its inclusion of either Geography or History has helped reverse that.. It is interesting to note that Clout (2004: 820) refers to Geography being '*overwhelmed by interest in Business Studies and the new fascination for Psychology*'. On a related issue, Kong (2007b) notes that the numbers studying '*geography still has not achieved the same popularity and esteem as professions such as law and medicine or disciplines such as economics and life sciences*'.

Even where numbers studying Geography have increased in absolute terms, this does not necessarily indicate a vibrant discipline. Barnes (2007) notes that in Canada, although numbers of undergraduate majors in Geography have increased, given the general increase in student numbers, in relative terms it has failed to keep pace.

Having explored the issue of declining absolute or relative numbers, the next section will explore the reduction in the number of places where Geography is taught.

### **The decline in the number of places Geography is taught**

There has been a steady decline in the number of places that Geography is taught at third level (Saff, 2010). The seminal event which has often been noted as both

causing and reflecting a crisis in Geography was Harvard University's decision to close its Geography Department in 1948 (Cohen, 1988). Harvard had first offered a course in Geography in 1642 (Martin, 1998). Hence it had over 300 years of history there. Although other factors undoubtedly influenced the decision (Cohen, 1988), the main reason given for this is Harvard President James Conant's '*devastating late 1940s assessment that geography is not a university discipline*' (Murphy, 2007: 123). This event is often referred to as the 'academic war' over the discipline of Geography (Smith, 1987, 1988; Martin, 1988; Cohen, 1988; Burghardt, 1988; Augelli, 1988).

The closing of the Geography department in such a high status institution had a domino effect on other leading third level institutions. As Murphy (2007: 124) notes '*the situation was exacerbated when three other leading universities – the University of Pennsylvania, Stanford and Yale – followed Harvard's lead and dropped their geography departments*'. Similar to Harvard, Geography had an established history in these universities. For example, reading in Geography was required in Yale from the 1770s (Osofsky, 2007).

The closure of Geography departments in the US did not stop with the loss of these four leading departments. Fink (1979), for example, notes the net loss of 32 Geography departments in the US between 1970 and 1976 (Murphy, 2007). The situation was so grave that some commentators were unsure whether the discipline would survive into the new millennium (Wilbanks and Libbee, 1979). According to Murphy (2007: 124), the loss was ongoing as '*the situation deteriorated further in the 1980s when formerly prestigious departments were closed at the University of Michigan (1982), Columbia University (1986), North-Western University (1986), and the University of Chicago (1987)*'. Haigh (1982: 187) remarks that the significance of the closure of the Department of Geography in the University of Michigan was of such a '*magnitude of ... disaster*' that '*it is difficult to explain*'. The closure of Departments of Geography is not only a phenomenon within the US. Barnes (2007) notes similar closures at the University of Alberta and Windsor in Canada.

Summarising the closure at Harvard, Augelli (1988: 146) ominously suggests that '*Geography and geographers should continue to "run scared". We can be just as vulnerable today as we were in 1948 to the whims of administrative decisions, to the demands of financial crunches, and to the potential criticisms of colleagues in other disciplines...*'.

It should be noted that the decline in Geography offerings is not limited to third level. Although once widely taught in the US, it is now a reality that many Americans can very successfully transit from kindergarten to university graduates without every studying Geography (Saff, 2010; De Blij, 2005). Having examined the significant number of closures of Geography departments, it is opportune to note that in many third level institutions Geography was never offered as a subject in the first place. The next section explores this issue in-depth.

### **The absence of Geography at third level**

*'American geography, then, is a small and "non-traditional" discipline.'*  
(Haigh, 1982: 187)

An important consideration in assessing the vulnerability of Geography as a discipline is reflected not only in the closure of prestigious universities, such as Harvard, Yale and Stanford, but in the lack of introduction of such courses in many colleges in the first place. In assessing the period 1900 to 1950 in the US, Murphy (2007: 122) notes that *'this period also saw significant weaknesses in geography's institutionalization. Geography never found an independent foothold at some of the nation's leading research universities...it was largely ignored at many smaller liberal-arts colleges, and it occupied a relatively marginal position in many of the colleges and universities where it was present'*.

The Geography department's closure at Harvard not only influenced the closure of departments elsewhere, but also resulted in the lack of establishment of such departments in many of the growing state universities and liberal-arts colleges throughout the US (Murphy, 2007). Bjelland (2004) notes that 93% of liberal arts colleges in the US lack degree granting Geography programmes. In a similar vein, Kong (2007b) notes that only one out of the three universities in Singapore teaches Geography.

Closer to home, the absence of Geography at a number of prestigious institutions in the UK, such as Imperial College London (ICL) has been noted (Sidaway and Johnston, 2007). As a science-based university one might have expected ICL to develop a strong Geography Department based around areas such as physical geography, environmental geography, remote sensing or GIS. Similarly, Sidaway and Johnston (2007) note that Geography is not present in a number of universities established in the 1960s, including East Anglia, York, Warwick, Essex and Kent. Overall, however, Geography is taught at most of the universities in the UK, including both the older and more prestigious universities and those that were formerly polytechnics (Sidaway and Johnston, 2007). The absence of Geography in many third-level institutions in Ireland has already been addressed above.

Having explored where Geography has failed to be validated by inclusion as a discipline, the next section will explore how Geography remains vulnerable because of its perception as lacking focus and clarity.

### **Geography: a lack of focus and clarity**

*'The strange fact ... is the role of geography ... is at once anomalous and ubiquitous. Geography lacks a clear identity ... so the problem for geographers, curriculum planners, and teachers is to find ways to acknowledge and act on this reality.'*  
(Douglass, 1998: 143)

Pritchard and Hutchinson (2006: 2) describe Geographers as being *'inveterately promiscuous in the ways they borrow and synthesize ideas'* (Gibson, 2007: 98).

While this diversity is undoubtedly a strength in many ways, it appears to present a significant difficulty for those in other disciplines attempting to understand the exact nature and scope of Geography. This uncertainty is by no means new. In discussing a speech by William Morris Davis in 1905, Pattison (1990: 203) refers to the ‘*familiar suspicion that geography is simply an undisciplined “omnium-gatherum”*’. The misperceptions around this lack of clarity remain. In 1997, the National Research Council (1997: 28) in the US stated that: ‘*Consequently, geography is sometimes viewed by those unfamiliar with the discipline as a collection of disparate specialties with no central core or coherence*’. Referring explicitly to the long-standing attempts to mould an identity, Kwan (2004: 756) states that ‘*from decades of antagonism and struggles, it is clear that attempts to create a unified identity for geography based on a singular and purified vision seem to be untenable projects.*’

It must be remembered that the eclectic nature of Geography is not accidental. Geography is a rare discipline in being able to act both as a bridge between other disciplines, as well as to explore and integrate information from a different (spatial) perspective. As Gibson notes (2007: 98): ‘*While biologists, economists, planners, sociologists and others have much to contribute to ... debates ... they do so speaking from specific subject positions. The intent of geographers, by contrast, is to transgress disciplinary specificity*’. This lack of clarity has proven to be a particular issue in schools in the US, where many non-specialist teachers may be involved. As Kariel (1967: 150) states ‘*it is often difficult for persons responsible for geographic instruction in the public schools to obtain a clear-cut and understandable working synthesis of the scope of geographic study*’. Davies and Taylor (2004) have discussed the potential damage of the breadth of geography in an Irish context.

The Royal Geographical Society (RGS, 2015) has commented on the high employment rates of Geographers. White (2010) has explored why Geography graduates tend to have lower unemployment rates than graduates from other disciplines and suggests that this may result from their unique skill combination. White suggests that Geographers are well equipped with analytical skills, numeracy, technological skills, as well as team work skills, and cultural sensitivity. As well as perceptions of a lack of focus and clarity, Geography must also recognise the adverse impact of its internal squabbles. These divisions within Geography form the focus of the next section.

### **Geography: divided territory?**

*‘In response to articulations of new visions of what geography is or should be, debates often turned into antagonistic discourses that are surprisingly tenacious once set in motion.’*

(Kwan, 2004: 756)

Gaile and Willmott (2003: 1-3) depict the breadth of Geography in a positive light, referring to Geography as ‘*a community of diverse thought*’, and laying a heavy

focus on *'unity amidst diversity'*. These authors continue to suggest that Geography has become *'more robust, more recognized, more marketable, more unified, and more diversified'* (Gaile and Willmott, 2003:1). However, this optimistic appraisal is far from the universal perception of the *'duality'* of the discipline (Clifford, 2016). Centrifugal forces may push the discipline apart (Strohmayer, 2004; Morgan, 2014). Kwan (2004: 756) argues that the *'distinctive geographical traditions or specialities ... are often perceived as incompatible if not outright conflicting'*. The issue of the increasing fragmentation within Geography is an important one (Sidaway and Johnston, 2007). Even external commentators are probably aware of at least one *'major rift'* in the discipline, that between Human and Physical Geography (Kwan, 2004: 756). This separation, it has been suggested, is the result of the ontological separation of society from nature in discourses within the field of Geography (Kwan, 2004; Hanson, 1999; Massey, 1999; Massey, 2001). Recent evaluations suggest that this division is widening (Tapiador and Marti-Henneberg, 2007; Sidaway and Johnston, 2007). The second contemporary major rift in the discipline in recent years lies between Spatial-analytical Geographers and Social-cultural Geographers (Sack, 1974; Soja, 1980; Kwan, 2004).

While debate is undoubtedly positive, significant schisms within the discipline continue to render it vulnerable. Haigh (1982: 187) notes Geography as a *'discipline whose traditions have been shaken by an apparently continuing series of curious shifts in its emphasis, and even in its general subject content'*. This image of division is enhanced by the tumultuous developments within the discipline over the last fifty years. In an exploration of the place of Geography in the US, Gaile and Willmott (2003: 1) note the occurrence of *'at least three "revolutions"'* during this period.

The revolutions identified include firstly, the quantitative revolution's rejection of the descriptive exceptionalist Geography that had been dominant, with its *'normative and empirical approaches to analysis and inference'* (Gaile and Willmott, 2003: 2). The second includes the Marxist revolution with its focus on inequalities (Harvey, 1973), and finally the postmodern revolution, or the *'cultural turn'* as it is often known (Harvey, 1989). Other dramatic changes include the rejection of the *'excesses of environmental determinism'* (Murphy, 2007: 123). Such developments are crucial for a lively, evolving and critical discipline. However, elements of these revolutions may cast suspicion on the integrity of the basis of Geography. Kwan (2004: 757) identifies that *'important events in the process include denouncing geographical work of the preceding phase as utterly worthless'*. Also, Kwan (2004: 756) states that not only are the divisions in Geography *'deeply entrenched'*, but more disconcerting goes on to suggest that *'the rift seems to have magnified over time through rounds of polarizing debates and to have led to a situation of mutual indifference and absence of dialogue between these two groups of geographers – a predicament that is arguably more difficult to overcome than antagonism'*.

It has been suggested that the recent post-modern turn in Geography with its explicitly critical approach to the world may have caused particular harm: harm



that a vulnerable discipline such as Geography could well have done without: *'Post-modernism was incredibly appealing from an academic standpoint by being intellectually hypercritical of all knowledge. While this heightened level of criticism did serve to expose problematic areas in geographic research, it also led to an intellectual cul-de-sac where nothing but criticism was acceptable. This criticism of the focus on criticism has led to its near demise'* (Gaile and Willmott, 2003: 4).

It is probably true however that the impact of internal divisions on the standing of Geography are modest compared to the focus of the next section, which looks at misperceptions about the 'trivial' nature of Geographic study.

### **Trivial Pursuit Geography**

*'Geographers have long complained that they are sadly misunderstood and that no one does capes and bays or capital quizzes any more, that is "trivial pursuit" geography.'*

(Smith, 1988: 160)

Perhaps one of the most damning misperceptions of Geography is its pervasive interpretation among the general public as a subject focussed little more than the parrot-style learning of 'Geographical' facts, such as longest rivers and capital cities (Kong, 2007b). Lee and Dorling (2016) allude to this very point when they discuss public perceptions of Geography in the context of *'memories of arcane geographical facts competing on the BBC television quiz programme University Challenge'*. On this issue, Ward (2007: 1058) notes *'the failure of UK "publics" to "get" contemporary geography continues unbounded'*. Naming both the US game show and the popular board game, McDougall (2003) explicitly refers to this as the *"Jeopardy or Trivial Pursuit" attitude* towards Geography, and states that it is *'no wonder students conclude geography is something for grade school and of no importance to the "real world" of their careers'*.

De Blij (2005) refers to this perception of Geography among the population noting how public gaffes concerning the lack of *'geographical knowledge'* of leading politicians (such as President Reagan mistaking Bolivia for Brasilia) tend to *'confirm the public's image of geographic knowledge as equivalent to skill in naming places'*. Harper (1966: 177) suggests that *'the evidence is overwhelming that the public does not consider "knowledge about the world" in itself of sufficient importance to provide space in the curriculum'*. Therefore, while Geography is mistaken for little more than factual lists, it will remain precarious. As Kong (2007b: 53) states: *'A healthy and continued presence of geography as more than mountains and rivers, countries and capital cities in the public imagination and within policy circles can only contribute positively to geography'*.

Given the discussion above the next topic may seem rather incongruous. However, the next section explores the perception that Geography is a rather abstract or theoretical subject and as such less relevant or sought after.

### Abstract Geography?

An additional vulnerability in Geography lies in its apparently abstract and theoretical nature. Perhaps, this perception is the antithesis to that mentioned previously concerning ‘trivial pursuit geography’ and, although undoubtedly less pervasive, may be equally damning. Gibson acknowledges some of the difficulties Geography as a discipline may encounter in public perceptions of its seemingly dubious relevance: *‘When compared with the raison d’être of other disciplines, our central concerns might appear to be more abstract – place, space, scale, interconnectedness, flows and networks, processes and changes’* (Gibson, 2007: 98). Gibson, quite rightly, argues why these issues are important, stating that *‘they are ... key conceptual tools to provide the kinds of knowledges and correctives most needed amidst the dizzying whir of today’s info-entertainment world’* (Gibson, 2007: 98). However, it is clear that the technical language, which may of course be all too easily interpreted as jargon, and the concepts used, at first appear rather devolved from ‘real life’.

In a similar vein, Kong (2007b: 43) refers to *‘a lack of awareness of geography’s relevance’*, its perception as a *‘traditional discipline’*, and that it is only of use for a teaching career. The perception of Geography as a theoretical or abstract subject is echoed by Gibson (2007: 108) who refers to students opting for *‘more apparently “vocational” subjects such as commerce, legal and business studies’*. Having explored misperceptions of Geography’s abstract nature, the next section in contrast looks at how the introduction of GIS/GISci skills may not necessarily be the panacea some might have hoped for or assumed.

### Geography and GIS/GISci

*‘What happens in the wake of the founding of the new Centre for Geographic Analysis at Harvard ... may be instructive ... Its potential to fill an important gap in Harvard’s offerings and to have ripple effects elsewhere, however, is likely to depend on whether it leads to a fuller range of geographic teaching and research at the university.’*

(Murphy, 2007: 128)

As noted by Murphy (2007) above, Harvard has recently moved back into the field of Geography with the opening of the Centre for Geographic analysis. This decision reflects, and no doubt will contribute to, significant growth in the field of Geographical Information Systems/Geographical Information Science (GIS/GISci) globally. Many people see this growth as an opportunity for Geography. On this issue, Kong (2007b: 42) notes that there has been a move *‘to turn to geotechnology as a means of repositioning the discipline within the academy’*. While acknowledging the growing number of vacancies for *Geographers* graduating with PhDs in the US, Gaile and Willmott (2003: 4) acknowledge that *‘many of these jobs, of course, owe their genesis to the considerable and growing demand for education and training in GISci’*.

The reasons for the growth in GIS education in recent years are numerous. Brown *et al.*, (2003: 362) detail a number of these including '*its growing use in a broad array of application areas coupled with the greater affordability, availability and ease-of-use of GIS hardware and software*'. However, Brown *et al.*, (2003: 362) state that much of the education provided in this field is '*focused on technical training rather than on building strong intellectual foundations (Sui, 1995; Warren, 1995)*'.

The growth of GIS alongside Geography has resulted in an uneasy relationship. This discomfort is longstanding. As Brown *et al.*, (2003) identify, as far back as 1988, Terry Jordan (1988) gave his American Association of Geographers (AAG) presidential address in which he argued that GIS is merely a tool constituting '*non-intellectual expertise*'. Brown *et al.*, (2003: 354) makes reference to this unease, stating that '*although geographers have remained central within the emerging GISci community, and although the GISSG has become the largest speciality group within the AAG, there are signs of discomfort in the relationship between academic geography and GIS as one of its children*'. One contemporary evaluation of the potential for a positive outcome for Geography in light of the growth of GIS is undecided. Murphy (2007: 128) suggests that '*it is an open question whether the institutions that are embracing only the technological end of the discipline (i.e., focussing largely on establishing GIS/GIScience centres) will ultimately foster interest and investment in geography more generally*'. For other commentators, the outcome is less uncertain and far more negative. Tapiador and Martí-Henneberg (2007) note that some will refer to the success of GIS/GISci to '*save*' Geography as a '*Pyrrhic victory*'.

There are two substantive issues in regards to GIS being seen as a boon for Geography. The first of these is the very real perception in some areas of Geography that GIS is a new technology that reinforces old prejudices, agendas and power relations. The second refers to the difficulty of Geography educators to utilise and develop its potential.

Examining the first of these issues, GIS has been surrounded by controversy since its inception (Schuurman, 2000, 2002), having been accused of many ills (Pickles, 1995). It has been accused of being both inherently positivist and masculine (Lake 1993; Roberts and Schein, 1995). In addition, concerns have also been raised around a number of other issues including: warfare; surveillance and control; the emerging digital divide between rich and poor opinion formation; and geo-demographics (Pickles, 1991, 1993, 1995; Smith, 1992; Lake, 1993; Goss, 1995). GIS has been described as both '*Saviour*' (Openshaw, 1991), and '*Satan*' (see Openshaw, 1997) (Schuurman, 2002: 261). So divided is the debate that Kwan (2004: 756) states that '*human geographers have become identified in binary and pejorative terms: social theorists and postmodernists on the one hand, and spatial analysts, quantifiers or GISers on the other*'.

Among those that may view GIS as a broad benefit to Geography, concerns remain as to its real potential to aid the discipline. Bednarz *et al.*, (2003: 475), for example, state that '*Geography lags in access to computing technology and*

*training that would enable us to take advantage of GIS'. Locating the causes of the lag, Bednarz et al., (2003: 469) argue that 'the rate of adoption by instructors has been slow' and that the 'relevant factors relate to (1) hardware and software requirements, the need for data, and other technical obstacles; (2) teacher training and a paucity of curriculum materials; and (3) motivation, reward, and broader systemic issues'.*

GIS/GISci may represent something of a threat to the discipline of Geography. Similarly the rise of interdisciplinarity, which is explored below, also threatens the integrity of the subject.

### **Geography and Interdisciplinarity**

*'Geographers are dealing with the seemingly compulsory requirement for interdisciplinarity in ways that are complex and challenging.'*  
(Gibson, 2007:99)

The interdisciplinary nature of much of Geography is undoubtedly a positive feature of the discipline. However, it is not without the danger that it can serve to harm Geography as a distinct entity. There are a number of aspects to this concern, the first of which relates to the significant 'blending' of *Geography* with other subjects which can result in its near fatal dilution. In reviewing high school Geography in the US, Bednarz et al., (2003: 468-9) note that *'three curricular models operate in the US. In the most common model, geography is a component of the "social studies," sharing time in a crowded curriculum with history, economics, political science, and other social sciences...The second model, (is) characterized as the histocentric model because of that subject's primacy in the curriculum... Geography is relegated to secondary status. While not all geographers see this as pernicious... the model makes it difficult to teach geography as a discipline in its own right... The third model, with geography as a stand-alone subject, is found only in Colorado'*. On a related issue, Sidaway and Johnston (2007: 60) draw attention to similar unease in the UK: *'concerns are currently being voiced regarding the consequences of geography's relative erosion as a discrete school subject for the longer-term future of university geography'*.

At third level, interdisciplinarity can also pose serious problems. Such approaches can result not only in a lack of critical mass (Gibson, 2007) among Geographers, but can threaten the very existence of distinct departments of Geography. Kong (2007b: 46) has warned that *'while geography's synthesizing nature is an intellectual strength, it can have complications for institutional positionality, with attendant implications for the department's healthy existence'*. On this issue, it is worth noting Gibson's (2007: 97) stark warning that *'it is true that there is no longer an independent, united school of geography at any university in Australia'*. For Gibson (2007: 101), nomenclature is *'critically important'* in helping students decide on third level courses. It can be hard for departments to resist pressures to move towards interdisciplinarity, particularly where, as Gibson (2007: 101) notes, *'discourses of "disciplinarity as intellectually*

*limiting” were repeatedly mobilized’*. Reviewing the experience of Geography in Australia, Gibson (2007: 99) notes that ‘*geographers have always championed the discipline’s holistic and interdisciplinary capacities ... and although in our own work we have long excelled at crossing disciplinary boundaries ... different kinds of institutional pressures to become interdisciplinary have emerged. These pressures are sometimes less about making disciplines speak to each other, and more about dissolving disciplinary identities altogether for convenient short-term financial savings’*.

Related to interdisciplinarity, particularly in the US, is the issue of the poor teaching of Geography at both school and university level. The next section explores the impact of poor teaching on the state of Geography, with a particular focus on the US and England.

### **Poor Geography Teaching**

*‘Geography ... faces a crisis of identity. As long as students think that, the discipline consists of learning the names of state capitals and leading exports, its future is doomed. However, the uncomfortable truth we geographic educators need to face up to is that this is largely a dilemma of our own making. Despite our claim that geography is more than a body of facts, we continue to use the factual knowledge of our students as the benchmark for assessing their geographic expertise. If geography is to earn its proper place ... we geographers need to change our ways.’*  
(Rallis and Rallis, 1995)

A report examining the state of Geography teaching at second level in the Republic of Ireland acknowledges the strong position of the subject there (Department of Education and Science, 2008). However, this finding is by no means universal. Particular in-depth and prolonged criticism has been levelled at the state of Geography teaching in the US (Gardner, 1986; Bednarz *et al.*, 2003), although problems are acknowledged elsewhere (Wolforth, 1986). Taking a very broad view on this issue, Bednarz *et al.*, (2003: 475) note that ‘*we have not yet clarified the nature and purpose of geography in American education for ourselves, let alone for society at large’*. Unsurprisingly therefore, Murphy’s (2007: 135) review of the discipline in the US is particularly damning: ‘*for several decades the vast majority of students went from kindergarten to high school with virtually no exposure to geography beyond a list of location facts to be memorized’*. The problems in the US concerning Geography education are particularly worrying as they have been ongoing for such an extended period. As Rallis and Rallis (1995) note: ‘*for almost a century, American geographers have warned that teaching geographic trivia does little but trivialize geography ... This is a problem that runs the gamut from kindergarten to graduate school’*.

In the same way that Wolforth (1986) roundly criticised teacher education for Geographers in Canada in an earlier era, so Bednarz *et al.*, (2003: 470) are particularly critical of contemporary teacher education in the US: ‘*Unfortunately,*

*pre-service geography education has not changed in as positive or rapid fashion as in-service education ... Thus, with notable exceptions, a major shortage of well-prepared geography teachers in US classrooms remains*. Bednarz *et al.*, (2003) also outline the lack of a strong enough research base for Geography education in the US to facilitate development of the necessary curriculum and materials. Also highlighting weaknesses in this field, Hill (1989) has explored the weakness of associations of Geographic educators in some countries, including the US.

Unfortunately, problems in Geography education are not only limited to the US. In the UK, for example, Clout 2004 refers to the practice of teaching 16-18 year olds Physical Geography one year and Human Geography the next, a division that often includes a different teacher. However, this appraisal is very mild compared to the significant criticisms that were levelled at the discipline by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) in a damning report published in 2008. The report is so critical that it helps to copper fasten the argument made here that Geography is particularly vulnerable:

*'In primary schools in 2004/5, pupils' achievement and the quality of provision were weaker than in most other subjects... many primary teachers are still not confident in teaching geography... The leadership and management of geography were weaker than for all other subjects in primary and secondary schools in 2004/05... Although pupils achieve high standards in GCSE and A-level geography, there is a significant decline in the number of pupils studying at these levels.'* (Ofsted, 2008: 5-6)

Lee and Dorling (2016) recently stated that: 'In the UK, the phrase "geography teacher" remains a term of abuse'.

Recent examinations of potentially adverse issues facing Geography relate not only to teaching quality, but also to issues of curriculum and approach. Cotton *et al.*, (2013) have explored the problematic issues raised by the intentional and unintentional messages in the '*hidden curriculum*' (Jackson, 1968). On a related note, Morgan (2014) suggests that the ideology behind New Zealand's Geography curriculum has been challenged as part of a '*crisis of representation*' leaving the discipline vulnerable. Pickerill (2016) similarly identifies uncritically accepted ethnocentric, Eurocentric and Anglo centric approaches and attitudes that have damaged the discipline.

As well as poor teaching in Geography, the issue of gender representation among Geography educators is important. As the next section illustrates, the continuing gender imbalance in Geography educators may hinder female uptake to, and affiliation with, the subject.

### **A Lack of Female Representation in Geography**

A continuing vulnerability of Geography is one that it shares with many other disciplines, and that is a persistent inequality in terms of the lack of female representation in the 'academy' (Monk *et al.*, 2004). This shortcoming has been

noted in Ireland (Ní Laoire, 2004; Ní Laoire and Linehan, 2002; Storey and Ketch, 1989), Britain (McDowell and Peake, 1990), the Netherlands (Droogleevert-Fortuijn, 2004), Hungary (Timár and Jelenszkyné, 2004), Catalonia (Garcia-Ramon and Pujol, 2004), and the US (Lee, 1990; Oberhauser *et al.*, 2003). It is important to remember that although there are reports of improvements in gender ratios in some countries, such as Singapore (Yeoh *et al.*, 2004); dis-improvements have been observed elsewhere in recent years (Garcia-Ramon and Pujol, 2004). A particular absence has been observed among ‘women of colour’ in Geography in the academy (Mahtani, 2004). Although Murphy (2007: 138) argues that ‘*a few decades ago US geography was almost completely the province of men of north-west European ancestry*’, the problem remains an issue.

Gender equity in academic positions is crucial. If women do not feel that there is a ‘place’ for them in Geography, undoubtedly they will be more inclined to move in to other areas. The relative scarcity of women in Geography, particularly in more senior positions, will also result in a reduced focus in teaching and research on issues of particular relevance to women. Issues of gender and race continue to threaten Geography. Other threats include the issue of a growing managerial culture in third level education which is explored in the next section.

### **Geography and Managerialism**

A more recent threat has been the growing influence of managerialism throughout the global university sector which has impacted on Geography education, research, publishing and funding (Clout, 2004; Mills, 2004). Although discussed in part above in relation to interdisciplinarity, the issue is a wider cause for concern. Managerialism refers to a culture of work, which is anti-democratic and focuses on performance measurement and metrics, accountability and strict hierarchies. Sidaway and Johnston (2007) have identified the adverse impact of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) on defining research priorities and stifling the quality of Geography teaching. Haigh (1982: 186) alludes to the importance of research and publication stating that ‘*the phrase “an excellent teacher” is better known as an academic epitaph than as the accolade of a survivor*’. It should also be noted that even where the numbers of Geography students have increased, rather than this being indicative of a genuine commitment to the expansion of the discipline, Kong (2007b) suggests that it may simply be driven by a ‘*bums on seats*’ philosophy. As well as dealing with the impact of managerialism in third level education, Geography must also improve how it markets itself to wider audiences.

### **‘Marketing’ Geography**

The public’s perception of the nebulous nature of Geography has been addressed above. However, an important related issue is the routine failure of Geography to market itself effectively (Salter, 1986; Nally, 2004; Linehan, 2004; Strohmayer, 2004). Augelli (1988: 1470) identified the need for Geography to focus on ‘*public relations*’, while Hudson (1984: 100) had previously referred to ‘*the discipline’s image problem*’.

There can be no denying the relevance and potential marketability of Geography. However, as a discipline, Geography is failing to achieve its potential in the public eye. Hay and Israel (2001: 117) address this issue, arguing that *‘Geographers have important stories to tell on a wide range of topics. Unfortunately ... they are often very poorly equipped to translate this scholarly work into material that can be more readily communicated to the general public’*. Hay and Israel (2001) outline how Geographers could use the media more effectively, an approach they term *‘newsmaking geography’*. Examining this issue in Singapore, Kong (2007b: 52) states that *‘what remains lacking however is engagement in public debate’*. Ward (2007: 1062) explores the role of Geographers as *‘public intellectuals’* and disappointingly, but accurately, concludes that *‘in general geographers are not performing as public intellectuals, at least not in the way that gets them nominated on to high-profile, media-attention-grabbing league tables and rankings. Economists, historians, sociologists appear on these listings ... Geographers for the most part, however, do not. So, as a discipline we do not have anyone championing geography at the highest level, someone prepared to “represent” ... geography and to name themselves as a geographer’*. In terms of ‘selling’ Geography (Ward, 2007), although the issue of interdisciplinarity has been addressed above, it is worth noting Gibson’s (2007: 103) comment that *‘the kind of obscurism produced by amalgamating disciplines and fabricating generic school names certainly does not help on the marketing front’*.

### **Geography in Ireland: Strengths**

Until recently, it might have been relatively easy to have become complacent over the future of Geography in Ireland. The discipline appeared to have Ministerial and government support (Government of Ireland, 2002), as well as a strong following in the education sector at secondary and third level. Pupil numbers remain healthy with over 50 percent of Leaving Certificate pupils studying Geography in recent years (State Examinations Commission, 2016; Waddington, 2011). Inspector reports examining the teaching of Geography at second level have been equally positive (Department of Education and Science, 2008; State Examinations Commission, 2012; Department of Education and Skills, 2016a, 2016b).

In a wide-ranging review of the state and future prospects for Geography in the new millennium, Kitchin (2004) explored the strengths and weaknesses of the discipline. This review noted a few threats, although the overwhelming message was one of celebration and success. Evidence of this ‘success’, it was noted, could be seen in the buoyant number of students studying Geography at third and fourth level. As Kitchin (2004: 15) stated *‘undergraduate numbers are extremely healthy (some might say excessive)’*. Kitchin (2004) also identified significant increases in funding North and South of the border including the existence of strong Geographical themes in five of the PRTLIs (Programme for Research in Third Level Institutes), as well as the establishment of the Irish Postgraduate Training Consortium for Geography, the Ireland-Geog mailing list, and increase in conferences, workshops and seminars. Kitchin also highlighted the



growing international profile of Irish research, through increasing participation in international research networks, publications, journal editorship and the uptake of key international roles (such as Anne Buttimer's role as President of the International Geographical Union). Based on these successes Kitchin (2004: 16) concluded that '*Irish geography is more visible and engaged... than at any point in its past*'.

### **Geography in Ireland: Vulnerabilities**

However, Kitchin's (2004) review identified a number of vulnerabilities in the discipline of Geography in Ireland. These included a lack in expansion of academic staff numbers to match escalating student numbers, heavy teaching and administrative burdens, and a hiatus in research funding. Kitchin also noted patchy institutional participation in Geographical events (notably the Conference of Irish Geographers), fragile North-South links, institutional restructuring, and limited promotional opportunities for academic Geographers. Little composite information is available on changes since Kitchin's analysis. However, given that the intervening period included a worldwide recession and an economic period in which Ireland received an IMF/EU bailout, it seems unlikely that there have been significant positive developments since.

Kitchin's (2004) consideration of the state and future prospects of the discipline might also have noted a host of other weaknesses both internationally and nationally. At a practical level in Ireland, unlike Maths, English and Irish, Geography is not a core curriculum subject in second-level schools at Leaving Certificate level. Waddington's (2011) more recent review of second level Geography, discussed the absence of Geography as a formal component in the Leaving Certificate Applied and Leaving Certificate Vocational programmes. Waddington (2011) also explored the reduced time devoted to Geography in the Junior Cycle compared to Maths or Irish, as well as the Junior Cycle inclusion of Geography applying to secondary schools, but not to vocational or community schools. At third-level, although Geography is now beginning to be taught at Dublin City University, as a result of the incorporation of Saint Patrick's College Drumcondra, the University of Limerick still does not offer degrees in Geography.

Whilst in the UK, Geography is firmly established in a number of the former polytechnics, it holds no such prominence in any of Ireland's Institutes of Technology (which fulfil a very similar role here, although it should be noted that IoTs were not always degree granting institutions). However, a smattering of Geographers may be found across the IoT sector, often associated with tourism and heritage studies, the discipline remains on the periphery here (McCarthy, 2004). If anything, the prospects for Geography in this sector are in decline. Galway-Mayo IT formerly offered a BA degree programme in Outdoor Education & Leisure with Geography. However, it has been decided that, although Geography will remain the same element of the course, the term Geography is to be removed from the course title (Prendergast, 2012). Examination of courses offered by The Open University that are available to residents in Ireland, as well as privately operated

third-level colleges around the country, also show poor development and visibility for the discipline.

Any examination of the discipline of Geography in Ireland might also note its lack of media profile, and the absence of vocal publicly identifiable advocates (Strohmayer, 2004). Although there have been some positive developments on this front, including media appearances by John Sweeney and colleagues on climate change and Susan Hegarty's RTE role, more is required. Geography in Ireland also lacks professional development opportunities, such as the UK Royal Geographical Society's Chartered Geographer programme.

### **Waking up to the threat: Geography at Junior Certificate Student Award (JCSA) level in Ireland**

Many Geographers in Ireland may now be willing to acknowledge the vulnerable state of the discipline since the threat emerged in 2010 to the continuation of Geography as a distinct exam subject in the Junior Certificate (Holden, 2011). Proposals had been made to incorporate Geography alongside History into some form of interdisciplinary Social Studies course (Holden, 2011). Alarming, the NCCA (2011: 10-11) document outlining which subjects advocates suggested should be included in the revised Junior Certificate, fails to mention Geography directly. These proposals have since been rigorously opposed (Boyle *et al.*, 2011; Lydon, 2011; Duffy and Kitchin, 2011). However, it is clear from the submissions listed in the NCCA Junior Cycle review (2011: 41-42) that none of the organisational advocates that one might have hoped to see representing Geography at any level, made a submission (e.g., AGTI, GSI, RIA- Geographical Sciences Committee). Although this deficit was undoubtedly a result of a constellation of factors, including the timing and short duration of the invitation of submissions, which was during the summer holiday period, as well as the lack of publicity or media attention given to the consultation process, their absence was unfortunate. At present, Geography remains in the Junior Certificate cycle. However, unlike Maths, English and Irish it is an optional subject (Hayes, 2012). Importantly, schools themselves will decide how many optional subjects to offer and this figure will undoubtedly be less than in the current Junior Cycle. This raises the 'pipeline' into Leaving Certificate issues, if students opt not to take Geography in the Junior Cycle, and raises the spectre of further vulnerabilities to the discipline at Leaving Certificate level.

### **Exploring the vulnerability of Geography in Ireland**

The review above clearly identified the vulnerability of Geography both nationally and internationally. This project was designed to explore how relevant the issues outlined above were in the minds of key academic leaders in third-level education institutions in Ireland. This study focussed specifically on exploring the experience and perceptions of pivotal leaders in academic organisations that did not at the time offer degrees in Geography. This sample was chosen specifically based on the warning included above by Smith (1988: 160) who warned of perils when a

discipline is only assessed from within, or what he terms ‘*a set of self-reflecting and self-distorting mirrors*’. Perhaps the danger of this is best summed up in the phrases ‘*preaching to the converted*’ or ‘*group think*’. While both of the authors of this paper are academics, one is based in a Department of Psychology and the other in a Department of Public Health & Health Administration. As such, we felt that we may more routinely be exposed to a wider spectrum of opinions towards Geography than may be typical in some environments. It was this ‘external view’ that we were most keen to capture.

## Method

The participants in this study were a purposive sample of pivotal academic leaders in six third-level state sector academic settings that did not at the time directly teach degrees in Geography. The sample included key personnel from the University of Limerick, Dublin City University, and four Institutes of Technology (IoTs). In each instance, a request was made to interview the respective President of the College (or their equivalent as nomenclature varied somewhat). Where this was not possible, interviews were requested from other members of the academic element of senior management teams. Two interviews were conducted in one IoT. The achieved sample included a total of seven senior academics, including four Presidents, one Vice President and two Registrars. Notably, six out of the seven participants were males and none had studied Geography at third level. Six of the seven interviews were carried out in person, while one was conducted via telephone. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Ethical approval for the study was granted by LIT’s Department of Humanities Social Studies Ethics Review Group.

This research adopts a phenomenological approach in which meaning is explored from the subject’s perspective (Smith, 1998). All descriptions were analysed using a hybrid method, incorporating both inductive and deductive approaches (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This approach acknowledges both the a priori experience and knowledge of the researcher, but still draws the body of its work from the transcribed interviews. As such, this research is heavily influenced by the Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenological tradition (Dowling, 2007). This approach acknowledges the legitimacy of individual accounts and aims to interpret a person’s experience, whilst acknowledging interviewer preconceptions, but giving precedence to the world view of the research participant (Lowes and Prowse, 2001).

Thematic analysis was conducted to supplement the a priori codes identified by the researcher using the five-stage ‘Framework’ method developed by Ritchie and Spencer (1994). This framework is an analytical process comprised of five integrated stages. These five stages are familiarisation; identifying a thematic framework; indexing; charting; and mapping and interpretation (Rabiee, 2004). As Pope *et al.*, (2000) outline, familiarisation involves immersing oneself in the raw data, while identifying a thematic framework involves identifying key concepts, themes and issues. Indexing involves the formal application of the

observed thematic framework to the data set, while charting involves the collation of these outputs. Finally, mapping and interpretation, the fifth stage, involves examining the data to explore linkages, concepts and explanation (Pope *et al.*, 2000). Seven criteria have been put forward as a framework for interpreting data at the mapping and interpretation stage (Krueger, 1994). These are by examining the words; context; internal consistency; frequency and extensiveness of comments; specificity of comments; intensity of comments; and 'big ideas' (Rabiee, 2004; Krueger and Casey, 2000). Although thematic analysis may be acknowledged as suffering from low academic status, this does not diminish its usefulness in any way and it remains a standard and worthy means of exploring and interpreting phenomenological interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

## Results

Analysis identified nine distinct themes emerging from the seven interviews. These themes included a general lack of engagement with Geography among respondents, as well as negative impressions concerning the enormous breadth of Geography. Other themes to emerge included perceptions of Geography as an enabler of other disciplines, rather than as a discipline in its own right, and negative views concerning the generally low status of Geography as a discipline. The low profile of Geography also emerged as a theme, as did the twin themes of Geography being perceived as being stale and academic as well as it being basic and factual. The experience of poor quality teaching in Geography also emerged as a theme, as did the lack of any intention or inclination among respondents to pursue or promote Geography as a discipline in their respective Colleges. These themes are addressed in turn below.

### Non-Engagement with Geography

One significant finding in this research was the lack of engagement of participants with the discipline of Geography. As noted above in the description of participants, none had studied Geography at third-level. However, it is clear that their disengagement with Geography as an exam subject preceded this as only two of the seven had studied Geography to Leaving Cert level or equivalent. The participation of two respondents to this level might appear somewhat promising, perhaps indicating a commitment or interest in the discipline. However, as is painfully clear from the following statements, their study of Geography to the end of second level schooling was not by choice:

*'My recollection is anecdotal because in my school you did geography if you weren't good enough to do Greek. It was Greek, or special geography, as it was referred to. It wasn't quite a remedial class, but as people fell off the Greek bandwagon, they did geography.'*

*'It was compulsory.'*

### **The Breadth of Geography**

A substantial number of respondents noted the sheer breadth of Geography. This was an important theme within the dataset. Although many Geographers might cherish this aspect of the discipline, among these respondents it was clearly seen as a drawback rather than as a strength:

*'Geography is so broad....'*

*'One thing that would strike me about it would be the breadthness of geography.'*

*'It is broad.'*

This breadth was seen not only as problematic, but also as a potential liability to exam success:

*'Well actually I will say this about when I was doing my Leaving Cert ... I was doing, at the time I was doing 7 honours subjects and I pass subject and I only needed to get 6 honours to get the CAO points, or whatever way it was at the time, and about 6 months before my Leaving Cert I gave up geography. And I gave it up not because I didn't like it, but because it was so wide. It seemed to me like I have so much to do here. I can concentrate on things much more simply you know if I don't do geography. I can do science or physics or something much more straightforward in that sense. I didn't feel that geography was giving me the return that ... now maybe that was a very utilitarian way of looking at it, but that was the way that I looked at it at the time.'*

This feeling is echoed in the following statement, which clearly suggests that perceptions of this intense workload persist:

*'I would think it is more interesting now ... probably too wide, but interesting ... I would say there are two sub-sets, I would say there are two subjects in the current Leaving Cert syllabus anyway at least anyway.'*

The sheer breadth of Geography was clearly problematic for some respondents for whom it was evidence of a lack of cohesion within the discipline:

*'It always struck me that geography is a peculiar type of discipline in that it borders on a whole lot of other disciplines. Now I don't even know whether there is a debate within geography as to whether geography is a discipline in its own right.'*

### **Geography as Enabler**

Another dominant theme to emerge was that of Geography as an enabler to other fields of study, rather than as a discipline in its own right. Evidence of this approach is clear from the following statements:

*'Where geography or any subject would be a winner, is if it could operate as a melder of all of those, and we are talking constantly about interdisciplinary studies, and geography obviously has some real strengths in that regard.'*

*'I see geography as an enabler of other things. Like health science, like economic geography, the environmental piece has become huge now. It has become huge at level 9. It tends to have, my impression, it tends to have more of a personality at postgraduate level rather than at undergraduate... in other words geography really comes into its own at level 9 and beyond. Again it's used more as an enabler, rather than a core subject itself.'*

*'It has application as a background to many fields rather than as a core subject.'*

*'Geography is really a vehicle ... or tool to ... for ... to feed into bigger problem statements or a bigger discipline area ... where it's ... it is just really subservient to that. That's how I would view it.'*

*'By the time you get to third level, geography is probably too generic a term ... it's like a degree in business, what is a degree in business? Is it marketing, is it accounting? At third level you would expect it to be more focussed ... what kind of geography?'*

Almost half of respondents clearly articulated this lesser role for Geography. Respondents could identify a role for some Geography in relation to other subjects such as mining; planning; GIS; engineering; health; economics; agricultural engineering; computing; surveying; business. However, the central focus of such attention was never Geography, but its role as an aid to other disciplines.

### **Geography: Not very influential**

Such an enabling, rather than central role, echoes another theme to emerge from this research, that of the issue of the status of Geography. It was clear from both the tone and content of the interviews that Geography was not seen as a particularly high status or relevant subject. Many respondents described not having thought about it in a long time. For example, one participant stated that: *'The general reputation it has is something akin to history. Important and interesting but not very influential'*. Such was the general disdain for Geography that some respondents were clearly rather puzzled at its popularity, which disconcertingly appeared to run counter to their concerns about employability:

*'You'd have better employment chances if you can offer English rather than Geography because you have got to teach English all the way through to every student in second level. If you are a... teacher having English or Maths as your second subject would give you more opportunities.'*

### **Geography: A low profile**

As well as having a low status, one clear theme to emerge was the low profile of the discipline. The number of Departments teaching Geography was assumed to be low and their role peripheral:

*'I think as a discipline per se, as a pure discipline, Geography is very, very small indeed. I'd be surprised if you could count on more than*

*the fingers of one hand the number of academic departments, be they in universities or the IoT sector; where Geography is studied as a core subject, not just as a module here and there ...'*

*'Geography is taught in Mary Immaculate' [a College that historically has been centrally involved in teacher training]' ... I guess its geography for teacher education.'*

### **Geography: Static and Academic**

Geography was conceptualised by some respondents as being overly academic, esoteric and rather static. This is clear from the following statement, which also makes allusions to the related theme of poor Geography teaching:

*'I'd conceptualise it as an arts subject in as far as it's generally an academic ... let me put it that way. It is an academically taught subject ... that it my impression of it. It would be an academic subject and generally the people involved would not see the real world applications of it. So generally I think it would be taught academically and interesting to the people doing it ... not so interesting to the people listening to it.'*

The perception of Geography as an academic and theoretical subject is also evident from the following quotation:

*'I suspect it ... being taught as a theoretical subject ... There is always that disconnect when a subject is taught theoretically. It is then very difficult to grasp the real application of the subject. Why am I doing it in the first place?'*

The perception of Geography as an overly academic and theoretical subject was so strong that in one IoT this was perceived as a reason not to start to teach it:

*'... as you are probably aware we don't want to get involved in the arts end of subjects ... theoretical subjects ...'*

It is clear from the three quotations above that Geography is conceived as being rather stale and irrelevant, if not to say boring. Despite the guarded language, the following statement also concurs with this perception:

*'My instinct would certainly be to put it at the more traditional, static end of the market ... but probably because it doesn't move at a ... it doesn't change overnight, like geography doesn't change instantly, the topics under it may have evolved over time ... but as a core area it probably has a fairly well travelled path over time.'*

### **Geography: Basic and Factual**

A related theme to emerge was the perception that Geography is a rather basic, factual type of discipline:

*'I think it is one of these disciplines where you need to ... to devote your full concentration and energy to really get something out of it ... because*

*there is a lot of factual information to be absorbed, to be reviewed and it's one of these areas where these days 'people are just too lazy.'*

An element of this same perception can be seen in the following remark: *'physical geography ... which I assume is more or less covered by Leaving Cert level.'*

### **Poor Teaching of Geography**

The theme of having experienced poor Geography teaching was clear from respondents. As well as the quote above, evidence of this can easily be seen in the following statements:

*'The teacher we had at senior cycle was actually a literature man, he was an English literature man. He was a pretty jaded individual.'*

*'I'd ... abandoned it having been bored up to Junior Cert.'*

*'The most boring, boring man on earth ... very tedious ... The lessons themselves ... such an amount of boring work to get through ...'*

*'Our studies of the geomorphology of Ireland were entirely book based ... we did no field trips, no experiential work. My knowledge of the geomorphology of Ireland came from a book.'*

*'We were taught it in a very desk kind of way ... a classroom way ... I don't ever even remember us going on a field trip or I don't think we ever ... kind of visited...'*

Disconcertingly, respondents also envisaged that their experience of poor Geography teachers continued to colour their perceptions of how they imagined the discipline is currently taught. For example, one respondent assumed that it continues to be taught by non-specialists:

*'Geography I suspect is the same. That most people who are teaching geography probably haven't been through a BA or BSc in geography, and so have never really applied geography in real situations which makes it interesting for students...'*

### **Geography: No future intent**

The final theme identified may be termed no future intent. Not only does it appear that Geography may lose its precarious last foothold in at least one college, it seems highly unlikely that others will expand current activities to include this discipline:

*'We are down to our last fellow and he is due to retire next year and we will not replace him with a geographer. That decision was taken 4 or 5 years ago... and whatever geography provision we make will have to come from elsewhere. Now why did that happen? Well there are a couple of reasons. One is that there is a feeling about developing critical mass. There are some new subjects that we are just not going to do or some subjects that we will let come to a natural end in terms of critical mass....'*



*'Nearly anything that appears in a BA programme we would not do per se here ... obviously we have French as a subject but we don't ... We will never have a BA in French, we won't have a BA in Geography, or a BA in History, we will never have any of those normal subjects as core programmes. They will often appear on programmes, but not in themselves as an entity ... we never would I don't think....'*

## **Discussion and Recommendations**

The findings of this study are worrisome for Geography as a discipline. Key personnel in academic institutions have little history of engagement with the discipline. Perhaps more alarmingly, many appear to have had an extremely negative experience of the field. The issue of poor teaching noted in the literature was clearly experienced by the overwhelming majority of participants. Such adverse experiences may have imposed an unexpected and yet perilous legacy for Geography. Geography is considered so broad that, rather than this being seen as a strength, it is perceived as indicating that Geography lacks a real core. Geography was regarded by most participants in the subservient role of an enabler of other disciplines, rather than as a focal point for integrating differing disciplines and perspectives.

Geography was also perceived as being a rather static, traditional and overly academic discipline. It was regarded as being of low status and involving learning a large volume of basic factual information. Perhaps the most alarming finding in this study relates to the future expansion or decline of the discipline. The respondents in this study, who as powerful gatekeepers may potentially have the power to initiate or block the development of Geography as a discipline in their respective institutions, were overtly not supportive of moves towards expansion in this field. One participant signalled a conscious and definitive decision towards effectively closing the discipline, while others could see its potential only in regard to a host of other subjects as little more than an enabler.

Geographers in Ireland cannot afford to be complacent. Nationally and internationally the discipline remains vulnerable. The changes to the JCSA syllabus proved not to be as adverse as anticipated. However, the ease with which proposals to effectively weaken the discipline were made, combined with the lack of an effective, coordinated and timely response needs to act as a wake-up call to Geographers in Ireland. As noted above, there were mitigating circumstances around timing to explain the lack of a formal response. However, the impact was potentially significant. Although the JCSA Geography proposals turned out to be less adverse than anticipated the position of Geography at Leaving Certificate level may in time be equally critically precarious.

It is clear that there needs to be both vigilance and coordination between representative bodies of Geography in Ireland, involving groups such as the Association of Geography Teachers of Ireland, the Geographical Society of Ireland, and the Royal Irish Academy. However, this is not sufficient. Geographers need to market themselves and their discipline to the public in a way that demonstrates

its contribution and relevance. Media and public relations and media advocacy work on behalf of the discipline need to feature as an increasingly integral role for Geographers into the future. Sustained, coordinated and planned media strategies should become a feature of the routine planning of representative bodies for Geography and *Geographers* in Ireland. Geography is all too often misunderstood and perceived by the general public as either basic, or rather nebulous. Perhaps Geographers can learn from attempts to identify and ‘brand’ their work from other disciplines that have faced similar visibility issues. For example, the Association of Schools of Public Health launched an awareness raising campaign ‘*This is public health*’ to identify and demonstrate the nature and scope of their discipline (Association of Schools of Public Health, 2017).

Geography is a relevant and crucial subject that can aid the ‘*holistic and supple understanding*’ of critical issues in our hyper-complex world (Gibson, 2007: 98). Geography is not only a bridging subject, remarkably unfettered by the prevalent disciplinary silo mentality, but it adds its own unique perspective on ‘*place, geographical scale and nature*’ (Gibson, 2007: 98). However, Geography is currently facing a series of threats in both the second- and third-level education sector in Ireland. Therefore, it is crucial that Geographers respond robustly to current and future threats to the discipline. The time for complacency is over. If Geographers in Ireland do not respond effectively to defend their discipline, we may be witnessing the start of a significant and inexorable decline.

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