



## Looking for an international strategy for geography education

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### Abstract

Geography education is under pressure in many countries in the world. Many publications in the field of geography education and a lot of papers presented at geography conferences focus on the problematic position of geography in primary and secondary education. However, describing the problem is easier than finding a solution for it. To take a step forward some effort and creativity are needed. The good news is that at different places in the world new initiatives are developing to stimulate geography in education. The 2013 Rome Declaration on Geographical Education in Europe is one new initiative to help the teaching and learning of geography in schools. Elaborating on the Rome Declaration this contribution presents some ideas for a strategic plan for geography education and invites readers to contribute their ideas for how to take this forward. The Commission on Geographical Education of the International Geographical Union is happy to function as meeting place and to facilitate the sharing of good practices in geography education worldwide in close cooperation with EUGEO, EUROGEO and regional and national geographical organisations.

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### 1. Introduction

Ottens (2013) reported in this journal that the 2013 EUGEO congress in Rome included discussions about the state of geography education and resulted in the Rome Declaration on Geographical Education in Europe. The Rome Declaration is a joint response of the Association of European Geographical Societies (EUGEO), the European Association of

Geographers (EUROGEO), the Italian Association of Geography Teachers (AIIG), and the International Geographical Union (IGU) Commission on Geographical Education to recent threats to reduce or even abolish geography lessons in primary and secondary education. The Rome Declaration, addressing governments and educational institutions in the

European countries, describes the focus of geography in schools and some minimum requirements for good geography teaching. In this declaration, De Vecchis et al. (2013) underline that the teaching of geography in schools is fundamental for the future of Europe and state: “With this firm conviction, we are committed to taking initiatives in the countries of Europe and with the relevant European institutions to provide standards and guidelines that will help authorities develop relevant syllabuses and school curricula, methods and approaches in geography that:

- Apply geographical knowledge, skills and understanding to the main issues linked with processes of change in society, nature and environment at local, national, European and global levels; and
- Highlight the educational values and the role of geographical education in a changing world.

We urge those responsible in European governments and educational systems:

- To recognize the educational value afforded by the study of geography as an essential school subject; and
- To acknowledge its strategic role for realizing active citizenship and balanced social, economic and environmental development.

We therefore request that:

- Sufficient time for the teaching of geography is allocated in curricula for primary and secondary schools;
- The teaching of geography is limited to teachers with a qualified training in geography and geography education”.

The Rome Declaration is unique in the way that it is the first joint declaration of the EUGEO, EUROGEO, AIIG and IGU together. However, it is not unique in its content and scope. In and outside Europe earlier initiatives have been developed to improve geography’s position in schools. Many of the issues mentioned in the Rome Declaration are also important in countries outside Europe. It seems wise to extend the Rome Declaration to a worldwide initiative to improve the position and quality of geography education and to use the

ideas from earlier plans to improve geography education. In the next section three initiatives from the whole range of national and international projects and strategies to strengthen the position of geography in schools are briefly described.

## 2. Different initiatives

The international report on geocapabilities (Solem, Lambert and Tani, 2013) offers a useful approach for researching and improving teacher preparation and leadership in geography. This capabilities approach provides “a theoretical framework for understanding the broader aims of geography in education and how these aims may be shared internationally, irrespective of differences in the scope and sequencing of national curriculum standards”. The idea is that a capability approach can “empower teachers to become leaders of curriculum making by clarifying the ways geography imparts an essential perspective for life and citizenship in a highly interdependent world”. The synthesis of findings of the year 2012-13 presents shared capabilities and examples of implications for collaborations in curriculum making between the US, Finland and England.

Another significant initiative is the US Road Map for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Geography Education. It brought together experts in geography, science, education and research to create a set of landmark reports (Bednarz, Heffron and Huynh, 2013). Stoltman (2013, p. 7) writes that this Road Map “is expected to have a major impact on the discipline that will continue for longer than a decade. It includes recommendations for collaborative research on the most critical issues that geography education is confronted with as curriculum, teacher preparation, student learning of geography, preparation of instructional materials, the uses of geospatial technology in geography education both in the classroom and in field study, and the developments in the discipline that, with time, may become forces of change for school level geography”.

A third important initiative that can be helpful for geography education worldwide is the start of the Geography Education Research Collective (<http://www.geography.org.uk/gtip/>)

gereco), a group of geography teacher educators in the UK. GEReCo is a collective dedicated to the promotion of geography education through research and publications. One of its aims is to add value to the research activities of the wider geography education community. Another aim is to develop original thinking, and new and critical perspectives.

### 3. Next step

As follow up to the Rome Declaration a small group meeting of EUGEO, EUROGEO and IGU took place at the end of February 2014. The representatives of EUGEO, EUROGEO and IGU stated that good geography education can make a difference and that the position of geography education can be improved by:

- *Making the focus and contribution of geography education for society more explicit.*

Although Morgan (2013) writes that we need to be cautious about rushing to define the subject once and for all, he also states that similar themes recur. Firstly, geography is concerned with human-environment interactions in the context of specific places and locations and with issues that have a strong geographical dimension like natural hazards, climate change, energy supplies, land use, migration, urbanization, poverty and identity (Haubrich, 1992). Geography is a set of fascinating stories of people that live on planet earth at different spots in different ways in conditions that change continuously (Van der Schee, 2012). Secondly, geography is very practical and useful in everyday life. Geography helps us to get an overview of locations and regions. Location is a key factor in life, especially in an era of globalization and internet. Geography is the discipline where location has its base. Geographical knowledge and more recently also geospatial technologies offer unique opportunities to show policy makers that without geography we cannot make sense of the modern world nor make plans for its future. Thirdly, geography is a way of thinking and looking at the world around us. The idea that geography education is a

lesson in how to think geographically is clearly described in the manifesto “a different view” by David Lambert and his colleagues (Geographical Association, 2009). Connected with this way of thinking geography education has its core concepts. According to Taylor (2008) diversity, interaction, change, and perspective are key concepts. These concepts are what historians call “second order concepts” (Taylor, 2013) but not all of them are distinctly geographical.

- *Describing the minimum requirements for geography teaching in primary and secondary schools as well as for geography teacher training institutes.*

The teaching of geography should be limited to teachers with a qualified training in geography and geography education. Geography teachers in primary and secondary education should be well trained in physical and human geography as well as in geography education. The geography International Baccalaureate (IB) programme can be inspiring and useful to make a good start (Ottens, 2013).

- *Developing an (inter)national exchange of good practices.*

The teacher is the key to innovation in education. Co-operation between geography teachers can strengthen the position of geography in schools and help to promote geography as an essential part of future education. Some schools have geography teachers that do extremely well in modernizing and promoting geography while in other schools in the same city or region geography is almost dying. Co-operation between geography sections of different schools is rare and this cannot be explained by competition between schools alone. Groups of enthusiastic geography teachers supported by teacher training institutes should try to organize local and regional (virtual) meetings and help lines to develop a challenging school geography.

- *Developing a research agenda for geography education.*

The last decennia show a growing number of publications written by geographers in education. However, the quality of these publications is not always the same. Sometimes there is a lack of focus and often there are insufficient data- and evidence-based studies to support informed decision-making in geography education (Bednarz, Heffron and Huynh, 2013). Review studies in important sectors of geography education are an option to get a better view on the state of the art and where further research is necessary. Another way to achieve more focus in research in geography education is to organize international research groups. These groups should not be exclusive. Brooks (2010) states that we should take notice of research of those for whom research is part of their work as academics or educational professionals, but also take notice of research of practicing teachers.

- *Creating a strong professional network structure.*

Donert (2008) states that it is necessary to recognize the need to establish routes that enable our efforts for geography education to be long-lasting and sustainable. A professional network structure is necessary to open a new horizon for geography education. This network needs to get support from a large range of geographical organizations and stake-holders. Its visibility in the discipline and in the media is an important issue to work on. Organizing a community of learners in geography education using a set of core practices may be helpful.

#### 4. Conclusion

Apart from a discussion about main goals, minimum requirements, networking and PR for geography education it seems worthwhile to work in joint international projects in the field of teaching and research in geography education. Doing geography together is often a good way to get a different view. There are several national and international projects that can inspire us and help to learn about dos and don'ts. One of the older ones is the successful Land Use UK Survey for the 21<sup>st</sup> century project (Walford,

1997). In this project 50,000 pupils were involved in systematic data collection scanning their part of the landscape or townscape. These pupils described and evaluated their own local environments. The fieldwork stimulated discussions about views and visions for a particular area. It also stimulated a discussion about the contribution of geography to environmental awareness and citizenship.

More recently modern geospatial technologies help us to connect people all over the world to learn and think about the future of local environments as well as the future of planet earth. One example is the use of e-learning technologies to connect geography classes in different countries for online learning collaboration and discussions organized by the Center for Global Geography Education of the Association of American Geographers.

At the EUROGEO Conference in Malta in May 2014 as well as at the IGU conference in Krakow in August 2014 the discussion about a joint strategy for geography education will continue. There will not be one solution that fits all, but it is possible to strengthen our community of learners in geography education by helping each other to exchange curriculum ideas, research results and good practices. Butt and Lambert (2014) state that attempts in the past to create forms of international solidarity in geography education met with only limited success as the impact of different unique contexts and traditions in geography is often underestimated. Although geography education may be expressed in different ways in different national settings, an exchange of views on geography education can be helpful. Different views may help to reflect on your own practice. No less important is geographical knowledge itself as it is a vital component in the education of young people in a globalizing world. Geography educators co-operating on regional, national and international scale can help to stimulate and structure the international exchange of geographical information and ideas across borders among the citizens of today and tomorrow. The IGU Commission on Geographical Education tries to help to facilitate such initiatives.

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