

# Part 1: Analysis of entries to undergraduate geography degrees

## Report for the Royal Geographical Society

Natasha Plaister  
Dave Thomson

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## 1. Introduction

This report forms half of the written output from a piece of work carried out for the Royal Geographical Society, analysing the characteristics of undergraduate geography students, and the progression of A-Level geography students to higher education. In this particular report, we look at the characteristics of undergraduate geography students, during the period 2004/05-2017/18.<sup>1</sup> We also consider the proportion of students who went on to complete their degree.

A separate document is available which describes the methodology followed and definitions used.

### Acknowledgments

This publication includes analysis of the Department for Education National Pupil Database, linked to the HESA student record. Inferences or conclusions derived from the NPD or the HESA student record in this publication are the responsibility of FFT Education Datalab and not the Department for Education or HESA.

This work was produced using statistical data from ONS. The use of the ONS statistical data in this work does not imply the endorsement of the ONS in relation to the interpretation or analysis of the statistical data.

### Navigation

Titles used in sections 3 and 4 of this report correspond to worksheets in the Excel document provided showing all of the results of this project. This workbook also includes charts showing trends in entries. Sections 3 and 4 of this report are best read as an accompaniment to these charts.

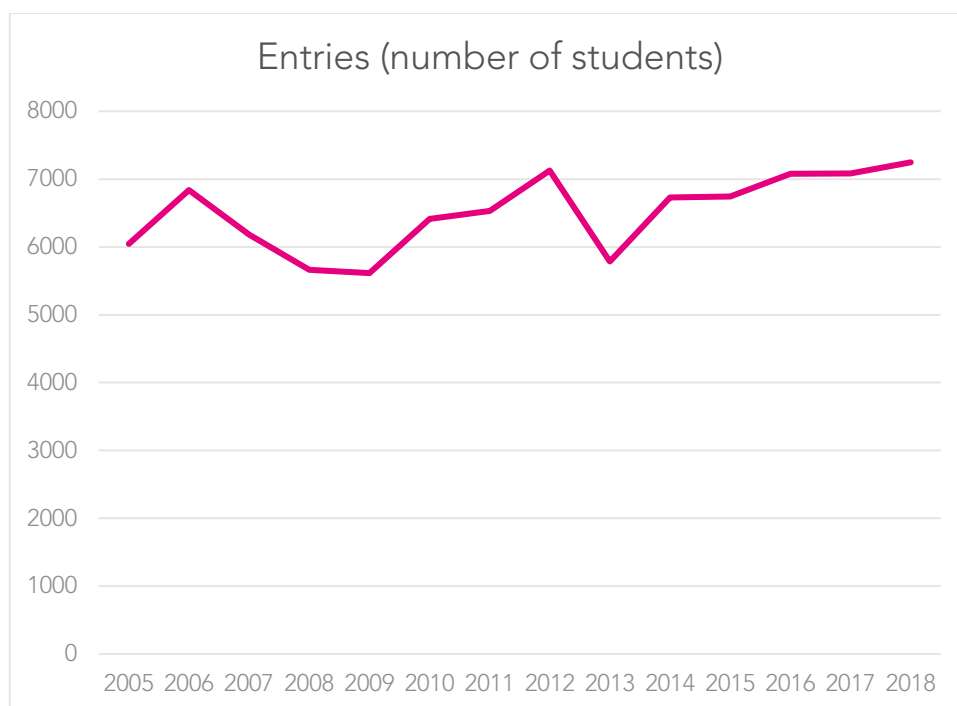
## 2. Summary

Over the period since 2005, entries to geography degrees have increased from 6,043 to 7,247 in 2018.<sup>2</sup> This has not been a steady increase; there was a fall of 1,337 students (19%) between 2012 and 2013, following reforms to higher education spending, although numbers in 2018 had recovered to slightly above the 2012 level. The graph overleaf shows the trend in entries from 2005 to 2018.

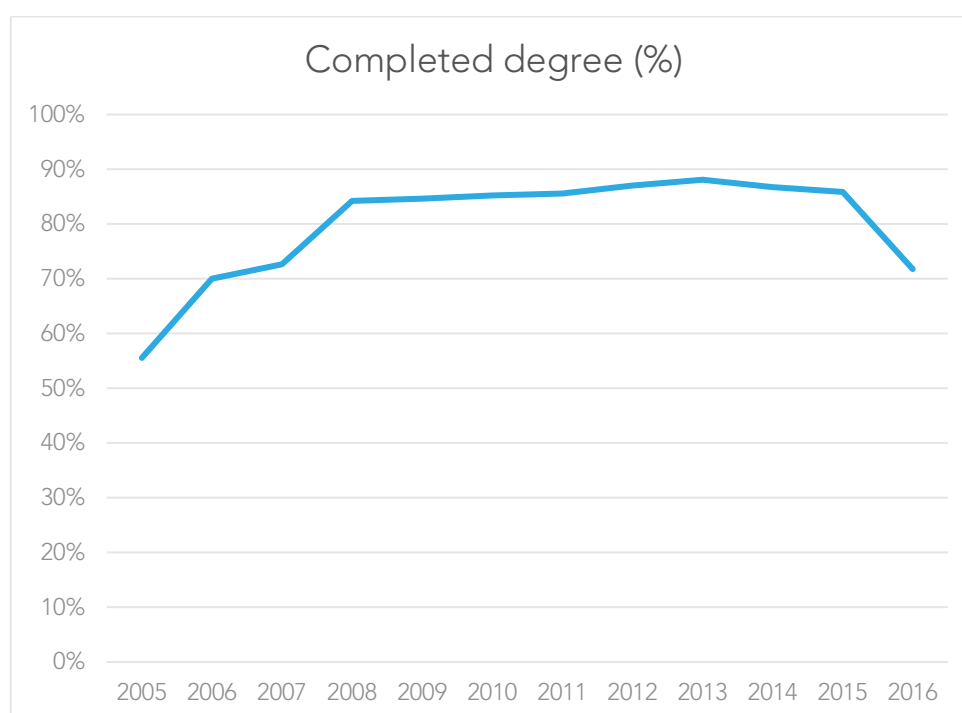
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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this report, years refer to the year in which the academic year finished – that is, 2010 refers to 2009/10, for example.

<sup>2</sup> The number of geography entrants in a particular year is defined as the number of students who began a degree in the relevant year. Through this report, the terms geography undergraduates or geography degree students will be used to refer to geography entrants, unless otherwise stated.



The proportion of students completing a geography degree would appear to have risen substantially. However, the completion rates for students in 2005-7 appear artificially low, and we would suggest that this is due to an error in the HESA student record, as provided for this report. We are pursuing this issue with DfE and will provide an updated analysis if they are able to resolve it.



From 2008 onwards, the completion rate has been fairly steady at around 85%. The dip shown here in 2016 is likely to be explained by students who began four year degree courses in that year, who would not have come to the end of their courses by the time the

latest HESA data was published, or students who took more than three years to complete their degree for other reasons, rather than by an actual fall in completion. For the remainder of this report, when commenting on completion rates for the most recent cohort, we will tend to use students who began their degrees in 2015 rather than 2016 for this reason.

## 2.1 Data suppression

There are some restrictions placed on the publication of data and statistics from the National Pupil Database. In particular, data based on ten or fewer individuals is 'suppressed': the exact number, and any statistics based on that number, cannot be published. This is to avoid possible disclosure of information on individuals.

In this report and the accompanying Excel document, any numbers of ten or fewer have been replaced with a range. In most cases, this was not sufficient, as the number could still have been calculated from data provided. To avoid this issue, we have also replaced one or more other values in the data with a range. This is clearly noted in the Excel document. Suppression has been applied to data in the ethnicity section.

## 3. Student characteristics

### 3.1 Gender

The proportion of geography undergraduates who were female<sup>3</sup> increased from 47% in 2005 to 56% in 2018. Since 2010, it has increased every year.

A higher proportion of female students went on to complete their degree than other students; this was true in every year looked at for this report. For example, 88% of female students who began their degrees in 2015 had completed by 2018, compared to 84% of other students.

### 3.2 Ethnicity

The majority of geography students were white, 88% in 2018. The next largest ethnic group was Asian students, who made up 5% of entrants in 2018.

Between 2005 and 2018, the number of black students more than tripled, and the number of Asian and mixed students more than doubled. The proportion of students who were white fell from 93% in 2005 to 88% in 2018. As noted in our companion reports on entries and attainment at GCSE and A-Level, the school-age population has been getting more diverse during this period, so these sorts of changes are not unexpected.

Generally, white students were slightly more likely to complete their degree than students from other ethnic groups, with the exception of black students. Black students were much less likely to complete than students from any other group; in 2018, only 66% completed their degree, compared to a completion rate of 86% for all students.

### 3.3 POLAR

Participation of local area (POLAR) classification measures the proportion of young people from an area who participate in higher education. Here, we have split areas into five groups,

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<sup>3</sup> Gender is categorised here in two groups: female and not female. The 'not female' category includes all students who did not identify as female. See the methodology document for more details on the categorisation of gender.

or quintiles. The first quintile includes students from areas with the lowest participation, and the fifth the students from areas with the highest participation.

Unsurprisingly, a lower proportion of geography undergraduates came from areas in the first quintile than in any other quintile; this was consistently around 6-7% between 2005 and 2018. The lowest point came in 2012. The proportion of students from the highest quintile increased from 38% in 2005 to 41% in 2018.

Generally, the higher the quintile, the more likely a student was to complete their degree. Of those students who started a geography degree in 2015, for example, 78% of students in the lowest quintile completed their degree by 2018, compared to 88% of students in the highest quintile.

### 3.4 IDACI

The Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) is a commonly used measure of the deprivation of children in an area. Specifically, it measures the proportion of children (defined as those between 0-15 years old) living in income deprived families. Here, as with POLAR classification, we have split areas into quintiles. Quintile one includes students from the most deprived areas, and quintile five the least deprived.

A higher proportion of geography undergraduates (36% in 2018) come from the least deprived quintile than any other. The proportion of students from the most deprived quintile is lower than that from any other, although it has increased in the years since 2012, when it was at a low of 5%, to 7% in 2018.

Similarly to the pattern seen with POLAR quintiles, students from the lowest (most deprived) quintiles were less likely to complete their degree than the least deprived. Of those students who started a geography degree in 2015, 78% of students in the lowest quintile completed their degree by 2018, compared to 88% of students in the highest quintile. Coincidentally, these proportions are the same as those for the highest and lowest POLAR quintiles.

### 3.5 Prior attainment

#### *Qualification type*

Unsurprisingly, in every year considered in this report, the vast majority of geography undergraduates had completed an A-Level in geography in England<sup>4</sup>. The proportion has fallen slightly, from 89% in 2005 to 86% in 2018. A similar trend can be seen in the proportion of students with at least one A-Level in any subject; this fell from 95% to 90% over the same period.

The number of students with vocational qualifications increased from 2005-2018, although it remains low; only 585 students, 8% of entrants, had some sort of vocational qualification in 2018.

#### *Attainment*

We looked at attainment using two measures: mean points score at geography A-Level (for those students who took A-Level geography) and mean points score across the best three A-Levels (for those students who took at least three A-Levels).

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<sup>4</sup> As our analysis is based on the NPD, which only covers England, it is likely that some additional students completed A-Levels elsewhere; in Wales, for example. See the methodology document for more information.

Trends were similar for both measures. Mean attainment at A-Level was higher each year until a peak in 2012, after which it fell each year until 2017. In 2018, the geography attainment measure was marginally smaller than in 2017, and the best three measure was slightly higher.

## 4. Establishment characteristics

### 4.1 HEI group

This section looks at whether geography undergraduates were studying at higher education institutions (HEIs) that were part of a group. Various such groups exist within the UK. For this report, we use the five groups defined by the Complete University Guide, and an additional group made up of universities ranked in the top third, as defined by the Department for Education.

The majority of geography students, 64% in 2018, went to top third universities, and a large proportion (51% in 2018) went to Russell Group universities. A substantial proportion attended University Alliance institutions, although this proportion has fallen from 22% in 2012 to 16% in 2018. Attending universities in the other groups was unusual, with only 3%, 3% and 4% attending Guild, Million+ or Cathedrals universities in 2018.

Students who studied geography at Russell Group or top third universities were more likely to complete their degree than those who studied at a university in one of the other groups.

### 4.2 School type

This section looks at the proportion of geography undergraduates by the type of school in which they took their A-Levels. Schools are broken down into six types: selective state schools, non-selective state schools, independent schools, sixth forms, further education colleges, and other. The other group includes special schools and alternative provision.

More students attended non-selective state schools than any other type of school; 48% in 2018. The next largest group were students who attended independent schools; around 20% of geography entrants attended this type of school.