



INTRODUCTION

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Geography is the subject which holds the key to our future.
Michael Palin, broadcaster and author

1.1 WHAT THIS GUIDE IS TRYING TO DO

This Guide has been designed to help you study geography and related subjects at university. Whether you have already started or are about to start a geography degree, the Guide aims to let you make the most of your time in higher education. Whether geography (or a part of it such as human or physical geography) is the whole of your degree or a substantial part of it, this Guide shows you how to get more out of your time at university. We hope you will enjoy studying for your degree and become a better geographer and more employable. The information and advice here should be as relevant to part-time students as to full-time ones; and to those taking a full geography degree as to those following only a few geography courses or modules within a different degree scheme. So how is the Guide going to help you?

First, we want to explain what higher education, focused on geography, is trying to do and how it will help you develop into a resourceful, versatile and self-confident person (we discuss this further in Chapter 2). This chapter also discusses how to study and study more effectively in terms of

what the research literature tells us about the different ways in which people learn things.

Second, the Guide tells you what qualities employers are looking for in their prospective staff, so you will know what to aim for during your three or four years at university (see Chapter 3 for details). The study of geography is unlikely to take up all of your time at university, nor should it. So in Chapter 6 the Guide suggests several ways in which you can take the initiative and use your spare time to enrich your period at university (and the rest of your life) and improve further your chances of getting the good job you want. Geography, we believe, can really let you get more out of life overall as well as being useful in career terms.

Third, the Guide de-mystifies the various elements of your degree and of the geography courses and modules which make up your degree. It explains why staff use devices like lectures and tutorials, examinations and essays; what they are using them for; and what you can do to get the most out of them. This is what we explore in Chapters 4 and 5. We believe that it will help you if educators tell you why they are teaching what they do, why they teach it that way, what they expect of you and what they expect you will gain from it.

Finally, the Guide provides you with a framework to help you measure your personal progress towards your goals. At various points during this Guide we shall talk about the value of assessing your progress and reflecting on how you are getting on. There is a grid in Appendix A which gives you a structure for this. In Appendix B there is a log where, under various headings, you can add to your personal record of achievements as your degree develops, year by year.

This Guide is necessarily short, which is no bad thing since you can read it quickly. It is *not* a complete geography degree course in one slim volume. It is an overview – something that is often missing – that shows you how all the components of a geography degree fit together. It suggests some steps you can take to make the most of your time at university studying geography.

1.2 THE GUIDE'S LIMITS

So, this Guide has been designed to operate within certain limits:

- it does not teach you geography as such; it is about how to study geography which is what the geography textbooks don't tell you;

- it deals mostly with how to study geography rather than with how to study in general, although many of the issues here are applicable to other subjects;
- it does not cover the ‘lifestyle’ issues of being a student (e.g. your social life, diet or sport);
- it provides general guidance on geography degrees and geography courses/modules, and obviously cannot deal with the unique features of individual geography departments.

1.3 MAKING THIS *YOUR* GUIDE

You are not ‘just another student’. You are you; different from other students in terms of your current skills, your interests in life and personal values. These differences will affect how you interact with your geography degree. So we have written this Guide in a way that lets you ‘customise’ it. There are sections throughout the Guide where we invite you to pause and think about yourself, your academic progress and your personal development. Here is your first chance to do this.

ACTIVITY 1

Try to get clear what your starting point is. You might like to jot down here your thoughts on five points.

- 1) Why did you come to university?
- 2) What do you hope to get out of your university degree?
- 3) Why did you choose geography rather than another subject?
- 4) What would you like to be doing five years after graduating?
- 5) As well as earning some money, is there anything else you would like to be doing or contributing to society, family or friends in five years’ time?

1.4 HOW TO USE THE GUIDE

To get the most out of this Guide we suggest that you use it in two ways. First, it would be useful for you to *read through the whole Guide* fairly

soon, to get an overview of the way we see geography degrees working. A geography degree has many elements which combine to form an integrated 'package' of higher education. This Guide shows you how the various elements of the degree combine and why staff use them. Second, you can use the Guide as a *reference work*, to be taken off your shelf whenever you need ideas on a specific topic (e.g. how to improve your essays).

If you are *just starting at university* or are reading this Guide before you go to university, then we would recommend that you focus particularly on Chapters 2 and 3, and Sections 4.1, 4.2, 4.4, 4.10, 5.1–5.4 and 6.1–6.6. Some other sections can safely be left for later, for example, Sections 4.3, 4.6, 5.6 and 6.7–6.10, since you are unlikely to be doing a dissertation or applying for jobs until much later in your degree course.

If you *have already progressed* some way through your degree, then you could skim quickly through Chapters 1 and 2, and Sections 3.1 and 3.2, whereas it is more important to read Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

For everyone, Chapter 7 is a very quick summary of the whole Guide.

Please remember that although we can give advice and guidance, there are no sure-fire routes to success. You need to read the advice and then adopt those aspects which suit you and your temperament. If a technique of study is working well for you, then carry on using it. However, if you are dissatisfied with your results, you can look through this Guide for alternative ways of learning which might give you better marks.

ACTIVITY 2

You may be assigned to a tutor or a member of staff early in your first year at university. That person's job will be to help you with university study in general and with the particular task of learning geography. A tutor is a useful person to get to know soon, and he/she will want to get to know you. So make sure you accept his/her invitation to meet and keep in touch. Your tutor could turn out to be really helpful.

1.5 FURTHER READING

At the end of the Guide the 'Further Reading' is designed to expand on what has been included here. You will find references to books and other materials on, for example, how to prepare a dissertation, how to produce

a curriculum vitae or résumé and how to write essays. The books are all easily available in university libraries and some will also be found in major bookshops. Particularly useful is Pauline Kneale's *Study Skills for Geography Students: a Practical Guide* (London: Arnold, 1999).

In some ways learning geography is not all that different from learning many other subjects and so you may also want to look at some of the general 'study guides'. They are listed in full and alphabetically in the 'References' at the end of the Guide. Those by Barnes (1995), Marshall (1995), Northedge (1995), Becker (1986) and Rowntree (1998) are very useful. Tolmie (1998) provides a tantalising group of commentaries from students in a number of disciplines who got the very best degree results (first-class honours degrees); unfortunately, most of them could not fully explain why they were quite so successful at university!

So, what is geography?

Geography is about places:

- *what they are like now, were like in the past and why they changed;*
- *how the people and natural aspects of places affect each other;*
- *how and why economies, societies and cultures, and physical systems work in distinctive ways in different places;*
- *how local, regional, national and global systems interact.*

By the end of his/her degree a geography student will:

- *be fascinated by the diversity of places and understand how they work;*
- *appreciate as a citizen different traditions and environments;*
- *understand as a scientist a wide range of contemporary issues;*
- *appreciate the complexity of human and physical systems;*
- *be familiar with the social-science and natural-science approaches to studying the world;*
- *be critical of orthodox thinking and what we take for granted;*
- *be able to describe, analyse, research and understand places using different traditions of study;*
- *be able to communicate that understanding in different ways;*
- *have been prepared intellectually and in terms of abilities to study, understand and communicate a wide range of complex issues long after leaving university.*

. . . which is pretty impressive!

1.6 WHERE NEXT?

Of course, one of the most important points has little to do with geography specifically. You need to think about why you are at university at all, and the ways in which higher education changes people. That is what we shall consider in Chapter 2.

PITFALL I THE SHAPE OF THINGS

Which of these is the correct shape of Greenland?

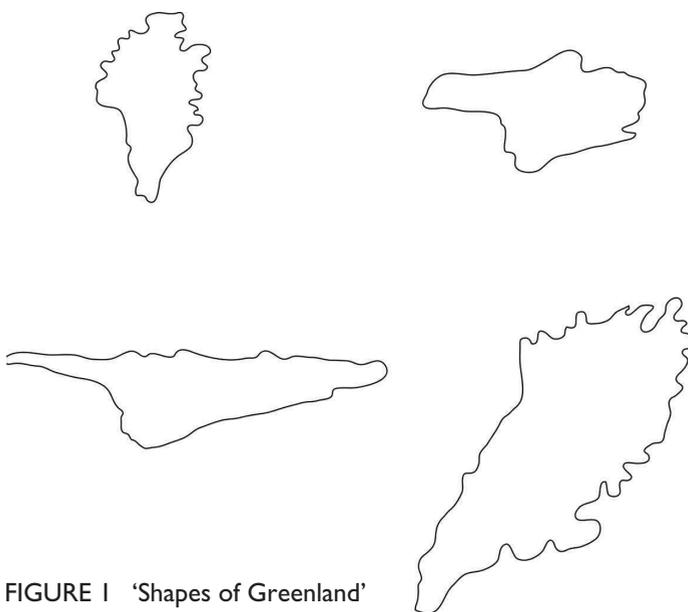


FIGURE I 'Shapes of Greenland'

None of them; they are all distortions. There can be no absolutely correct flat representation of a part of a spherical surface, such as the Earth's surface. Which distortion is best for your purposes?

No map is a perfect representation of reality. Similarly, words and statistics can never describe things perfectly – they always organise, highlight, select and distort the features of places.

A WORLD OF SHAPES.



FIGURE I *Transporter Bridge, Middlesbrough, England*



FIGURE 2 *Sunflowers and silo, Garden City, Kansas, USA*