Geography in South Australian Universities: future prospects

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Introduction

The papers in this special issue of the South Australian Geographical Journal have identified some major changes in the content and delivery of geography programs at the three universities in South Australia over the last 100 years. In addition, there have been significant changes in the administrative structures within which academic geographers in South Australia teach and carry out research. Not so long ago, structures were simple. The University of Adelaide had its Department of Geography and Flinders University its Discipline of Geography. Each was a ‘stand alone’ unit whose main and clearly identified roles were to teach Geography as a major within undergraduate degrees, supervise geography postgraduate degrees and carry out geographical research. Identifiable geography units also existed within several of the Colleges of Advanced Education that were later to become part of the University of South Australia (See Slaytor and Harris 2004, this volume). However, in 2004 we find that Geography has disappeared as an identifiable discipline at the University of South Australia following structural changes and associated staff retirements, and neither Adelaide nor Flinders university has a unit which focuses solely on Geography. Adelaide now has a Discipline of Geographical and Environmental Studies within a School of Social Sciences, whereas Flinders has a School of Geography, Population and Environmental Management. Clearly, some serious questions must be asked about the future of Geography at university level in this State.

This final paper of the special issue therefore considers the place of Geography at Adelaide and Flinders universities in 2004 by examining the current structural and administrative arrangements and the degree programs in which geography staff are teaching. We trace how the present structures arose in the context of national changes to Geography, in particular the proliferation of mergers between former geography departments and other disciplines. From this basis we then go on to speculate about future directions for Geography.

Any discussion of academic organisation in contemporary universities is bedevilled by the problem of inconsistent and ever-changing terminology. From now on we shall use the acronym AOU (Academic Organisational Unit) in lieu of ‘department’, ‘discipline’ or ‘school’. ‘Discipline’ will only be used in its general sense as a field of intellectual endeavour.
The changing nature of academic Geography in Australia

In 2002 the Institute of Australian Geographers (IAG) published four papers on the theme ‘Geography’s cross-disciplinary links’ in its journal *Australian Geographical Studies*. These papers, organised by Emeritus Professor John Holmes of the University of Queensland, were the outcome of research commissioned in 1995 by the National Committee for Geography, Australian Academy of Sciences, into geography departments/programs, focusing on cross-disciplinary mergers and transfers. According to Holmes (2002) no other discipline in Australia’s pre-1987 universities was undergoing the same level of disciplinary linkage and neither was the trend occurring in comparable overseas university systems. Holmes examined the various linkages between Geography and other disciplines such as Planning, Geology, Population/Demography, GIS, and Development Studies but noted that ‘Environmental Studies/Science/Management was by far the most common source of linkage’ (Holmes 2002, p. 9). More detail on the GIS linkages is provided in the paper by Lees (2002) and on Environmental Studies linkages by Harvey, Forster and Bourman (2002).

A fourth paper by Jones (2002) examined the nature of Geography in Australia’s newer universities (i.e post-1987). Jones compared the pre and post-1987 universities and noted that most (16) of the pre-1987 universities offered major/minor courses in Geography compared with the remainder (4) which adopted more interdisciplinary structures. In comparison the newer universities did not, according to Jones, have the traditional nexus between discipline and department as was the case for the established universities and he noted that Geography as a discipline major/minor was only offered by the minority (5 out of 17) of the newer universities. For this reason Geography ‘failed to establish a significant disciplinary presence and identity in these institutions’ (Jones 2002, p. 49) and, according to Jones, no post-1987 Australian university has ever appointed a Professor of Geography. Jones contrasts this with the United Kingdom where a number of former polytechnics have large, single-discipline geography departments.

The University of South Australia clearly falls into Jones’ category of the newer universities which do not currently offer Geography as a separate discipline. What is not captured by Jones’ analysis, however, is the fact that the University of South Australia used to have a number of geography staff but lost Geography as a discipline due to various structural mergers and staff retirements (Harvey, Forster and Bourman 2002). The complexity of these changes is discussed in more detail by Slaytor and Harris (2004, this volume).

Adelaide and Flinders universities both belong to the pre-1987 group of Australian universities which still offer Geography as a discipline major/minor. However, Geography at both these universities has been subject to mergers in Environmental Studies/Management. The reasons for these mergers are discussed by Harvey, Forster and Bourman (2002) in the context of five similar mergers between geography and environmental programs at James Cook, Melbourne, Monash, Newcastle, and Tasmania.

Harvey, Forster and Bourman (2002, p. 30) note that ‘Environmental Studies units emerged in Australian universities in the 1970s, often at the graduate level, to fill a vacuum which emerged as Geography neglected society-environment relationships and applied studies to pursue more narrowly specialised research and teaching.’ They contend that public interest in environmental issues became important again after the Brundtland Report of 1987 and the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. Consequently student interest in ‘Environmental’ degrees boomed in
response to an increased societal awareness of the need for teaching and research in environmental issues (Harvey, Forster and Bourman 2002).

Harvey, Forster and Bourman (2002) comment on the perceived decline in human geography due to the emphasis on environmental teaching at Flinders University, and the loss of Geography at the University of South Australia. They suggest that a number of geography departments saw a move to the environmental arena as a solution to falling student numbers and managed to recolonise the territory that some departments had lost twenty years ago. ‘The result was that areas of Geography were re-badged as Environmental Studies, and the distinctive, interdisciplinary flavour of Environmental Studies/Science programmes was in danger of being swamped’ (Harvey, Forster and Bourman 2002, p. 20).

It is in this context that Geography at Adelaide and Flinders has evolved. At both universities there has been a merger with Environmental Studies/Management, though for quite different reasons. Both universities have developed strong linkages with population studies and GIS although currently the undergraduate teaching of both of these areas of study is stronger at Flinders University. Much of the detailed historical context for what has happened to Geography at Adelaide and Flinders is contained in other papers in this volume (Gale 2004; Maude 2004; Hugo 2004; Smailes and Griffin 2004) but it is relevant to reflect on the current situation of Geography at each university before commenting on implications for the future of the discipline in South Australia.

Academic Geography in South Australia 2004

Other papers in this volume have discussed the achievements of academic Geography in South Australia. For example Maude (2004, this volume) refers to key areas of study where Flinders geographers have contributed in recent years. Smailes and Griffin (2004, this volume) and Hugo (2004, this volume) comment on achievements by Adelaide geographers, in particular as measured by publication records and competitive research funding won. This success is also highlighted by the high proportion of Australian Geography’s top professional awards that have been made to South Australian geographers (see Harvey 2004, this volume). In numerous cases, academic staff have also progressed from appointments in South Australia to influential positions elsewhere.

Another measure of success which has not been addressed by other papers in this issue is the breadth and depth of research undertaken by geography postgraduate students. The various Honours, Masters and Doctoral theses produced by geography students is a lasting testimony to the discipline. The University of South Australia and its predecessor institutions did not produce any postgraduate geography theses but a large number has been produced at both Adelaide and Flinders universities. It is not possible in this paper to list the titles of Honours, Masters and PhD theses, although they can be viewed at the Adelaide and Flinders university websites. Table 1 outlines the total number of theses produced and indicates a strong performance in geographic scholarship. What the table does not show is that before 1990, all the theses were in Geography. It is only since then that awards have progressively diversified to include Population and Human Resources, Development Studies, Environmental Studies and Environmental Management. In addition to the increased diversity there has also been an increase in production over time. Of the 40 geography PhD theses produced at the University of Adelaide since 1960, 27 (68%) have been completed during the last 10 years. And the PhD program in Environmental Studies at Adelaide was only introduced in 1993, so
Table 1. Postgraduate theses supervised by staff in the geography and environmental studies/management AOU’s at Adelaide and Flinders Universities from 1953 (Adelaide) and 1969 (Flinders) to 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University of Adelaide</th>
<th>PhD</th>
<th>Masters</th>
<th>Hons</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>42*</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>337</td>
<td>425</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Studies/Management</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>296**</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population and Human Resources</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>43***</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spatial Information Science</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>31**</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flinders University</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14***</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Studies/Management</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population and Human Resources</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>58***</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development Studies</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>61***</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>97</td>
<td>558</td>
<td>572</td>
<td>1,227</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*12 PhDs in Geography at Adelaide specialized in Population and Human Resources but are not recorded as a separate discipline
**Masters theses of similar length to Honours theses
***A mixture of Honours length theses and longer theses
****Some Development Studies Honours theses have been supervised by Flinders AOU staff but separate details are not recorded

that all of its 18 theses were completed within the last 10 years. Flinders University did not award its first PhD until 1974, so the acceleration in output appears less marked. But, of the 37 PhDs supervised in the AOU, 21 (57%) have been completed since 1993. This record of strengthening postgraduate research output is indicative of the current emphasis on geographical research excellence at both Adelaide and Flinders.

Apart from the strength of research in Geography, it is clear that the traditional ‘nexus between discipline and department’ referred to by Jones (2002) no longer exists at either Adelaide or Flinders universities. In both cases the environmental programs have become important partners to Geography and there has been blurring of the distinction between some Geography and interdisciplinary environmental courses.

Traditionally, geographers at both universities were strongly involved in maintaining the integrity of Geography as a high school subject, although it was never a pre-requisite for entry to Level I Geography at university. The current situation is that Geography as a named subject for matriculation and university entrance (year 12 Geography Studies - HESS general) at high school in South Australia, is losing popularity and has seen a steady decline over the last 20 years (Figure 1) so that by 2004 the number of students attempting year 12 publicly-examined Geography was 40% lower than it was in 1984. The peak occurring in 1992 is a demographic phenomenon across Australia but in recent years there has been a real decline. Geography was ranked 8th among the most popular matriculation subjects through the 1990s but has now slipped to 12th. While this decline does not necessarily directly influence Level I Geography numbers at university, it indicates a loss of status for the discipline as one of the key subjects for high school study. Linked to this is the decline in the separate school assessed year 12 Geography which is currently being incorporated into a new subject which is likely to have ‘environment’ or ‘sustainability’ in its
name rather than 'Geography'. There is a
danger that the declining status of Geography
will at the very least affect the attitudes of
South Australian students and their parents
when making choices about university courses
in terms of their relevance and currency for the
modern world.

The decline in year 12 geography enrolments
over the past 20 years has in part been
mirrored by a decline in overall geography
numbers at South Australian universities.
However, as noted above, this is offset to some
degree by Geography linkages with
environmental programs. Originally the
geography AOU's at both Adelaide and
Flinders drew most of their student load from
students taking a geography major in the
Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Economics, or
undertaking postgraduate research in
Geography. Gradually that has changed, until
the current situation is much more complex
and diverse (Table 2). The two AOU's are now
responsible for offering a wide range of
undergraduate and postgraduate programs.

When the full range of students taught by staff
in the two AOU's is considered, the picture
becomes even more diverse. Figures 2 and 3
show how the 2004 undergraduate student load
is distributed across various degree programs.
At Adelaide the most important source of
students is now the Bachelor of Environmental
Studies, followed by the Bachelor of Arts and
then the Bachelor of Social Science. Figure 3
shows that at Flinders University the Bachelor
of Environmental Management now
contributes over a third of the School's
undergraduate student load, followed by the
Bachelor of Arts (majors in Geography,
Environmental Studies and Development
Studies) and the Bachelor of Applied GIS.

At both universities the range of other degrees
from which the AOU's draw students is
impressively wide. Flinders contributes core
topics to degrees in Social Work and Planning,
Ecotourism, and Biodiversity and
Conservation, and draws other students from
Education, Archaeology, Marine Biology,
Environmental Sciences and almost 20 other
degrees (Maude 2004, this volume). Adelaide
contributes core topics to degrees in Social
Science, Environmental Studies and draws
other students from Environmental Science,
International Studies, Health Sciences and
Science. Overall, Figures 2 and 3 suggest a
significant diversification of teaching activity.
All our eggs are no longer in the one
'Geography' basket. Neither of the two AOU's
has become over-dependent on service
teaching for degrees offered by other
departments. In both cases approximately 70
per cent of the current undergraduate student
load is generated by the AOU's' own key
degree programs as listed in Table 1.
Table 2 – Degree programs taught by staff in the Discipline of Geographical and Environmental Studies, Adelaide University and the School of Geography, Population and Environmental Management, Flinders University, 2004.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ORGANISATION</th>
<th>UNDERGRADUATE DEGREES</th>
<th>POSTGRADUATE DEGREES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Flinders: School of Geography, Population and Environmental Management</td>
<td><strong>Geography:</strong> Bachelor of Arts in Geography</td>
<td><strong>Geography:</strong> Master of Arts in Geography; PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Environment:</strong> Bachelor of Arts in Env. Studies;</td>
<td><strong>Environment:</strong> G.Cert. Env. Man.; G.Dip. Env. Man.;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bachelor of Env. Management</td>
<td>Master Env. Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Development Studies:</strong>*</td>
<td><strong>Development Studies:</strong>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bachelor of Arts in Development Studies</td>
<td>G.Cert International Dev, G.Dip International Dev, Master</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>GIS:</strong> Bachelor of Applied Geographical Information</td>
<td>International Dev, PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Systems</td>
<td><strong>Population &amp; Human Resources:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&amp; Hum Res, PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adelaide: Discipline of Geographical and Environmental Studies</td>
<td><strong>Geography:</strong> Bachelor of Arts; Bachelor of Social Sciences; Bachelor of Environmental Studies</td>
<td><strong>Geography:</strong> Masters (research); PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Environment:</strong> Bachelor of Arts; Bachelor of Social</td>
<td><strong>Environment:</strong> G.Cert. Env. Studies; G.Dip. Env.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sciences; Bachelor of Environmental Studies</td>
<td>Studies; Master Env. Studies; Ph D;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>G.Cert. Env. Man.; G.Dip. Env. Man.; Master Env. Man;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>GIS:</strong> Bachelor of Applied Geographical Information</td>
<td>G.Cert. Spatial Information Science.;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Systems</td>
<td>G.Dip. Spatial Information Science.;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Master Spatial Information Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Population &amp; Human Resources:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Master of Arts (Pop. &amp; Migration Studies)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Development Studies is an interdisciplinary program offered in conjunction with other Social Science disciplines*
Figure 2. Breakdown of student EFTSUs (Equivalent Full Time Student Units) by degree programs for Adelaide Geography, 2004 (N = 171.18) (nb from 2004 the B Env Studies Hons degree was replaced by a B A Hons in Env Studies but is separated here for clarity)

Figure 3. Breakdown of student EFTSUs (Equivalent Full Time Student Units) by degree programs for Flinders Geography, 2004 (N = 161.34)
The future of Geography in South Australia: discussion

As discussed earlier, Holmes (2002) pointed out that by the late 1990s ‘stand alone’ geography AOUAs had become nearly extinct in Australia, yet they continued to thrive elsewhere in the English-speaking world, for example in New Zealand and the UK. Jones (2002) also argued that the reluctance of Australia’s newer universities to establish geography AOUAs contrasted with the UK experience. However, even in the short time since Holmes and Jones wrote their comments, events appear to have overtaken them. By late 2004 ‘stand alone’ geography AOUAs existed in only two of New Zealand’s seven public universities, and in only 37 of the 79 UK universities listed as offering undergraduate or postgraduate geography courses (Royal Geographical Society-Institute of British Geographers 2004). In the other five New Zealand universities and the majority of the other UK institutions (23 out of 42), Geography now coexists with Environmental Studies, Environmental Science or Environmental Management. Whatever the combination of reasons, the pattern is clear. It simply seems to have emerged slightly earlier in Australia than elsewhere. Geographers at Adelaide and Flinders, like almost all their counterparts in other Australian and New Zealand universities and an increasing proportion in the UK, now work in the environment illustrated by Table 1 and Figures 2 and 3 and implied by the titles of the two AOUAs involved. Other papers in this special issue have traced the different processes in the two institutions that have led to the current situation, and one can sense a range of views about its desirability or otherwise. Given the national and international trends it is very hard to imagine a return to the days of the ‘stand alone’ geography department mainly teaching geography students.

The ‘opportunistic pragmatism’ (Harvey, Bourman and Forster 2002, p. 31) of mergers and takeovers has allowed the Flinders and Adelaide AOUAs to survive and even grow in a university environment that threatened them and other small disciplines with decline or worse. And in an era when the Geography label is proving increasingly hard to market at secondary and tertiary levels, ownership of the Environmental Management, Environmental Studies and GIS ‘brands’ promises to be vital to future survival. A pessimistic view of these developments is that because we are now training relatively few geography graduates, we are failing to reproduce our kind (Holmes 2002). At Flinders University this is particularly the case in Human Geography, where the number of graduates has fallen sharply and staff have increasingly taken on teaching roles in environmental management topics. We prefer the more positive perspective: that the new AOUAs at Adelaide and Flinders are now teaching the key integrative geographical concepts, approaches and skills to a larger and more varied clientele than ever before, and that this, rather than the labels applied to courses, is the important thing. An Environmental Management graduate from Flinders in 2004 will have absorbed more geographical training than a BA graduate with a single major in Geography. So will many of our Applied GIS graduates. An indication of this change is that the John Lewis Prizes awarded by the Royal Geographical Society of South Australia to the students achieving the best results in undergraduate Geography at Flinders are now commonly won by Environmental Management or Applied GIS students.

Similarly, as described in other papers in this special issue, staff of the two AOUAs are actively publishing important geographical research on a wide range of topics and applying geographical insights to an equally wide range of consulting and community activity, to the public good. We have breadth and diversity in our activities and a core of...
high quality staff, including ‘new blood’ via recent appointments. That much of our output is now labelled environmental management or demography or urban studies seems to us to be beside the point, though we recognise that some of our colleagues think differently and fear for the loss of Geography’s distinctive identity.

At Adelaide, the environment program is more popular than arts and social sciences, but it is not as dominant as it is in Flinders. This is because of a significant amount of service teaching by geographers into the social science degree and the fact that there has not yet been the same level of integration between Geography and environmental studies programs as occurred at Flinders. However, there is a similar breadth and diversity in research and a gradual change in the labeling of various topics. The net result is likely to be students with a broad geographical training but with degree programs where the ‘Geography’ label is less prominent.

Does the current situation suggest that we can generally be optimistic about the future of university Geography in South Australia? The result of the 2004 Federal election suggests that Australian universities will be pushed further down the path of inadequate public funding and increasing reliance on students to pay some or all of the costs of their courses directly via full fees or HECS surcharges. We may regret that trend, but we shall have to come to terms with it. In the world of the ‘enterprise university’ (Marginson and Conindine 2000), our challenge will be to convince intending students that our courses represent good value for money and university administrators that they represent good business propositions. This will not be easy. Geography, as noted earlier, has always struggled with an image of being boring, old-fashioned and not leading to well-paid jobs. We as university geographers would of course refute that view, but we have yet to succeed in convincing school-leavers. Nor can Environmental Studies/Management courses be relied upon automatically to solve the problem. Despite generally positive student attitudes towards them, neither attracts large numbers of students. GIS, seen some years ago as Geography’s new saviour, also remains a small niche market and has been damaged by the general slump in demand for information technology degrees in recent years.

So we face an uncertain future – as do many disciplines in the Australian university system of the early 21st century. Diversification has improved our chances of survival, but certainly not guaranteed it. We shall need to be vigilant and inventive, marketing our current courses as effectively as we can, pointing to and building on the relevance of Geography to many contemporary issues, and looking for new opportunities. This will continue to place stress on relatively small units whose staff are already heavily loaded with the demands of offering a range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses, while meeting increasing pressure to carry out research and publish. In addition there is an ever-increasing administrative burden imposed by the Commonwealth educational bureaucracy in the name of freedom and competition. Nonetheless, both at Flinders and Adelaide, it seems to us that we are in a much stronger position to meet these stresses and demands than would have been possible had we continued as ‘stand alone’ geography units.

Acknowledgements
The authors thank Tony Mercurio for providing the SSABSA data, and Iain Hay and other colleagues for their insightful comments on the concluding sections of the paper, but responsibility for the views expressed remains ours alone.

References
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