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Outside Edge

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One of the most likely outcomes of the recent results of the 2014 UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) – the system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education – is institutional reform and reorganisation. The location of geography in universities – in terms of both teaching and research – will not be immune to these changes.

Geography is a continually evolving discipline, both in relation to its subject content and its institutional configuration within schools and higher education. Although debates about the state of geography are as old as the discipline itself, evidence from UK university departments has highlighted its vulnerability. Undergraduate recruitment to UK geography programmes has fluctuated, linked closely to the subject's perceived economic and disciplinary value, as well as its place and popularity in the national curriculum. A number of geography undergraduate programmes and academic departments have closed in recent years, while others have faced being merged into larger units. These shifting fortunes of academic geography are not limited to the UK, with the USA, Australia and elsewhere experiencing the closure of university-level programmes.

Complex and multiple reasons for these developments in the discipline include the fluctuating interest in geography in schools, focus on the REF, and an increasing focus on interdisciplinarity, and changing political and economic contexts. The 'neoliberal' university's emphasis on marketization and pervasive audit culture, epitomised in the UK by the REF and National Student Survey, have dramatically changed the terms of engagement in academia and have transformed what it means to be an academic.

As we deliberate here, the 'neoliberal' university has increasingly become a place of uncertainty and insecurity for many geographers. Frequent institutional reorganisation means it can no longer be assumed that academics reside in their disciplinary unit of training and research.

Following restructuring, geographers at Brunel University London, for instance, are now located within, and have contributed to, a broad range of subject areas, including Civil Engineering, Education, Social Work and Environmental Studies. Successive rounds of reorganisation have meant some of us have been located in three different subject areas over a ten-year period. Like us, many other geographers are having to define their place in higher education at a time in which their identity cannot be drawn upon by their institutional location as they are not employed within named geography departments.

In our experience, this presents numerous opportunities as well as challenges. Geographers, with a broad range of ways of working and seeing the world, an expertise of a variety of local, national and global contexts, and a wide variety of technical skills, are uniquely positioned to contribute to a variety of other disciplines. Many universities have promoted interdisciplinarity through cross-disciplinary research units, centres and programmes. While this is often encouraged, the crossing of disciplinary boundaries can prove unsettling for individuals. One challenge is to combine these institutional pressures while defending and reaffirming our identities, and developing disciplinary capital as geographers. Our dilemmas relate to where to publish (geography journals or publications

in other disciplines?), which conferences to attend, and how we might contribute to teaching on non-geography programmes.

Our institutional position outside of geography has enabled us to obtain funding and work collaboratively with youth workers and education scholars to evaluate secondary school and further education provision, and to shape local educational policies. The career paths of numerous other academics are examples of this, including Professor Tim Hall, a geographer at the University of Winchester, who is located within Humanities and Social Studies, teaches sociology, and writes on pedagogy and education in geography journals as well as publications from other disciplines.

The Economic and Social Research Council has identified that human geography research is used by a range of disciplines as well as organisations outside of academia, and that its interdisciplinary nature makes it ideal in allowing 'for the exchange of innovations beyond the discipline's boundaries'.

These examples show that geography is not only practiced as an academic discipline through named geography departments and is not just taught through geography degrees. We urge the discipline to more fully recognise and engage with the increasing number of academic geographers who work outside of formal geography departments. This requires greater acknowledgement of the innovative and cutting edge work that is done 'beyond' its conventional disciplinary borders, academic departments and programmes.

Wherever you are in a university, there is a geographer near you.