



Geography Effect: Two decades of change

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Introduction

The number of students studying HSC Geography has declined over the past two decades, and although there has been a levelling off in numbers, they are nothing like the glory days. What has happened? Are we seeing the end of Geography as we know it?

When I confront an issue like this my starting point is one of self-reflection. What could I have done?

One of my regrets in my involvement in professional Geography between 1995 and 2001, when the review for the HSC was undertaken, was my lack of awareness of the consequences of decisions made at the time.

I had been teaching for 9 years when the Professor Barry McGraw HSC review started, was in my second school, had only been back in Sydney since 1991 and had just joined the GTA NSW and Geographical Society of NSW Councils.

I was sufficiently professionally connected through the writing of articles for Geography teachers since the mid 1980s to get an invitation to be part of the team to set up the HSC Online. This involved a trip to Charles Sturt University Bathurst campus where we set up and populated the online resource for the New HSC in Geography.

In the GTA NSW we were working hard and strategically to represent Geography. I was too in-experienced to be effectively involved and nor could I get the time off school to attend the key meetings, where the decisions were being discussed.

Hindsight makes you wiser than you are at the time decisions are made. However, 25 years of experience

and observation of NESA data has made it possible for me to reflect and see what has happened since then.

This is what I am going to try and do in this paper. Maybe it is to atone for my failure to successfully represent Geography.

I have lots of unanswered questions which you may be able help myself and each other with suggested answers. Is there an ongoing decline of students studying Geography, or have we reached an equilibrium in the numbers studying Geography? What role has the absence of the School Certificate had on Geography numbers and development of skills and knowledge of geography? Is there a mismatch between HSC and University geography or can they help each other? Is there an overemphasis in skills, GIS, perhaps even fieldwork and the SGP in Preliminary Geography? What impact does this have on retention of students into the HSC year?

In addition, to these issues within Geography, what is the impact of overcrowded curriculum, changes in all syllabuses, teachers not trained in geography and high-level political decisions, for example, to drop three unit study, or the removal of the School Certificate? Of course, most recently, there are the findings of the Curriculum Review to consider.

Does Geography have a crisis of identity and suffer from the ills of conflicting agendas and multiple stakeholders? Is there dilution of its core through engaging with new trends such as the agenda of activists, alignment to certain political ideologies and the adoption of new initiatives?

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It appears here that I have made a series of blanket generalisations through these questions, which would be a fair reflection. My plan is to take a deep dive into most of these issues and seek input from membership in the coming writings and podcasts.

This article is only the starting point. It will look into the evidence of the changing participation in Geography over the past 25 years through an investigation of publicly available data on the NESA website.

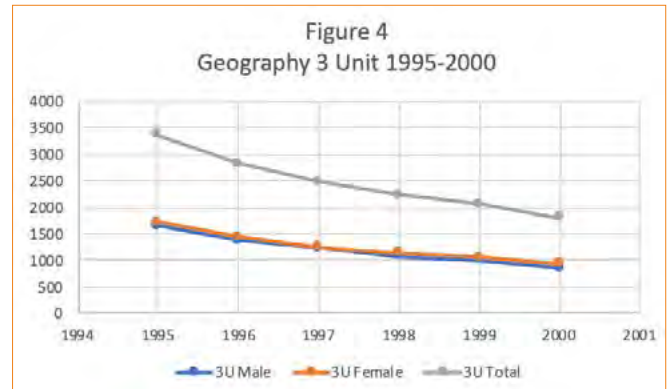
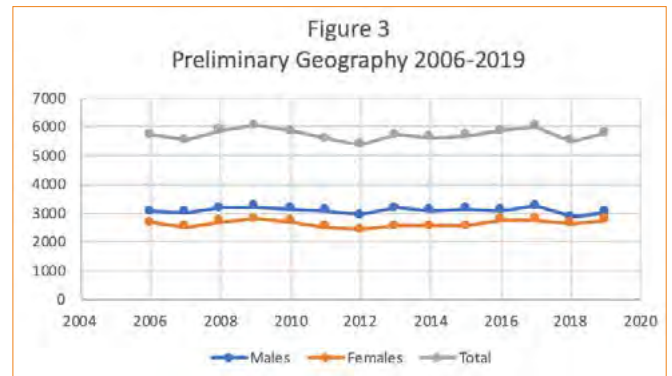
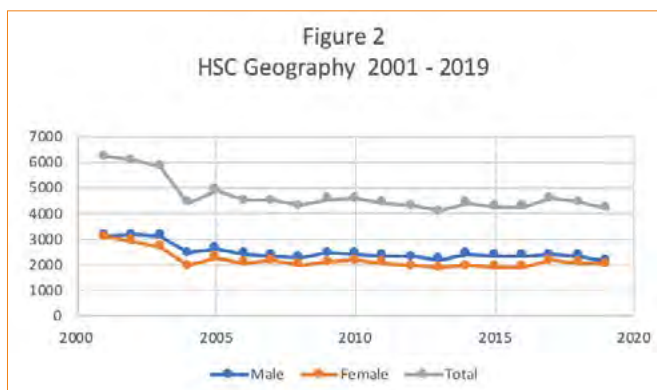
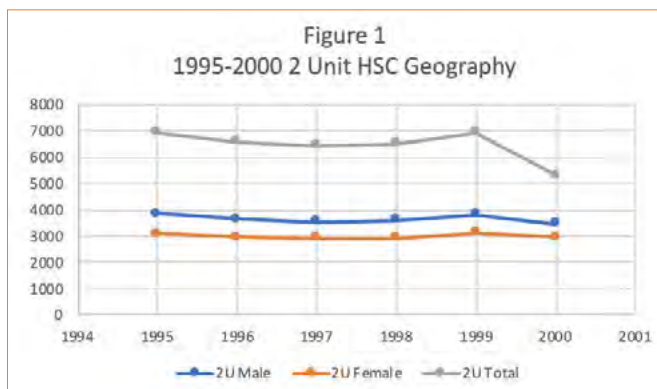
The data

Now let's look at the NESA data.

Let's see if these generalisations about the decline of Geography are indicated in the data. NESA, and the Board of Studies at the time, has provided data for the number of students enrolled in subjects since 1995. The year 1995 was the year that Professor Barry McGraw initiated the HSC review which was implemented in 2001.

In this period, we transitioned from the School Certificate, implemented the new syllabus for Stages 4 and 5 Geography and Three Unit Geography was removed as a course of study with the implementation of the New HSC in 2001.

Firstly, we have the course enrolment data figures for students studying Geography in the HSC (Figures 1 and 2) and the Preliminary years (Figure 3).



Prior to the New HSC in 2001, (1995 to 2000) Geography was studied by students with the option of two units and three units of courses (Figure 4).

The number of students that studied Two Unit Geography range from 5287 in 2000 up to 6932 in 1995. In addition, the number of Three Unit students ranged from 1803 through to 3366 once again between 2000 and 1995 respectively.

It needs to be noted that the students studying Three Unit are included in the Two Unit enrolment numbers. When Two Unit and Three Unit students are combined the total number of students studying Geography was 10,298 in 1995 compared to 7090 in 2000, before the start of the New HSC. One comment can be made is that the decline in students studying in geography was trending down from 1995 six years prior to the new HSC.

Now let's see what the impact of New HSC implementation, if any, on the number of student's studying Geography.

In 2000, the total number of students studying geography (2 Unit) was 5287 and in 2001 increased to 6223. However, the number of total students studying geography was reduced substantially with the removal of Three Unit Geography.

In 2002, there were 6090 students studying Geography and in 2003 there were 5835 students. After this the number of students studying Geography stayed in the 4000 bracket all the way through to 2019. In 2005 there

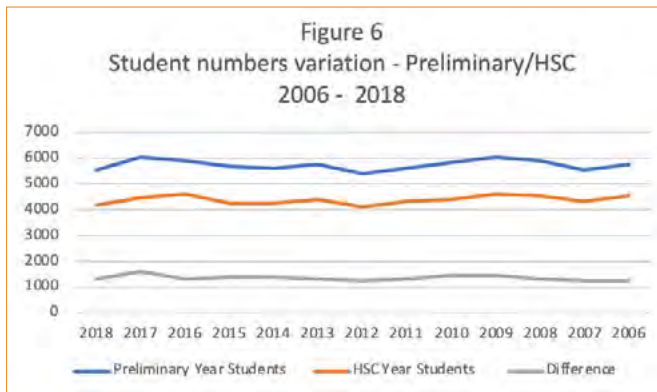
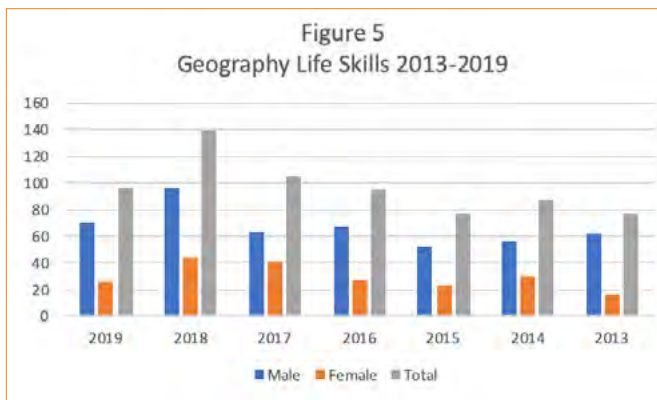
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was a slight peak at 4913 and the lowest point was in 2019 with 4189. What does this suggest?

For the Geography Life Skills course (Figure 5) the NESA HSC data exists for 2013 to 2019. The total number of students studying the course range from 77 up 240 students each year.

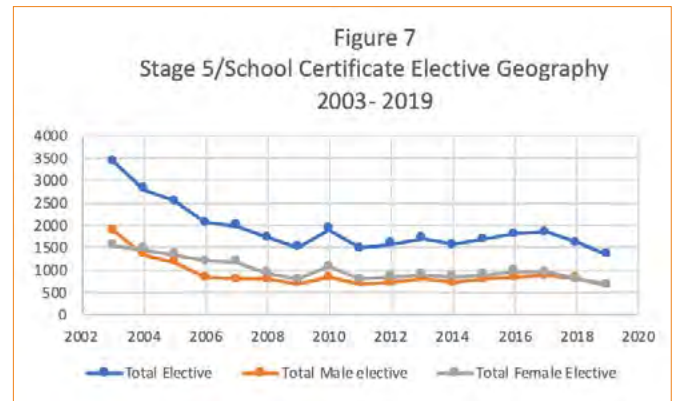
The NESA website also has the figures for students studying Geography in the Preliminary course. The students studying Preliminary Life Skills between 2012 and 2019 had enrolments with troughs and peaks of 102 students in 2013 up to 169 students in 2016. The numbers also drop off into the HSC year.

A comparison of the numbers of students studying Geography in Year 11 Preliminary course and Year 12 the HSC course makes for an interesting comparison (Figure 6).



In short, we are able to see how many students dropped Geography after the Preliminary year by looking at the NESA data. For example, the 2018 student numbers can be compared to the Preliminary course data for the 2017 students. This can be applied to NESA data available between 2006 and 2018 – it's just a matter of aligning the spreadsheets.

In summary, in each year of a transition between Year 11–12, there is drop in the number of students studying Geography between 20–25%. The smallest decline being 21.1% 2006 (1211 students) and largest 26.28% 2017 (1580 students).



The NESA data also provides a breakdown of the number of students studying elective geography in the School Certificate era and the Stage Five era of the Geography (Figure 7).

It is a little bit tricky to compare the elective data prior to 2001 because there is a substantial decline in the number of students studying elective geography.

Why? It seems the elective students are separated from the total number of students studying Geography after 2001 but not before 2001. For example, there was 15,770 students studying geography in 2001 and then the elective units had 2814 students in 2002, so there must be a variation in the collection of data.

However, the data does show that in 2002 there were 2814 students studying both 100 and 200 hours of Elective Geography and this number stayed around this level through to 2007. After this it varied between 900 and 800 students studying Geography through to 2017. The numbers declined again to 788 students in 2018 and dropped further to 676 students in 2019.

The data also provides information into the gender of students who study geography (Figures 1–3). In the HSC and the Preliminary course for every year between 2001 in 2019 there are more males studying geography than females. For the period 1995 to 2000, the pre-New HSC geography era of courses for Two Unit, also had more males than females studying geography.

In relation to Three Unit Geography between 1995 and 2000 the number of female students were greater male students studying the extension Three Unit course.

In relation to the Life Skills courses for both the Preliminary and the HSC year there were more male students studying Life Skills for the period where data is available between 2012 2019.

Where does Geography fit in to all the subjects taught in the HSC year?

The number of students studying the HSC has grown by about 14,000 students from 1995 to 2019, that is, from

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61,551 to 75,006 in 2019 (Figure 8). However, the highest number of students studying the HSC was 77,433 in 2015. Geography made up 6% of this total 2010–2019, 7% 2004–2007, 9% 2002–2003 and 10% in 2001.

Figure 8 HSC and Geography Candidature Comparison

Year	HSC Students	Geography Students	Percentage
2019	75006	4189	6
2018	76732	4432	6
2017	77150	4589	6
2016	77163	4283	6
2015	77433	4276	6
2014	76669	4418	6
2013	74168	4109	6
2012	73397	4297	6
2011	72391	4409	6
2010	71310	4600	6
2009	69261	4556	7
2008	67931	4299	6
2007	67189	4528	7
2006	66185	4504	7
2005	65888	4913	7
2004	66279	4408	7
2003	65311	5835	9
2002	64805	6090	9
2001	62751	6213	10
2000	62883	7090	11
1999	66768	8999	13
1998	65667	8737	13
1997	63038	8901	14
1996	63000	9409	15
1995	61551	10298	17

In the Pre-New HSC era (1995 to 2001) the percentage of students studying Geography compared to the total number of students doing the HSC steadily declined 17% 1995, 15% 1996, 14% 1997, 13% 1998, 13% 1999 and to 11% in 2000.

This percentage drop in the study of Geography is also reflected in comparing the top 30 subjects in 2019 to the top 30 subjects in 2000, the year before New HSC (Figures 9 and 10). In 2000 Geography was ranked 16th and, in comparison to other related HSIE subjects, was ahead of all but one subject with Ancient History at 28th, Economics 21st, Legal Studies 17th, Modern History 18th and Business Studies 5th.

In 2019 Geography was ranked 26th and substantially dropped below similar HSIE subjects such as Economics

22nd, Ancient History 17th, Legal Studies 9th, Modern History 8th and Business Study holding solid at 5th place.

In short, Geography was on the last run of the ladder in relation to HSIE subjects in 2019 compared to second on the same ladder in 2000.

Figure 9 2000 HSC Subject Enrolment Ranks

Rank	Subject	Male	Female	Total
1	English (General)	12866	16635	29501
2	Mathematics in Society	12058	15435	27493
3	Mathematics	11459	11026	22485
4	Contemporary English	11939	9418	21357
5	Business Studies	8667	7777	16444
6	Biology	5075	9731	14806
7	General Studies	5445	6128	11573
8	Chemistry	5273	4877	10150
9	Visual Arts	3132	6765	9897
10	Mathematics	5446	4030	9476
11	PDHPE	4192	5185	9377
12	Physics	6480	2588	9068
13	Computing Studies	6196	2670	8866
14	Studies of Religion	3915	4711	8626
15	English	2729	5567	8296
16	Geography	4291	3849	8140
17	Legal Studies	2922	5163	8085
18	Modern History	2952	4207	7159
19	Computing Studies (General)	3171	3268	6439
20	Mathematics in Practice	2465	3586	6051
21	Economics	3541	2290	5831
22	Design and Technology	2687	1739	4426
23	Ancient History	1557	2706	4263
24	Drama	1042	3064	4106
25	Life Management Studies	571	3424	3995
26	Music Course 1	1775	1800	3575
27	Visual Arts	918	2573	3491
28	Ancient History	1259	1953	3212
29	Food Technology	595	2581	3176
30	Business Studies 3U	1617	1468	3085

Figure 10 2019 HSC Subject Enrolment Ranks

Rank	Subject	Male	Female	Total
1	English Standard	14861	15372	30233
2	Mathematics Standard 2	14219	15440	29659
3	English Advanced	10472	14779	25251
4	Biology	6799	11869	18668
5	Business Studies	9481	8105	17586
6	Mathematics	9030	8281	17311
7	PDHPE	6868	8678	15546
8	Modern History	5471	5858	11329
9	Legal Studies	3827	6689	10516
10	Chemistry	5436	4842	10278
11	Mathematics E1	5123	3707	8830
12	Visual Arts	2279	6247	8526
13	Studies of Religion I	3832	4643	8475
14	CAFS	786	7622	8408
15	Physics	6500	1906	8406
16	English Studies	4963	3390	8353
17	Ancient History	3008	4225	7233
18	Hospitality	2048	4505	6553
19	Studies of Religion II	2163	3883	6046
20	Industrial Technology	4812	891	5703
21	Catholic Studies	3132	2024	5156
22	Economics	3372	1728	5100
23	Mathematics Standard 1	2967	2129	5096
24	Society and Culture	869	3901	4770
25	Music 1	2348	2329	4677
26	Geography	2155	2034	4189
27	SLRS	2951	1154	4105
28	Drama	1428	2652	4080
29	English E 1	1036	2454	3490
30	Design and Technology	1841	1380	3221

Using the data

So, what can we do with all this data?

Firstly, it starts with personal reflection. For me personally, I reflect on my failure to do more to help Geography when I instinctively saw the signals, while I was professionally in position to do more with the changing of syllabuses, School Certificate and the New HSC. There was always going to be an impact on the number of students studying Geography.

The government of the day had declared interest in History rather than Geography as an extension subject in the New HSC. The adoption of new courses introduced increased choice for students and in the case of Geography moving some of those students across to other subjects.

In my involvement with the GTA NSW in this period we were aware of these implications, and efforts were made to address our concerns, but on reflection we could have done more but I don't know what.

Secondly, in hindsight there are little trends there which we should've picked up earlier, but I guess it's difficult to do unless you have 20 years of data which we have now to interrogate.

We need to further investigate the pinch points where there were meso and micro declines in the number

students studying Geography. We could look into the lead in role of elective geography for Stage 6 geography. Should we investigate why female students are consistently under-represented in the study of geography compared to male students, especially since the removal of Three Unit Geography.

Of significance I feel we need to see what we can do with the substantial reduction in the number of students studying Geography between the Preliminary in the HSC years. By substantial I mean, since 2006, the decline is between 20% and 25% each year. We need to strategically build an approach to improve the retention of students between Years 11 and 12.

Thirdly, I hope this data can be used by you in discussion with your teaching staff and middle leadership to develop a strategy to hopefully arrest the decline of Geography. Or, if this is the new norm, how do we move forward?

I have a spreadsheet of all this data, should you wish to have the spreadsheet. So please let me know if you would like a copy and I will forward it to you. You can contact me via martinpluss@gmail.com or twitter.com/plu.

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