



CVCD



SUBJECT BENCHMARK STATEMENT

IN

GEOGRAPHY

Committee of Vice-Chancellors & Directors
and
University Grants Commission
Sri Lanka

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FOREWORD

The work in connection with the development of Subject Benchmark Statements was begun in August 2003 as a part of the overall quality assurance framework that supports academic standards and the furtherance and dissemination of good practice in Universities in Sri Lanka.

Subject Benchmark Statements will support and promote quality and standards by:

- Providing universities with a common and explicit reference point for internal and external programme approval and review;
- Guiding and promoting curriculum development, especially in new departments and new universities, and in other institutions of higher education;
- Evolving over time to take account of changes and innovations that reflect subject development and new expectations;
- Providing an authoritative and widely recognized statement of expectations of what is expected of a graduate in a specific (or designated) subject area in a form readily accessible to students, employers and others with a stake in higher education qualifications;
- Providing a clear and transparent reference point for external examiners;
- Assisting international comparison and competitiveness of higher education awards and student achievement.

SUBJECT BENCHMARK STATEMENTS

GEOGRAPHY

Subject Benchmarking is a policy device aimed at improving the capacity of subject communities to regulate their academic standards. It achieves this by creating subject-based information that can be used by teaching teams as a prompt for self-critical reflection and further development. It provides a set of reference points to show how the key features of a programme, its intended learning outcomes and the standards that derive from these intended outcomes, relate to what is deemed appropriate by the subject community (Jackson, 2000).

Subject Benchmark Statements are used for a variety of purposes. Primarily they are an important external source of reference for higher education institutions when new programmes are designed and developed in a subject area. They provide general guidance for articulating the learning outcomes associated with the programme but are not a specification of a detailed curriculum in the subject. Benchmark Statements provide for variety and flexibility in the design of programmes and encourage innovation within an agreed overall framework.

Subject Benchmark Statements also provide support to institutions in pursuit of internal quality assurance. They enable the learning outcomes specified for a particular programme to be reviewed and evaluated against agreed general expectations about standards.

Benchmarking information is intended to focus on the general intellectual outcomes of learning in a subject rather than defining curricular content. An important aim of subject information is to promote thinking on the learning that a subject-based curriculum is intended to promote and provide general criteria to guide judgments on achievements.

The present Benchmarking Statement focuses on Geography taught in the Universities of Sri Lanka at Special Degree level. However, it must be noted that the discipline is studied in a variety of other contexts, too. Generally, it is a popular subject offered by undergraduates in their General Arts Degree programme. In some universities, under the newly introduced modular system, selected components of the subject are offered to non-Geography students. In some other instances, it is a major component of a broader discipline like Social Studies. Benchmark standards must allow for this variety of provision.

The present exercise of Benchmarking of academic standards for Geography has been undertaken by a group of subject specialists representing different universities acting on behalf of the subject community. The group's work was facilitated by the Quality Assurance Project of the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Directors (CVCD), and the two consultants associated with the project from its inception.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In higher education in Sri Lanka, Geography has continuously been a popular subject. In recent times, although there has been an intense competition from a range of subjects, Geography has been able to withstand the competition and it was revealed that at the last Advanced Level Examination conducted by the Department of Examinations of the Government of Sri Lanka, around 30,000 students offered Geography as a subject. However, it has to be admitted that in the university, Geography is again under competition and the number of students offering it as a subject for the degree has declined to some extent. At this juncture, it must also be mentioned that in the public and private sector employment market the relevance of Geography has not been taken into account and this has been a major reason for the declining numbers of students in the universities offering geography.
- 1.2 The beginnings of the university education in Sri Lanka in the 1920s also marked the entry of Geography into the university curriculum. But it had many problems to overcome. It was with the establishment of University of Ceylon in 1942, however, that Geography began to grow on a solid foundation. Today, in seven Universities, namely, Colombo, Eastern, Jaffna, Kelaniya, Peradeniya, Ruhuna and Sri Jayewardenepura fully pledged departments of Geography are in operation. Also, in three of the more recently established universities, i.e. Sabaragamuwa, Rajarata, and South Eastern undergraduate courses in Geography are offered under the broader discipline of Social Studies.
- 1.3 Geography seeks to understand, analyse and explain the reciprocal relationships between man and his activities and the environment, both physical and built, in place, space and time. As the above statement itself suggests, the scope of the subject is very wide. The wideness of the discipline has made it necessary to embrace a large number of related subjects, However, the breath of the subject has in no way adversely affected the depth of its enquiries. Rather, as the geographical studies go into depth, due to its synthesising and holistic nature the knowledge in other related areas has become more and more essential. Thus Geography has been identified as a synthesising and integrative subject. How this analytical and synthesising character of the subject operates in real life situations has, to some extent, been exhibited in recent years by Geographical Information Systems.

2. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF A SPECIAL DEGREE PROGRAMME IN GEOGRAPHY

- 2.1 The Special Degree Programme in Geography envisages realizing two main objectives:
 - to provide a geographical knowledge and understanding of the physical and social environment that will lead to develop a geographical perspective. It has frequently been communicated back by the

- graduates in Geography that the Geography ' viewpoint is very much in demand in the formulation and implementation development activities;
 - 'through Geography ' it is expected to develop and improve student skills that will enhance their value in the world of work.
- 2.2 Geographers develop their geographical understanding through fieldwork and other forms of experiential learning, which helps to promote curiosity about the social and physical environments. In every university department of Geography in Sri Lanka, fieldwork is an essential component of the degree programme. However, fieldwork in Geography is used not only to gain an understanding of the physical and built environment but also to develop students' skills.
- 2.3 It is expected that all programmes would address the following areas of knowledge and understanding, so that graduating Geographers would be conversant with these aspects of the discipline. As they progress, students would be expected to develop a greater depth of knowledge and understanding of a selection of these aspects, often through their application and interpretation in a particular geographical context. Geographers should have an understanding of the vital contribution made by research in their discipline to the development of knowledge, particularly in terms of the influence of recent research.

3. KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING

- 3.1 Geographers should understand the *synthesising and integrative* role played by their discipline amongst a large number of other related disciplines. They should know how does Geography, although shares the subject matter with other subjects, acquire its own identity.
- 3.2 Geographers should be able to understand the character of a *place/region*, how that character is constituted and continually reshaped by physical, environmental, biotic, social, economic and cultural processes. They should also be able to understand the vertical as well as horizontal relationships that give a specific character to a particular place/region.
- 3.3 It is expected that geographers must have an understanding of the reciprocal relationships between physical and human aspects of *environments and landscapes* so that they could place the object under study in the proper context. In order to understand the relationships, they must comprehend the mechanisms that produce physical and built environments.
- 3.4 The understanding of the character of place/region and reciprocal relationships between environments and landscapes require the geographer to be familiar with another concept in Geography, the *spatial variation*. Geographers should have a knowledge and understanding of the *spatial distributions* and must be able to explain the patterns and dynamic nature of *spatial relations and variations* in physical, environmental and social phenomena. They must also

be able to comprehend the importance of the spatial dimensions in the current social, economic and political debates and issues.

- 3.5 Geographers must essentially be aware of the significance of spatial and temporal *scale* on physical processes, human processes and their interrelations. They should comprehend how such processes operate at local, regional and global scales to produce particular geographies, and the ways in which interactions at one scale influence those at another.
- 3.6 In understanding, describing, explaining and interpreting physical as well as human phenomena geographers will develop a *holistic view* and it will help them to conceptualise patterns, processes, interactions and change in terms of systems at a range of spatial scales. Also, they should know how to incorporate the natural environmental impacts on human activity, human impacts on biophysical systems and the management of environment and landscape into a systems framework.
- 3.7 In comprehending the *change* in physical and human worlds geographers must pay attention to the time factor. A knowledge in *temporal dimensions* will help geographers to understand spatial distributions and variations in a proper context.
- 3.8 A knowledge of place (vertical integration), space (horizontal interaction and variation) and the role of time (temporal dimension) help geographers to understand the nature of *difference* within the human world. This will help them understand the spatial inequalities found in various spheres.
- 3.9 Geographers must have a knowledge and critical understanding of the *diverse methods of representing physical and human phenomena*, their variations and interrelationships. They should know not only to read and interpret maps but also to show an understanding of their modern forms and dimensions. They should also have a knowledge and understanding of a range of other representational methods like, texts, visual images and digital technologies (especially GIS and remote sensing).
- 3.10 Geographers should possess a firm grasp of the main methodological strategies used in the analysis and interpretation of geographical data and information. This includes cartographical, graphical and statistical methods used in Geography. They should show a critical understanding of the appropriate contexts for their use.
- 3.11 All geographers must be conversant with the strategies adopted in observation and analysis in Geography. These strategies include: survey methods and interviewing techniques, geographical field research, laboratory-based analysis, quantitative and qualitative analyses.
- 3.12 Graduates in geography must have a knowledge and understanding that form the basis for *informed concern about the Earth and its people at a global level*. They should be aware of the geographical concepts and techniques that could

be of value and utility in solving the problems faced by the people and their environment. At the same time, the Sri Lankan geographers must possess a critical understanding of the problems faced by the country and its people, and must be able to contribute positively to make Sri Lanka a better place. However, the geographers in Sri Lanka should not limit their purview to Sri Lanka or the Third World, but, as geographers, must be able to perceive the mechanisms operating at various scales.

4. STUDENT SKILLS, ABILITIES AND ATTRIBUTES

- 4.1 In the context of changing economic and development philosophies and strategies, almost all departments of Geography in the universities of Sri Lanka have correctly understood the fact that students must be equipped with skills that are needed to be successful in the world of work. Such skills not only enhance and expand the opportunities available in the job market, but also, more importantly, will increase the resource value of the graduates who would be able to contribute positively to the development of the country.
- 4.2 In recent years, there has been an increase in the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and software packages in geographic education, thereby exposing the students to a wider world of knowledge and skills. At the same time, the introduction of modular structure to the mode of instruction has tended to increase the students' communication and presentation skills.
- 4.3 Thus, Geography students have been provided with opportunities not only to acquire subject-specific skills, but also to use Geography as a vehicle to acquire more practical, *generic* and intellectual skills. Graduates in Geography are expected to demonstrate competence in most of the skills, abilities and attributed described below.
- 4.4 After completion of the degree, a graduate in geography is expected to possess a geographical perspective based on analytical, synthetic and interpretative skills. Equipped with such *intellectual skills*, geographers will develop competence in a range of areas. They include analytical interpretation of data, information and texts, abstracting and synthesising information, critical evaluation of evidence and decision-making, development of reasoned arguments, problem solving, and assessment of contrasting theories, explanations and policies.
- 4.5 All Special Degree Geography programmes expect students to equip themselves with research skills that will enhance their quality and marketability as graduates. These *subject specific skills* include, ability to identify a research problem, designing of research methodologies, both quantitative and qualitative, identification of sources of data, employment of a variety of survey methods including field surveys, application of varying methods of data collection and presentation, and analysis and interpretation. They are also expected to employ a variety of technical and laboratory-based

methods for the collection and analysis of spatial and environmental information (GIS and remote sensing). All this research training and experience will result in an independent research study.

- 4.6 The discipline of Geography encourages the development of a range of personal attributes and social skills in graduates that will be important in the world of work. These skills include motivation to work and investigate, ability to work independently and with others, empathy and insight, intellectual integrity, awareness of responsibility as a local, national and international citizen, interest in lifelong learning, flexibility, adaptability and creativity.
- 4.7 In Sri Lanka, it has been noted for a long time that a degree stuffed only with knowledge and understanding is not enough. Graduate unemployment has been a problem throughout the years and to make the situation worse many graduates are under-employed. As such, skills development has become a necessity and many departments of Geography realizing their responsibility as well as potentials have adopted necessary measures to incorporate skills development strategies into their curriculum. In the formulation of syllabi proper attention is being paid to learning outcomes, and skills development occupy a central place among them.

5. TEACHING AND LEARNING PROCESSES

- 5.1 The knowledgebase of Geography is enriched by a vast number of disciplines from Natural Sciences, Social Sciences and Humanities. In the skilful application of this knowledge to real world situations, Geography utilizes the modern technologies, especially ICT, GIS and remote sensing to name a few. To produce a graduate who possesses knowledge, understanding and skills mentioned above, therefore, the teaching and learning strategies should be designed to encourage a progressive acquisition of subject knowledge and skills by moving from study methods that have a greater degree of support and assistance gradually towards independence and self-direction.
- 5.2 Students reading for a degree in Geography should be provided with full documentation on their programme of study and each individual component at the beginning of the programme. Also, instructions should be given about the progression and pathways of the programme.
- 5.3 Within the continuum of teaching and learning methodologies ranging from support and assistance to independence and self-direction, a variety of strategies are employed in Geography. They include:
 - Lectures and Audio-Visual Presentations;
 - Tutorials and Assignments;
 - Individual Presentations;
 - Seminars;
 - Practical Classes and Laboratory Work;
 - Directed Reading and Library Use;

- Field Studies;
 - Lectures by Invited Guest Speakers;
 - Access to Information, Research Papers and Data, including the information on the Internet;
 - Independent Research Projects.
- 5.4 In view of the necessity of keeping students abreast of accumulating and rapidly expanding knowledgebase and technologies, institutions should facilitate access to libraries, information systems, equipment and technical resources.
- 5.5 A subject that depends heavily on the findings of empirical research, Geography cannot overemphasize the significance of fieldwork. The engagement in fieldwork,
- provides an opportunity to apply theoretical, technical and scientific laboratory methods to the more complex, uncontrolled field environment, and to appreciate how processes that might be regarded as 'general' are modified by the social and environmental character of a specific place;
 - enhances students' capacity to identify a research problem and to evolve a research process to solve the perceived problem;
 - encourages to pay attention to ethical aspects of research processes;
 - develops a sense of place, awareness of difference and tolerance and respect for others;
 - promotes certain transferable skills required in practical work and seminars such as teamwork and observation.
- 5.6 In most Special Degree Programmes in Geography, carrying out of an independent research work, produced in the form of a dissertation or a research paper at the final stage of the programme, is a major requirement. The independent research work, based on a field study, reflects not only the skills acquired by the student but also his/her appreciation of the moral and ethical issues associated with the project.

6. ASSESSMENT

- 6.1 The assessment strategies aim at testing subject knowledge; independent thinking and skills acquisition and providing some sort of key/core information about graduates that will be useful to employers. These strategies must be made explicit, with aims, tasks and marking criteria clearly defined for each method of assessment. It should outline the progression of the assessment scheme throughout the degree programme. It should also reflect the variety of abilities and skills developed within the curriculum, the types of teaching methods and learning contexts used and learning outcomes of the degree programme. Students should be permitted to demonstrate their full range of abilities and skills.

- 6.2 Students of Geography are therefore likely to encounter a mix of assessment strategies. They include, unseen examinations, continued assessment through tutorials and assignments, oral, and audio-visual presentations, practical work (in the field and laboratories), computer-aided projects (e.g. GIS projects), and dissertations.

7. STANDARDS AND LEVELS OF ACHIEVEMENT

- 7.1 The performance of all special graduates in Geography may be expressed with reference to following areas of achievement: knowledge and understanding, discipline-specific skills, intellectual skills and key skills.
- 7.2 Table 1 shows the performance of students in terms of learning outcomes at the end of the degree programme. It must be noted that the Benchmark Statements are phrased in broader terms with the specific objective of encouraging universities to develop diverse and innovative programmes within the overall framework provided by the this document. It must be admitted that some universities, especially the young ones due to the lack of human and physical resources, may find it somewhat difficult to match their inputs and outputs with the descriptors given in the statement. However, it must be also be stressed the fact the Subject Benchmark Statements do provide an opportunity for these new universities (and for others also) to organize their programmes according to the directions given in the statement. Thus, Table 1 should not be treated as prescriptive but as an aid that will be of help in the improvement of the degree programmes.
- 7.3 Students should demonstrate achievement in each of the four areas of performance, but they are not necessarily required to possess all the qualities elaborated in Table 1. However, they would normally be expected to attain the appropriate level of achievement for each of the four areas taken as a whole and with due regard for progression through a Special Degree programme.
- 7.4 Table 1 identifies two levels of achievement: *threshold* and *typical*. The former describes the minimal standard achieved by a Special Degree graduate (a Pass or a Third class of the current honours degree classification); the latter describes graduates straddling the boundary between a Lower and Upper Second Class honours degree. This zone accommodates the majority of graduates. However it must be noted that the current exercise is not intended to provide detailed descriptors of degree class attainments.
- 7.5 *Threshold graduates possess a basic knowledge and understanding of change within human and physical environments, of interrelationships between these environments and of the interdependence of places at various scales. Their view of the discipline and its methodologies is strongly influenced by formal teaching and has a limited critical perspective. Competence in essential discipline-specific, intellectual and key skills is demonstrated.*

- 7.6 *Typical graduates* display a critical awareness of the scope and methodologies of the discipline, based on a solid foundation of knowledge derived from *formal teaching and independent study*. They consistently demonstrate a command of appropriate discipline-specific and key skills as well as proficiency in most of the higher-level intellectual skills. Typical graduates are also distinguished from the threshold level by a capacity for developing and applying personal perspectives critically to their studies.
- 7.7 It is also important to note that *a significant proportion of Geography graduates achieve excellence beyond the typical standard*. These graduates are distinguished primarily by *superior intellectual skills*, which are deployed in the context of wide-ranging knowledge of the various aspects of the discipline. The strength of Geography's wide-ranging methodological tradition is most clearly demonstrated in its best graduates, who bring originality, insight and superior critical and reflective abilities to bear upon this knowledge, and have the capacity to link theory and practice in identifying and tackling research problems. This quality is evident across the spectrum of assessed work, but is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in dissertations.

8.0 CONCLUSION

- 8.1 Being an integrative and synthesising discipline, a major intellectual task in Geography is to encompass the different types of knowledge that are characteristic of the study of the Earth's physical environments, human societies and the interactions between the two. These characteristics and their interrelationships are constantly changing so that the discipline must have the capacity to capture those changes and generate knowledge. In that context, the Benchmark Statements cannot be permanent and static but flexible and accommodative.

APPENDIX 1 - MEMBERS OF THE BENCHMARKING PANEL

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| 1. Prof. N.K. Dangalle (Chair) | University of Kelaniya |
| 2. Prof. Kanthi Ratnayake | University of Ruhuna |
| 3. Prof. Y. Rasanayagam | University of Colombo |
| 4. Prof. Jayanthi de Silva | University of Colombo |
| 5. Prof. J. Katupotha | University of Sri Jayewardenepura |
| 6. Miss. S. Ponniah | Eastern University of Sri Lanka |