

How is your country moving Geography into the future? Portugal

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The best way to answer the question that guides this forum is perhaps by saying that in Portugal we don't have a clear strategy to move Geography into the future. In my opinion, this response can be applied both to the fields of education and training offered by any institution of education, from elementary school to university, and to the involvement of professional associations, which through multiple activities have contributed to the recovery of Geography and for the recognition of the social usefulness of geographers.

The lack of a clear strategy to move Geography into the future doesn't mean that the subject hasn't been facing major challenges in the Portuguese society, because it has. There have been regular changes of curriculum at different levels of education in recent decades. However, the truth is that these changes, like the actions oriented to promote Geography and the relevance of the work of geographers rarely fit into a broader strategic plan with clear goals to move it forward. The reforms undertaken at the turn of the millennium are a good example of this practice. Actually, in upper-secondary schools, the structure and design of the National Curriculum can be seen as a mere product of the educational policy seeking to become reconciled with the most modern references in pedagogical and curricular innovation. In turn, at the higher education level, changes took place not for the reason that academics believe they are useful, but rather because it is necessary to satisfy the requirements of the Bologna Declaration and the Lisbon Strategy.

Whatever the reasons for recent changes in the Geography curriculum, there is no doubt that many aspects of the Portuguese geography curricula already look into the future. Several pieces of evidence can be used to justify this statement:

- First, the Earth and human communities face major challenges to which it is necessary to find effective responses. The options to be taken, at a variety of geographic scales, will depend on our common future in the world, especially the next generations. However, geography has faced these challenges in a proactive way, giving them a place of prominence in the study programs. The education for citizenship, namely through the acquisition of a territorial consciousness and the claim for the respect for the rights of all people to equality; the environmental education, throughout the call for sustainable use of resources, and responsible environmental planning, management and protection; and the education for sustainable development, through the natural propensity of Geography to adopt a holistic and interdisciplinary approach to the environmental and social problems, are today cross-sectional issues at different levels of education.
- Second, our future world will be dominated by technology and information, and by a more competitive and interconnected economy. Meaning that the world will

require high levels of spatial literacy and competency. Through the development of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and the central role played by ICT in study programs, geography can equip young graduates with essential tools to acquire the spatial skills and competencies that are indispensable to solve problems and to respond to the impact of technological change on daily life.

- Third, Geography in Portugal has considerably expanded its scope in the last 30 years in both general geographical education and teacher training. Besides the key role it plays in the education of young people, geography is nowadays also an important subject in fields such as territorial management, regional and urban planning, environmental studies, location of retail facilities, and GIS. According to the latest studies on employability and career opportunities, geography has an enviable position within the social sciences. Each year Geography courses in Higher Education are highly sought after by many young people and graduates in geography are highly employable.
- Fourth, in recent years, several activities have been undertaken to promote geography and show the social relevance of geographic knowledge, skills and competencies. The annual Geography festival in the small town of Mirandela, the Open day devoted to Geography organized by the most important institutions of Higher Education, and the week of Geography patronized by the Association of Geography Teachers are perhaps the most emblematic and the ones that involve a greater number of participants. However, in this area, much remains to be done to increase the visibility of geography, to publicize the role that geographers can play in society and to turn geography into an exciting subject in our schools.

To summarize, it seems clear that the lack of a concerted strategy to move geography towards the future didn't prevent the subject from asserting its relevance in the Portuguese society. The need to remain credible in terms of the curriculum and in terms of its ability to discuss the major social and environmental issues justify that geography in many areas looks to the future.