

# Geo-cube: an international toolkit promoting Geography for all

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**Abstract:** This paper describes the rationale, goals, actions and outcomes of the work of one special interest group of the HERODOT thematic network "Promoting Geography". It describes the research undertaken across Europe concerning who promotes Geography and how it is done. The paper describes the response of the network to these results and the issues increasingly being faced in geographical education. It introduces the Geocube (<http://www.geo-cube.eu>) as a multimedia toolkit to help geographers in campaigning for Geography and concludes with a call to geographers to consider the importance of promoting their discipline and the ways that they do it.

**Keywords:** branding, Bologna Process, promoting Geography, HERODOT, Geocube

## 1. Introduction

The Preface to the IGU-CGE Charter confirms that geographical education is indispensable as an informing, enabling and stimulating subject that contributes to a lifelong enjoyment and understanding of the world around us and in the development of responsible and active citizens (IGU-CGE, 1992).

Geographical education has been under pressure in some parts of the world and it lacks standing and position in others. It has a positive reputation, but in spite of this, there has been almost no research on the status and significance of Geography or of its visibility. This is an important worldwide issue which merits comparative research. This sort of activity can only be facilitated by international agencies with a remit to report on such matters. One example of such a body is the HERODOT thematic network for Geography in higher education (<http://www.herodot.net>) created in Europe and funded by the European Commission to support the facilitation of the Bologna Process (European Commission, 1999, 2003; Mechtenberg and Strausz, 2006)

## 2. The HERODOT Network: investigating Geography in Europe

In late 2002 the HERODOT network was established as the Thematic Network for Geography teachers and lecturers in higher education. It was created in response to prospective higher education reforms in Europe. The founding of a new network specifically for Geography in higher education allowed comparative research to be undertaken and a body of supporting evidence to be gathered about the relative position of Geography in different countries (Shepherd *et al.*, 2000). This would allow issues related to the Bologna Process to be identified and challenges to be met (European Commission, 1999). Informed strategies could then be developed for the maintenance and enhancement of geographical education in the continent.

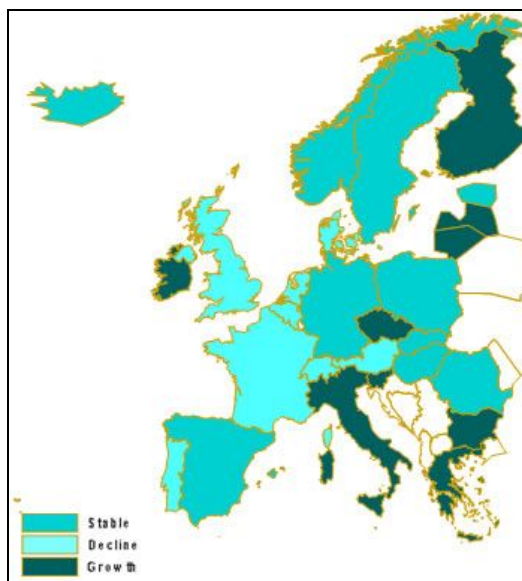
HERODOT has been active since this time, growing in its membership to more than 230 institutions from 55 countries and involving an increasingly varied group of stakeholders (Donert, 2009). The main HERODOT network activities revolved around two sets of studies. The first was to investigate and assess the social, cultural, economic and technical changes taking place and evaluate how they affect geographical education. This determined some recommended directions for the evolution of Geography courses and learning and teaching in higher education. The second was for the network to examine the role and contribution of the discipline with respect to changes currently taking place in European society. As a result, two major research activities were carried out and reported to the European Commission. The first assessed the 'State of Geography in Europe' (Donert, 2007a) and the second the TUNING academic structures in Geography (Donert, 2007b). The remainder of this paper examines some results associated with the state and status of Geography derived from this research and describes subsequent HERODOT network responses to these findings.

## 3. The state and status of Geography in Europe

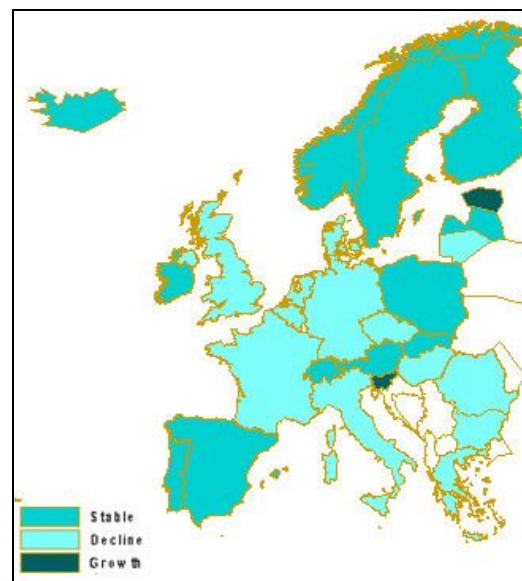
Status can be defined as the position of a discipline in the academic hierarchy. It is related to what is academically and professionally ascribed to the subject by external review and decision makers. Measurements of academic status in European higher education are generally undertaken of research outputs against certain criteria. In a few cases teaching performance was also used. In the case of research, impact assessment exercises were in place in many of the surveyed countries, where citation indices for publications were being widely used. In some cases, consensus studies of disciplines had also been attempted to determine research priorities and techniques (Hargens and Hagstrom, 1982). In teaching terms, measures of teaching quality were being used in an attempt to classify and grade the performance of individuals and departments. However, in terms of professional importance, only research outcomes were being linked to conditions of appointment, tenure and promotion. Teaching and learning thus had a relatively low individual and institutional priority.

When initiating the HERODOT network and in order to review the needs of its member organisations, network partners completed a wide-ranging questionnaire survey sent by email. Each was asked to produce a summary of the key messages concerning the state of Geography in their country. These national statements were based on a prescribed template. In cases where there were responses from more than one person at the same institution or in the same country, these were pooled to obtain the most common and consistent answer for each of the items in the survey. Communication between the survey participants and the network coordinator then took place via the HERODOT online community ([www.herodot.net/community](http://www.herodot.net/community)), until an agreed statement for each country was finalised. In total, 67 department responses were obtained which resulted in the production of agreed statements of the state of Geography for schools and higher education in 27 European countries. These results were presented to the EC in the in the ‘State of Geography’ Report (Donert, 2007a).

Based on the survey findings, aspects of the perceived state of Geography were mapped for schools and higher education (Figures 1 and 2). These results shown here were not measures of the status of Geography in each country, but an agreed assessment of relative growth, stability or decline.



**Figure 1: the state of Geography in European higher education**



**Figure 2: the state of Geography in European school education**

The state of Geography in higher education illustrated an apparently healthy situation as growth was being experienced in as many countries as it was stable or in decline. Many countries reported that Geography in higher education was attributed relatively low status. This was identified by most survey participants as a potential threat to the future of the discipline in Europe.

The high school situation showed that in most countries Geography was either stable or in decline. In fact school Geography was only experiencing growth in two relatively small countries, Estonia and Slovenia. The most significant decline was reported to be taking place in the larger and ‘older’ European countries, where Geography traditionally had a strong base. This was a very worrying trend for the future of Geography, as its health in universities and teacher education is dependent upon a strong application process. In fact almost all respondents reported that the position of Geography in higher education and in schools was being challenged and was seriously threatened in most European countries.

The place of Geography in schools and the image portrayed of the subject were said by survey participants to be the most significant factors which would affect the future of the subject in higher education. For example, Geography was often being taught along with other subjects, either as social science or applied science. In many of these cases classes frequently would be taught by non-specialist teachers. In other words the apparent decline was related to issues like the public image of Geography and the perception by decision-makers that school geography lacked importance or relevance.

This research confirmed that the knowledge, skills and competences that the study of Geography provides were no longer being recognised in most European countries as being essential to the education of secondary students. It illustrated that increasing the awareness, among decision-makers, of the significance and relevance of the discipline was of primary importance and that the HERODOT network had an important role to play in supporting

its members as Geography became under threat in schools. Initiatives to boost geography's position and image were very important (Oost and Kanneworff, 2000).

Unlike the situation in schools, in most European countries Geography was considered to be a popular higher education subject. Threats to the status of Geography and its role were identified in almost three-quarters of the survey responses. This was connected to declining student numbers and the closure of departments of Geography or mergers with other disciplines. Status was said to be closely related to the public image of the subject as there were mainly limited and incorrect views of what Geography is and what geographers do beyond the discipline itself. Shortages of funding and resources were also considered very important in determining strength and status. There were also dangers where Geography was under threat from other, often new, disciplines and through competition and mergers. Threats to the professional status of Geography were also mentioned.

The survey of the 'State of Geography in Europe' focused on the situation and status of geography in higher education. Based on this research, a series of focus group workshops and discussions were held within the HERODOT network. The following challenges for European Geography were identified:

- a) to improve the visibility of Geography in Europe and beyond
- b) to communicate an accurate, modern awareness of the subject to key target groups
- c) to promote the quality of geography education
- d) to share experiences and expertise
- e) to encourage teaching excellence to be rewarded, in order that it can be perceived as being as important as research
- f) to consider, research and promote exciting Geography
- g) to increase connections between school and university Geography
- h) to ensure the training of Geography academics as professionals

Given these outcomes, a second phase of HERODOT (2006-2009) was proposed and funding obtained. The project would include European-wide actions to help geographers promote Geography in Europe through a campaign that would help raise public and professional awareness. In direct response to these issues, HERODOT established four special interest groups (Thematic Pillars) in 2005, one of which was called *Promoting Geography for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*.

#### **4. Responding to the State of Geography in Europe**

Researching the State of Geography achieved the first step towards providing knowledge vital to understanding the achievements and contribution of the discipline to Europe and the perceptions held by geographers in Europe. Results from the survey provided a basis for understanding some of the strengths, weaknesses, threats and needs of European geographical education. It offered a barometer on the health of geography in different countries and highlighted some of the areas where action needed to be taken by the geographical subject community.

In response to some of the concerns identified, the HERODOT network moved on to examine the main issues at stake for the future of the subject in Europe, with Promoting Geography confirmed as one area requiring specific action. In 2007, European-wide research was undertaken in the network via a questionnaire, focus groups and discussion on the online community, in order to provide a body of supporting evidence which would help understand how Geography was being promoted so that a strategy could be developed to improve its position and status.

More than 60 departments in 25 countries contributed to the study (Donert, in press). The survey results showed that higher education departments mainly promoted geography through their own Web sites and through events which were organised and run by departments. The Web was almost ubiquitous in use, but there were few attempts to reach the media, decision makers, employers or even the public in general. Discussion within the HERODOT interest group suggested that the role of higher education in promoting geography needs to go beyond marketing its educational courses. It was also important that academics should raise public awareness of the subject and improve their understanding of what Geography really is and what geographers do. However, less than 20% of departments undertook such activities. The survey results also indicated that working with the media and with multimedia were thought to be of great importance, yet only two examples of how or where this was being done were provided. The potential value of television and the Web were frequently cited in helping develop spatial awareness of real-time, real-world issues. So, promotion in these areas would help avoid common misunderstandings about Geography and provide opportunities to explain how geographers contribute to relevant issues in society (Oost *et al.*, 2000).

Lowe and Short (1990) suggest that the ability of geographers to make their world more understandable will determine whether they can improve the image of the subject. In consideration of this, a special interest group of HERODOT members decided to embark on promotional developments that would attempt to re-image Geography as a modern, relevant, professional discipline and increase its visibility in Europe. An awareness campaign would thus be initiated that would seek to help people become more widely aware of the nature and benefits of studying

Geography. The aim was to help communicate Geography into society, by ensuring that issues which are commonly dealt with by geographers were promoted in an interesting and attractive way.

The reaction of the HERODOT group was firstly to examine precisely how and where Geography was promoted in different European countries and across Europe as a whole. An analysis was undertaken of what was considered successful promotion, in which contexts it was being undertaken and where the gaps were. The resulting debate led to the formulation of a network strategy to support the promotion of Geography in Europe, the key agencies and individuals that should be targeted and the identification of other organisations with whom the network should attempt to collaborate with. The following plan resulted:

- Promotion should target both geographers and society in general
- Promotion should focus on decision-making agencies such as the European Union and the Council of Europe and individuals therein
- Good practice on geo-promotion should be shared
- A toolkit should be developed which will help Geography to be promoted, best delivered through a single recognisable web site. Promotion would be enhanced by translating it to meet local needs.
- Students of Geography should be trained about the geographical skills they have and why they (as geographers) are important in society. They should then be encouraged to promote themselves as geographers. A social and professional alumni community would help meet this goal.
- A contact database would be set up of key government, business leaders and other high-status individuals who have connections to Geography.

## 5. The Geocube: a brand and image for Geography

A brand includes many attributes and beliefs which are associated with a product. It is based on providing distinctive images and manoeuvring the position of the product relative to the competition. It creates a personality for the product from its functional attributes and symbolic values (Hankinson, 2004) thereby adding value to it, in terms of augmenting the nature of the product, its marketing and therefore behaviour towards it. Branding is used within marketing, in pursuit of wide promotional goals, as part of powerful and successful image-building strategies. This approach would appear to have significant relevance to the contemporary nature of geographical education and its situation in Europe. Once established, a brand can be placed at the heart of orchestrated promotional activities, even in the academic world, as suggested by de Boer *et al* (2002).

Branding centres on mental images and deals with people's perceptions. Thus creating and managing the brand was at the heart of HERODOT network deliberations, in order to influence the mental maps of the target audiences in a way that will be favourable to the present circumstances and future needs of Geography. As a result, it was important to critically examine and understand the strengths of Geography, in order that the framework for an effective branding strategy for the discipline could be constructed and the target audiences could confidently recognise and appreciate these values.

In seeking to promote Geography, firstly the most important messages on offer had to be identified and then communicated. Research showed that higher education mainly stressed how attractive Geography was in their promotion of the subject. The success of their graduates and their employability had been used as main messages. In contrast, David Harvey (1974) urged geographers to consider what kind of geography we need to portray when understanding the tensions between humanistic tradition and the needs of the state and society. In considering the Australian situation, Van Noorden (2001) suggested that the key to promoting Geography was in fact not to promote all the wonderful things that geographers are involved in,



Figure 3: The original and final Geocube concepts

but rather to focus on the target audiences and define what their needs are. This should be used as the focus for promotion, by using their existing positive perceptions of Geography.

At the same time as dealing with branding and marketing considerations, research was undertaken of the way that the Internet was being used in promotion. In the Netherlands, the Dutch government was funding the creation of a “Canon” in the form of a Web site that would provide 50 windows in the form of a timeline describing the story of their country (<http://www.entoen.nu>). The term “Canon” originates from ancient Greek and means a ‘measuring rod’ or ‘standard’ (Nagel, 2009).

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| <p><b>LIVING TOGETHER</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- migration</li> <li>- mobility</li> <li>- poverty</li> <li>- literacy</li> <li>- ethnicity and religion</li> <li>- language</li> <li>- health</li> <li>- economic development</li> <li>- pollution in urban systems</li> </ul>                          | <p><b>EARTH FROM ALL ANGLES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- urban landscapes</li> <li>- rural landscapes</li> <li>- oceans and seas</li> <li>- rivers</li> <li>- mountains</li> <li>- deserts</li> <li>- wetlands</li> <li>- karst landscapes</li> <li>- polar regions</li> </ul>                 |
| <p><b>THE FASCINATING EARTH</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- earthquakes</li> <li>- tsunami</li> <li>- storms</li> <li>- floods</li> <li>- forest fires</li> <li>- conflicts in the earth systems</li> <li>- volcanoes</li> <li>- hurricanes</li> <li>- drought</li> </ul>                                    | <p><b>SHRINKING PLANET</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- energy resources</li> <li>- food resources and distribution</li> <li>- waste and pollution</li> <li>- water resources</li> <li>- nature</li> <li>- minerals</li> <li>- land resources</li> <li>- housing</li> <li>- agriculture</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>EXPLORING OUR WORLD</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- climate change</li> <li>- weather forecasting</li> <li>- ozone hole</li> <li>- population growth and distribution</li> <li>- aging populations</li> <li>- deforestation</li> <li>- species extinction</li> <li>- tourism</li> <li>- war</li> </ul> | <p><b>USEFUL GEOGRAPHIES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- education</li> <li>- planning</li> <li>- resource management</li> <li>- facilities management</li> <li>- transport</li> <li>- risk</li> <li>- GIS</li> <li>- using maps</li> <li>- geographic skills</li> </ul>                          |

Figure 4: Geocube faces and themes

Members of HERODOT Thematic Pillar examined this concept and then developed their concept of a Geocube (Figure 3). This would be used to represent visually the world in which we live. The cube structure allowed 54 (6x9) windows which could be developed to describe what Geography is and geographers do. Selecting the titles of the six faces and the themes to be used proved to be a very challenging task as the goal was not to be comprehensive. As the Geocube was designed for the general European audience and decision makers in particular, then each of the six sides (of the cube) was configured with its own message (Figure 4). The Geocube was used to provide access to a group of themes which would represent what Geography is and geographers do.

The text of the Geocube was produced by HERODOT volunteers from 16 countries. It was collated and edited for meaning and consistency. The focus was on the fact that geography makes important contributions to our knowledge and understanding of many issues in society and that geographers have specific spatial skills. The participants also proposed images and video clips which could be used in support of the text. High quality photography and low-bandwidth video were obtained to relate to the text. The collection of items as a whole demonstrated the richness of Geography and was considered to be broad enough to describe and illustrate the work of the discipline in the 21st Century (Lidstone and Stoltman, 2003). A suitable Web domain was obtained and the cube logo (Figure 5) and related promotional materials for the promotional toolkit was developed.



Figure 5: Geocube branding

A further challenge for the HERODOT network remains. How can it widely promote and inform the target audiences of the existence and usefulness of the Geocube toolkit? Network research indicated that professional bodies, associations and international organisations like EUROGEO in Europe and the IGU worldwide. Departments of higher education and teacher training also have an important role to play as they need to become much more active in promoting their discipline and encouraging their students and alumni to be advocates and ambassadors for Geography.

## 6. Conclusions

Studying the state of Geography in Europe provided an understanding of issues involved in the future of the discipline in different education sectors. Data on the national situation of Geography and the circumstances under which geography was being taught offered a measure of the health of the discipline. It provided a focus for developing an initiative that deals with the weaknesses and threats to geographical education at national and European scales. Such action needs to involve as many different organisations and agencies as possible in developing their own promotional opportunities. In Europe, this might be organised with the support of either an international subject network like HERODOT or else via a European professional association for geographers.

Geocube offers access to some of the most important messages that Geography has to offer, related to careers, travel, lifelong learning, geo-skills and global awareness. However, as Margaret Robertson (2003) suggests, geographical education is also in need of a spin doctor, HERODOT has started to provide some of the tools needed to improve the image of the subject.

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