

# Looking at Geography

Teaching and Learning in Post-Primary Schools



PROMOTING THE QUALITY OF LEARNING

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## Foreword

The experience of Geography provides students with an understanding of the world and how it changes. The subject allows students to understand processes in the physical and human world and to focus particularly on their local environment. Geography students study issues as diverse as migration, traffic management, urban sprawl and soil erosion. These and many other topics are synthesised within a number of over-arching themes including sustainable development, positive attitudes to the physical and human environments and active informed citizenship.

The Junior Certificate Geography syllabus and the Leaving Certificate Geography syllabus have contextualised Geography in the life experience of the Irish, European and global citizen. Students engage with interdependent local and global issues. The skills used and applied are skills for life. Students no longer concentrate on answering the traditional geographical question of *Where?* But now confidently ask the questions *What?*, *Why?* and *Why not?*.

This report, *Looking at Geography*, provides a detailed insight into post-primary students' experience of Geography. It provides an analysis of the quality of teaching and learning in

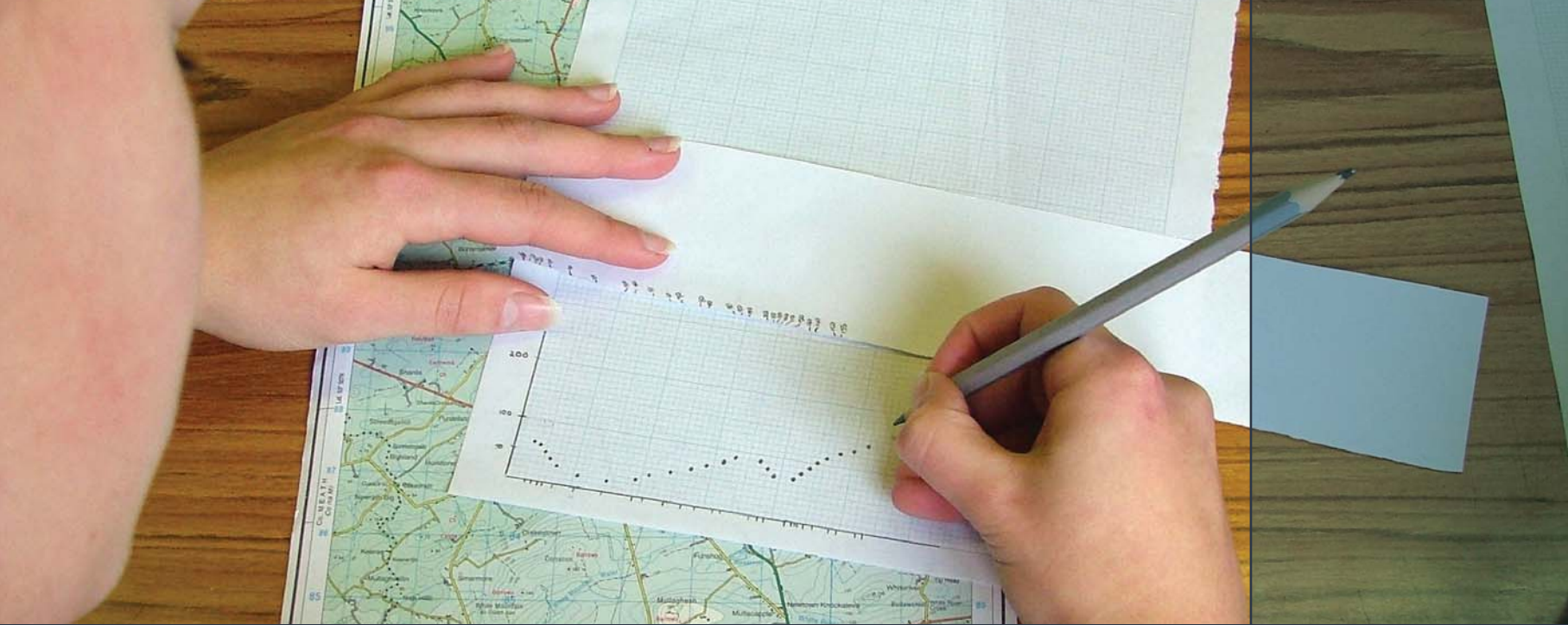
geography classrooms throughout the country. It also addresses provision, uptake, planning and assessment of Geography in our post-primary schools. It affirms the good practices observed in classrooms and highlights a number of areas for improvement. It also examines recent developments in the integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) in the teaching and learning of Geography and the impact of the resources provided to teachers by the Leaving Certificate Geography Support Service that has been working with teachers since 2003.

This report will be of interest to all teachers of Geography, to those involved in leading and managing schools, and to those involved in teacher education and school support services.



**Eamon Stack**  
Chief Inspector





# Chapter 1

## Introduction

## 1.1 Categories and types of schools inspected

This report is based on the findings and recommendations made by inspectors in fifty schools where subject inspections were carried out between January 2006 and October 2007. The reports analysed have resulted from inspections carried out as part of whole-school evaluation (WSE) and stand-alone subject inspections. A total of 195 teachers were visited, and teaching and learning were observed and evaluated in 236 geography lessons. The types of schools included are shown below:

School type	Number	Proportion of sample
Voluntary secondary schools	30	60%
Vocational Education Committee schools	12	24%
Community and comprehensive schools	8	16%
Total	50	100%

Schools by gender	Number	Proportion of sample
Co-educational schools	29	58%
Single-sex boys' schools	9	18%
Single-sex girls' schools	12	24%
Total	50	100%

## 1.2 Structure and purpose of the report

*Looking at Geography* reflects the subject inspection evaluation framework as set out in *A Guide to Subject Inspection at Second Level* (Inspectorate, 2004). It examines and analyses the findings and recommendations of the fifty subject inspection reports under the headings of:

- the quality of subject provision and whole-school support
- the quality of planning and preparation
- the quality of teaching and learning
- the quality of assessment.

Under each of these headings the report discusses and explores the findings and recommendations made by the inspectors. This discussion draws attention to areas of good practice and to concerns and it uses extracts from subject inspection reports to support these discussions. The report also outlines what the geography inspectors consider to be best practice in developing and improving classroom practice and learning. In this way it seeks to engage teachers and subject departments in a reflective professional dialogue in relation to the provision, planning, teaching and learning and assessment of Geography.



## 1.3 Geography in post-primary schools

Geography is concerned with patterns and processes in the physical and human environments. Students learn about these patterns and processes by understanding a number of essential concepts and by using and applying geographical skills. The Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate syllabuses exemplify these concepts through a range of local, national and global settings. These geographical skills are applied in the classroom and through engaging in geographical investigations and fieldwork.

The programme for Geography at primary level, the Junior Certificate syllabus and the Leaving Certificate syllabus have undergone various revisions since 1992. The revision at primary level placed Geography within Social, Environmental and Scientific Education. The revised Junior Certificate syllabus, which was first examined in 1992, introduced some significant changes to the way that Geography was taught. The revised syllabus was set out as a series of key ideas to be explored in local, national and global settings.

The revised Leaving Certificate syllabus was first examined in 2006. This syllabus was structured to build on the Junior Certificate syllabus. It comprises a series of core, elective, and

optional units and included a compulsory geographical investigation. As a result of these revisions students should now experience a structured, layered and linked geographical education as they advance through primary school and post-primary school.





# Chapter 2

The quality of subject provision and whole-school support

## 2.1 Geography in the junior cycle

Subject inspection reports clearly show that Geography was well supported by the school management in a significant majority of schools. Geography was a compulsory subject for all students in the junior cycle in forty-seven of the fifty schools in which inspections were conducted. In the three remaining schools Geography was an optional subject at junior cycle level. Two of these schools were vocational schools and one was a voluntary secondary school. In the voluntary secondary school the subject was offered in alternate years in rotation with History. *Rules and Programmes for Secondary Schools* (Department of Education and Science) makes clear that Geography must be included in the junior cycle programme for voluntary secondary schools and should be provided for all students in each of the three years of the programme. In the case of the vocational schools the subject was offered as an option for first-year students. While this practice is permitted it is regrettable that some students, who do not opt to study the subject, may have completed their geographical education on transfer from primary school.

The students were placed in mixed-ability class groups in junior cycle in the majority of the schools. In a small number

of schools the students were placed in either streamed or banded class groups. While this is current practice within the context, culture and tradition of some schools, the inspectors were concerned that all students and particularly those in banded or streamed classes should have access to the subject at the level of their choice: they should not be restricted in this access by the class organisation of the school. One report recommended:

As a means of more effectively catering for the needs of all students the present streaming method of class organisation should be reviewed as a matter of urgency.

In almost all instances the students studied the subject with a view to taking the higher level in the Junior Certificate examination. This meant that well informed decisions about the most appropriate examination level for the student could be taken at an advanced stage in the third year of the programme. Nationally, approximately 80% of students sit the higher-level Junior Certificate examination for Geography, and in a small minority of schools, the inspectors had concerns regarding the high numbers of students taking the ordinary level. The inspectors praised school arrangements that ensured equality of access to the subject at the higher level and commended highly schools that had high expectations of students.

In most schools the allocation of class periods ranged between two and four with the majority having an allocation of three class periods per week in the junior cycle. In cases where the allocation was as little as two periods per week the inspection reports recommended that the school management should review this allocation with a view to increasing it. The inspectors were also concerned that lessons should be spread throughout the week and recommended that the bunching of lessons on consecutive days be avoided.

### Features of good practice

- Almost all schools offered Geography as a compulsory subject in the junior cycle
- The majority of geography classes were mixed ability in nature
- Almost all students could access the subject at the higher level
- In most schools Geography was allocated at least three class periods per week

### Concerns

- Geography was only provided as an optional subject in a minority of schools in the junior cycle
- Access to Geography at the higher level was restricted for a minority of students
- Fewer than three class periods per week were allocated to Geography in a small number of schools
- In some schools geography lessons were not timetabled evenly throughout the week but were “bunched” on consecutive days

## 2.2 Geography in the senior cycle

At senior cycle, Geography may be provided during the Transition Year (TY) programme and it features as part of the Leaving Certificate programmes. Geography formed part of the TY programme in the majority of the schools in which inspections were conducted. In many instances, Geography within TY consisted of a module of study for part of the school year. The time allocated to TY Geography varied considerably with the majority of schools providing between two and four class periods for the duration of the module. While the majority of schools had a written, relevant and up-to-date TY plan for Geography it was of concern to inspectors that a significant minority did not.

In a large majority of instances the quality of the TY programme for Geography and the quality of the teaching methodologies and activities used to engage students in the programme were good. The TY programmes included topics relating to European studies, environmental issues, fieldwork and geographical skills. Many programmes engaged students in a range of cross-curricular activities. While approximately one half of the schools included a significant fieldwork element within their TY Geography programme it was of concern that the other half did not.

In approximately a quarter of the schools the inspectors recommended that consideration be given to including Geography in the TY programme. Where schools had included Geography in their TY programme most recommendations from the inspectors concerned the inclusion of a significant element of geographical skills. A small number of reports recommended the integration of information and communications technology (ICT) and the inclusion of project work to engage students. One such recommendation encouraged strategies that would

develop students as independent learners by the use of project work, [by the use of] ICT for research and presentation and by the undertaking of a geographical investigation perhaps in the local area.

The inspectors found that the programme for Geography needed to be reviewed in a small number of schools as it did not conform to the requirements for TY. *Transition Year Programmes - Guidelines for Schools* (Department of Education and Science, 1994) and Circular M1/00 clearly outline the variety of learning, teaching and assessment methodologies to be used and they state that the programme should not concentrate exclusively on the content or teaching approaches of the Leaving Certificate syllabus for the subject. In a few schools the inspectors noted that students completed their choice of subjects for the Leaving Certificate in advance of undertaking the TY programme. Leaving

Certificate textbooks were also purchased in advance of TY. It was also noted that the programme for Geography in TY concentrated on teaching significant amounts of the Leaving Certificate syllabus. One such report stated:

It was clear from the TY plan and the observation of classroom practice that the geography programme is dominated by Leaving Certificate syllabus material and teaching methodologies that are unsuited to the rationale and spirit of the TY programme.

This report recommended that

[the] school management and the geography teaching team should revisit the TY plan for Geography to ensure that students experience a range of teaching approaches to geographical studies and skills that will enhance their educational and social development within the programme.

Approximately 50% of students study Geography within the established Leaving Certificate and approximately 70% of these study the subject at the higher level. These figures were reflected in the inspection reports where data provided by the schools showed an average to high uptake of the subject in the majority of schools. One report that reflected the content of many stated:

The high uptake in the subject at senior cycle is a reflection of the commitment of both [the] school management and the geography teachers to the subject.

Individual students' preference is the primary determining factor in this strong uptake of the subject in the Leaving Certificate. However, the subject choice process in schools can affect access to the subject. In almost all of the schools students were provided with an open first choice of subjects. This subject choice process was commended by inspectors as it gave priority to the informed choices of students. In a small number of schools there was a more restrictive process whereby subjects were grouped in bands or blocks from which students were required to choose one subject. This process limited individual choice and forced the students to fit into the predetermined subject choice structure that was set by the school. The inspectors did not view this process positively. In one instance a report found that

[the] uptake of Geography in [the] Leaving Certificate is low. The subject choice structure in advance of transfer to Leaving Certificate requires students to choose from established and fixed option blocks of subjects. Geography is placed on one option block with History, Physics and Home Economics.

Access to the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) can also have a negative impact on the uptake of Geography. Students must choose from predetermined subject groups to qualify for the programme. Geography is not included in these subject groups at national level and this can limit the uptake of the subject in some schools that offer

the LCVP. In one such school the inspector reported that

Geography is not currently accepted nationally within the subject groupings [for LCVP]. This has contributed to the low uptake of Geography at senior cycle in the school.

In almost all instances students were placed in mixed-ability class groups following the subject choice process. As with the junior cycle, this organisation also facilitated ease of access by students to either the higher or the ordinary level within their class group. Most schools provided an allocation of five class periods per week over the two-year programme. This allocation often included a double lesson. This is an adequate level of provision as it reflects the Leaving Certificate Geography syllabus which was designed to be delivered in 180 hours of tuition which is the equivalent of five class periods of forty minutes duration per week.

### Features of good practice

- Geography was offered as a module in TY in the majority of schools
- A time allocation of two to four class periods per week was provided for TY Geography in the majority of schools
- The majority of schools had a relevant and up-to-date TY plan for Geography
- The range of teaching and learning methodologies to actively engage students in TY Geography was good in the majority of schools

- Students had open access to Geography in the majority of schools at Leaving Certificate level
- Mixed-ability class groups, that allowed access to the higher and the ordinary level syllabuses, were in place in almost all schools
- An allocation of five class periods per week was provided in most schools

### Concerns

- A geography module was absent from a minority of TY programmes
- A significant minority of schools did not have a TY plan for Geography
- There was too much emphasis on the content and methodologies of the Leaving Certificate syllabus in TY Geography in a small number of schools
- The development of geographical investigation skills and fieldwork was absent from almost half of TY geography programmes
- Option bands or blocks restricted access to Geography in a small number of schools
- Geography was excluded from the predetermined subject groups to qualify for access to the LCVP



## 2.3 Resources for the teaching of Geography

The geography room is normally the most significant and visible resource for the teaching of the subject in a school. A designated and well-resourced geography room was in use in more than half of the schools. The inspectors reported very positively on the resources available in the room and the visual impact of its decoration in creating a print-rich and map-rich teaching and learning environment. Reports typically stated:

The geography room is an excellent facility equipped with audio-visual equipment and a newly acquired laptop computer and data projector. The room is bright and the walls decorated with a very impressive range of 1:50,000 Ordnance Survey (OS) maps.

Inspectors found that in almost all instances the geography room benefited from displays of maps, posters and photographs. When this room was used for geography lessons the students were learning in a map-rich and print-rich teaching and learning environment. However, access to this room for all class groups often presented a problem. The inspectors regarded as best practice the maximum possible access to this room and its resources for all geography teachers and their students. A significant number of schools used a room timetable to ensure equal access for all class

groups and teachers. In other schools the room was assigned as a base classroom to one of the geography teachers and access was agreed by the teaching team. However, in some schools the original geography room had been lost to become a general classroom.

The use of base classrooms had a considerable effect on the use and availability of teaching resources. Where schools assigned rooms as base classrooms to teachers, almost all the learning spaces contained maps and posters. In contrast, where students remained in a base classroom and teachers moved to that room it was difficult to create and maintain an extensive geographical atmosphere. The inspectors encouraged the development of a geography notice-board in a central area of the school in a number of these instances. This would facilitate the display of geography materials, current events from the media and environmental issues. The inspectors also recommended the display of students' projects and aspects of geographical investigations either in the classroom or on the geography notice-board in a minority of schools. This raised the profile of the subject and enhanced the self-esteem of the students.

A significant range of resources to support various aspects of the geography syllabuses has been provided to schools by the Department of Education and Science (DES), State agencies

and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate Support Services have also facilitated the provision and distribution of resources to geography teachers. The storage and availability of these teaching resources need careful management, especially in schools where designated geography classrooms are not available. In the majority of schools, and particularly those without a designated geography room, a resource storage area was available. Teaching resources were normally catalogued and stored in this resource area. In a significant minority of schools however, such a catalogue of resources had not been completed. Teaching resources can be lost or can become based in particular classrooms in such a situation. The inspectors felt strongly that these valuable resources should be available for use by all teachers to enrich students' learning in Geography. In almost a third of the reports the inspectors recommended that resources be catalogued and stored in an accessible area. One report, reflecting these views, recommended that

the geography department should prepare a comprehensive catalogue of all resources available for the teaching of Geography in the school. The resources should be shared, made available and centrally stored to ensure that all geography teachers have easy access to them.

### Features of good practice

- A designated and well-resourced geography room was in use in more than half of schools
- A significant number of schools ensured equal access to the geography room for all geography teachers
- A catalogue of the school's resources for Geography was available in a majority of schools

### Concerns

- Access to the teaching resources for Geography in the school was limited by room organisation in some schools
- A catalogue of teaching resources for Geography in the school was not available in a minority of schools

## 2.4 ICT and Geography

The inspectors observed that geography teachers had engaged with the integration of ICT in teaching and learning in more than half the schools. The integration of ICT offered significant opportunities and some challenges to geography teachers. The availability of and access to ICT equipment and the skills levels of geography teachers were the main challenges to this integration. A small number of geography rooms and individual classrooms had a desktop computer and in some instances a laptop computer, a data projector and internet access. In many schools ICT equipment was based in computer rooms. Geography teachers often found it difficult and disruptive to move their class groups to such a room and then engage all students using ICT for what in most instances was a forty-minute lesson. Inspectors noted that opportunities to more effectively integrate ICT in geography lessons were created in schools by the use of mobile equipment such as a laptop computer and a data projector. In combination with an internet point in the classroom or a wireless system in the school, these were used in a small number of schools to integrate ICT in the teaching and learning of Geography.

The integration of ICT was an important element of the development priorities in a number of schools. Much of the

progress in the integration of ICT in Geography has been stimulated by the revision of the Leaving Certificate Geography syllabus and by the resources and training provided to teachers by the Leaving Certificate Geography Support Service (LCGSS).

### Features of good practice

- The integration of ICT in teaching and learning of Geography was observed in more than half of schools
- School management had supported the provision of access to ICT equipment for Geography in many schools

### Concerns

- There was inadequate access to ICT equipment for the teaching of Geography in some schools
- ICT was integrated in the teaching and learning of Geography in less than half of schools

## 2.5 Fieldwork and geographical investigation

The revised Leaving Certificate syllabus introduced a geographical investigation, previously referred to as fieldwork or a field study, as a compulsory core unit. All students must now complete a geographical investigation chosen from an annual list of possible investigations circulated to schools by the State Examinations Commission (SEC). Students are required to submit a detailed report describing the investigation process and outcomes.

The inspectors found that all senior-cycle geography classes now engage in a geographical investigation. In many instances the skills associated with this activity had been developed in TY geography lessons. The inspectors were very positive about and encouraging of the development of these skills in the TY. However, it was significant that half the TY geography programmes did not contain any investigative or fieldwork element. This was particularly disappointing given the flexibility of the programme and the importance of competence in geographical skills for the Leaving Certificate. The inspectors encouraged teachers and geography departments to develop geographical skills in the TY programme for Geography. One such report recommended:

that a more detailed fieldwork component be included in the TY programme. It is also suggested that consideration be given to a programme of work based on the Ordnance Survey Ireland (OSI) *Trail Master* DVD.

There is no assessment weighting for fieldwork in the Junior Certificate examination but the use of fieldwork is strongly recommended as an “integral part” of junior cycle Geography (Department of Education and Science, Teacher Guidelines for Junior Certificate Geography, 1989b). The guidelines accompanying the syllabus refer to the valuable and effective teaching and learning activities which fieldwork provides and to its centrality in the study and experience of the subject. It was regrettable, therefore, that very little engagement in fieldwork activities was observed in the schools at this level. Only four schools engaged in any fieldwork activity in the junior cycle. This small minority of schools used short field trips in the locality to enhance the study of physical geography. In one instance students visited a local geothermal spring while another school carried out a survey of urban land use in the locality. Student projects and photographs arising from these activities were displayed in geography classrooms in some instances. The inspectors encouraged teachers to engage with their students in fieldwork and noted that fieldwork in the junior cycle would enhance students’ competence in geographical skills before the TY programme and the Leaving Certificate syllabus.

### Features of good practice

- Fieldwork activities were well integrated in the teaching of junior cycle geography, but this occurred in a small minority of schools only
- A significant element of geographical investigation and fieldwork was included in half of the TY geography programmes

### Concerns

- There was a low level of engagement in fieldwork in junior cycle geography in almost all schools
- The absence of any investigative or fieldwork element in half the TY programmes for Geography was disappointing

## 2.6 Continuous professional development and geography teachers

Continuous professional development (CPD) for geography teachers has been provided mainly to support the revision of the syllabus. The revision of the Junior Certificate syllabus between 1989 and 1992 was accompanied by a series of in-service training days for teachers to support the new teaching approaches required by the syllabus. A similar but more intensive in-service programme was provided by the Leaving Certificate Geography Support Service (LCGSS) to facilitate teachers in implementing the revised syllabus.

The majority of senior-cycle geography teachers have attended some training associated with the revised syllabus. Many have also attended additional courses and it was clear to the inspectors that in most instances the methodologies and strategies provided by the support service have had a very positive impact on students' learning in the classroom. Teachers regularly commented to the inspectors on the high quality of these contributions and on the assistance provided by the LCGSS to support geography teachers.

The Association of Geography Teachers of Ireland (AGTI) also provided very effective and specific support for teachers through its branch network throughout the country and

through the publication of its journal *Geographical Viewpoint*. More than half the teachers stated that they had engaged with the AGTI. The branches of the AGTI are to be commended for the range of support that they provide to their members and to the wider community of geography teachers. Equally, teachers are to be commended for their commitment to their students and their subject in attending these professional development activities outside of school time.

### Features of good practice

- The majority of senior-cycle geography teachers had engaged with CPD provided by the Leaving Certificate Geography Support Service
- More than half of geography teachers had engaged with the Association of Geography Teachers of Ireland



# Chapter 3

The quality of planning and preparation

### 3.1 The geography department

Inspectors reported that geography departments were in operation in almost all schools. A subject co-ordinator had been appointed in all but five of the fifty schools inspected. In some instances the co-ordinator role formed part of the duties of a post-holder. In all other instances these duties were carried out voluntarily. The activities of the co-ordinator in most schools included organising subject meetings and recording the issues discussed and the actions planned and undertaken at these subject meetings. The role also included developing and co-ordinating the subject planning process, developing and managing teaching resources, and co-ordinating textbooks and in-house geography examinations. The inspectors were very positive about the commitment of these co-ordinators and of the subject teams in engaging in the collaborative development of the subject in the school.

#### Features of good practice

- A geography department was in operation in almost all schools
- A subject co-ordinator for Geography had been appointed in almost all schools
- The co-ordination role included the organisation of subject meetings and the subject planning process in almost all schools

### 3.2 Collaborative planning

Collaborative subject planning for Geography was regarded as being of a very high quality in a few schools and of good quality in the majority. The inspectors reported a less than satisfactory engagement in collaborative planning in a minority of schools. The tangible evidence of this process in the school was the development of a subject plan for Geography and the implementation and review of this plan to improve teaching and learning. The inspectors reported that a very detailed subject plan had been developed in slightly fewer than half the schools, while a similar number were in the process of developing such a plan. A small minority of schools had a very poor plan or no subject plan for Geography.

Recommendations from the inspectors concerning collaborative planning were mainly developmental. In a small number of reports the inspectors recommended the further development of the process, with detailed advice on areas to be included in the plan. One report that reflected this recommended

that a more formal and comprehensive plan for Geography should be developed. This plan should give consideration to a statement of learning outcomes for each year group. It should address the inclusion of students with special educational needs and the development of links with the learning-support



department. The plan should address the profile of Geography within the school, uptake levels in State examinations and the integration of ICT. The plan should also consider the future development of teaching resources and focus on assessment practices in the classroom.

In other instances the inspectors encouraged the geography teachers to concentrate particularly on planning for teaching and learning methodologies in the classroom. One such report stated:

To build on this very impressive progress in subject planning, the geography teachers should now consider a focus on teaching methodology and differentiated teaching strategies. The department could reflect and share their practice and experience in relation to effective strategies for teaching at different levels and for teaching in the mixed-ability, banded, and small group settings.

Subject plans reviewed by the inspectors showed that many geography departments had agreed to follow a linear approach to teaching the syllabus in the junior cycle and the senior cycle. This approach meant that teachers began by teaching section 1 of the syllabus and followed each section in a linear pattern to the end of the plan. This linear approach often mirrored the structure used in many textbooks. While it was acceptable to use this approach to teaching the syllabus, the inspectors felt that in some schools and classrooms the over-concentration on physical geography processes in the

### Features of good practice

- A collaborative planning process was in place in the majority of schools
- Effective subject plans contained references to learning outcomes, teaching methodologies, teaching resources and ICT
- References to learning and teaching strategies for the inclusion of students with special educational needs and those for whom English is an additional language were included in effective subject plans

### Concerns

- There was no subject plan for Geography in a small minority of schools
- A detailed collaborative subject plan had been developed in less than half of schools
- Some subject plans outlined a list of topics for study for a term or year but did not make reference to learning outcomes, teaching and learning methodologies, assessment strategies, teaching resources, ICT, differentiation or inclusion strategies
- Some subject plans adopted a strictly linear approach to the teaching of the syllabus that included an over-emphasis on physical geography in the teaching plans for the first term of the junior and the senior cycle in some schools

first term should be reconsidered. The teachers involved were encouraged to reflect on this approach and in a minority of reports it was recommended that they plan to concentrate on geographical skills in the opening period of the teaching plan. One such report stated:

In reviewing the subject department plan it is recommended that the teaching of Physical Geography at an early stage in first year be reconsidered and the development of map and photograph skills be introduced.

### 3.3 Individual teachers' planning

The inspectors reported that there was generally a very high quality of individual planning for geography teaching. They noted that best practice was evident when individual planning influenced classroom practice and students' learning.

The large majority of teachers were engaged in planning for their lessons. This was clearly evident in the approach to the lessons observed and in the resources used within lessons. In many instances teachers had developed detailed written individual plans for the term or school year for their class groups. These individual plans reflected the subject plan but

were tailored to meet the needs of students in individual classes. These plans outlined the content of lessons, the teaching resources, differentiated teaching methodologies, and timeframes for teaching the lessons. This was seen as very good practice.

#### Features of good practice

- Effective individual planning by teachers reflected the subject plan but was tailored to the needs of students in individual classes
- Good individual planning provided for the use of differentiated teaching methodologies and resources and identified learning outcomes and assessment strategies within clear timeframes
- Effective individual planning clearly influenced classroom practice and students' learning

#### Concerns

- Poor individual planning tended to be restricted to an outline list of topics to be taught in the term or the year
- Ineffective individual planning frequently failed to incorporate differentiated teaching methodologies and often did not specify resources, learning outcomes, assessment arrangements or timeframes



# Chapter 4

The quality of teaching and learning

### 4.1 Quality of learning

The quality of learning in geography lessons was generally good. In a significant minority of lessons the students impressed the inspectors with their detailed understanding of concepts and proficiency in using and applying geographical skills. However, in a minority of other lessons the students were passive participants in their learning. These students displayed some knowledge and understanding of appropriate syllabus topics and of the underpinning geographical concepts.

### 4.2 Quality of teaching

The quality of teaching of Geography was either good or very good in a majority of geography lessons. In a minority of lessons the teaching methodologies employed did not effectively engage students in their own learning. The inspectors made clear recommendations in relation to teaching methodologies that required development and improvement.

Where good practice was observed the teacher effectively engaged the students through the use of active teaching and learning methodologies. The students were attentive and enthusiastic in their responses to the variety of stimuli used by the teacher. The learning intention was clear and linked to

previous learning. Teachers discussed the learning outcome with students. "What you will know or be able to do at the end of this lesson" was outlined and placed on the board. Visual stimulus materials such as maps, photographs, graphs and diagrams were used to engage students. The students listened but also responded and questioned. Planned tasks for students were interspersed throughout the lesson to focus students on a particular geographical skill or aspect of the topic for study. Teachers' questions were directed at individuals and were differentiated in relation to the mixed-ability class. The depth and the targeting of these questions challenged students in their understanding and all responses were affirmed.

In a minority of the lessons observed the methodologies employed by the teacher resulted in a poor level of engagement by students. The students in these lessons were not actively engaged and were passive in their learning. The culture of these lessons was one of teacher talk and students as silent learners, occasionally responding to questions or directions from the teacher. The students were not challenged by tasks or the application of geographical skills. A lecturing style and an over-reliance on the textbook as the only stimulus were apparent in these lessons. The silence of students was implicitly rewarded. The topic for study was reduced to convenient segments and written as short notes on the board. In the mainly mixed-ability classes, these

methodologies ensured that the students were silent during contributions by the teacher and were directed to respond to the teacher's questions or to take notes, as appropriate.

The main recommendations in reports dealt with these teaching methodologies. These reports recommended that teachers employ active teaching and learning methodologies more frequently in lessons. A selection of recommendations from reports clearly illustrates the comments and concerns of the inspectors. One report recommended:

Teachers should consider a range of additional teaching methodologies that will actively engage students in their own learning.

Another dealt with the lecturing style used and stated:

Some lessons entailed lengthy teacher explanations and it is recommended that an activity based on the lesson content be introduced to vary the lecture model and actively engage students.

Another report recommended that active teaching methodologies be used in all lessons and stated that

in order to maintain a balance between teacher input and students' activity it is recommended that instruction be punctuated with short class tasks and worksheets. This practice was noted in some classes and its wider use is to be encouraged.

### Features of good practice

- Teaching methodologies that actively engaged students in their own learning were observed in the majority of lessons
- The integration of geographical skills, tasks and visual stimuli was in evidence in effective geography lessons

### Concerns

- Some less effective lessons were dominated by teacher talk and an over-reliance on the textbook; these occurred in a minority of cases
- The students were passive and not challenged to respond to questions, tasks, or the application of geographical skills in less successful lessons

### 4.3 Quality of questioning

Questioning of students by the teacher was the main methodology used to engage students, to maintain focus on the learning intention and to assess understanding. The inspectors reported that the quality of questioning was very good in the majority of lessons. In other lessons the questioning strategies that were employed were less effective in engaging students.

The use of a combination of higher-order and lower-order questions in lessons was considered to be very good practice. This questioning strategy was planned and managed by the teachers but was naturally adapted in lessons as learning progressed. An appropriate waiting time was provided for students in which to formulate their response to these questions. Lower-order or closed questions mainly dealt with factual recall and were used to maintain the attention of students as the lessons progressed. Higher-order or open questions challenged students to use higher-order thinking skills including application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

In lessons where questioning techniques were considered to be very good the teachers used carefully composed questions as a differentiated method to engage the range of students in the mixed-ability classes. An appropriate waiting time was also used to allow students to formulate their answers. The

evaluative comments of the inspectors praised the questioning techniques employed in a significant number of reports. One report, reflecting many, stated:

Teacher questioning was central to all the lessons observed. Lessons opened with questions on previous learning and the topics for study were progressed through well chosen and targeted questions. The question type varied between closed, focused questions and those requiring more expansive answers.

Another report commented:

Questions were very appropriately targeted at named students and all responses were affirmed. Students were also challenged to develop their answers and there was an appropriate balance between closed questions and those demanding more discursive responses and higher-order thinking skills.

Where the quality of questioning was less effective the main weaknesses in lessons were the use of predominantly lower-order questions and the failure to direct questions at named students. This resulted in some students answering regularly while others never answered or were never challenged to answer. These poor questioning techniques also encouraged chorus answering in some instances. In a small minority of lessons very few if any questions were posed by teachers to their students.

### Features of good practice

- The quality of questioning was significantly good in the majority of lessons
- In effective lessons the teachers
  - used higher-order and lower-order questions
  - directed questions at named students
  - provided a significant waiting time for students to think and consider their response
  - affirmed students' responses
  - challenged students to further develop their answer following contributions from other students or the teacher

### Concerns

- In a minority of lessons teachers used mainly lower-order questions
- In some less effective lessons the teacher's questions were not directed at particular individuals, with the result that in some students answered regularly while others were not challenged to answer
- Poor questioning techniques resulted in chorus answering in some lessons

## 4.4 Stimulus materials and students' tasks in lessons

Stimulus materials were used to very good effect in the majority of lessons. Textual, visual and auditory materials were used to stimulate students and to illustrate and develop the topic for study. Sketches, diagrams and key words or phrases placed on the blackboard or whiteboard were used in most lessons to focus students' attention on the main learning points. Overhead transparencies were used to illustrate the topic in a significant number of lessons. Individual maps and aerial photographs were also used in many lessons. Digital photographs, often with the use of presentation software, were also integrated in a small number of lessons. The inspectors praised the integration of these stimulus materials where they were observed and used appropriately in lessons to engage students and to assist with learning.

The inspectors' comments illustrated the effectiveness of these materials. One such report stated:

In most of the lessons teachers had adopted a visual approach to the teaching of Geography by the use of wall charts, the overhead projector and clearly drawn maps and diagrams on the blackboard.



The inspectors also commented that stimulus materials could have been used to greater effect in a minority of lessons. One such report stated:

The integration of a visual approach to the teaching of Geography is encouraged in all lessons as a means of facilitating student learning and catering for the range of learning styles within mixed-ability classroom settings.

Students' tasks were integrated to good effect in the majority of lessons to engage students in their learning. These tasks, as evidenced in lessons included note-taking for short periods of the lesson and completing short written tasks and worksheets. In some instances these tasks involved working with visual materials such as maps, photographs or samples. Group work and pair work was also used in the organising of these tasks. The appropriate inclusion of these tasks in the planned classroom methodology for geography lessons was seen as very good practice. One report commented:

In a number of lessons the students were also given short tasks using OS maps or worksheets. This strategy further engaged students in their own learning and allowed the teachers to circulate among the students focusing on individual progress.

A small number of the inspectors' reports recommended the inclusion of students' tasks as an active methodology for

engaging students in their own learning. One such report stated:

In order to vary lesson delivery and to challenge students to more actively engage in the learning process it is recommended that short in-class worksheets or other practical exercises be given to students.

### Features of good practice

- The integration of textual, visual and auditory materials into lessons to illustrate topics for study, to stimulate students' interest, and to assist learning was observed in the majority of lessons
- Students' tasks were used to engage students actively in the majority of lessons

### Concerns

- The absence of stimulus materials and tasks to engage students in learning impacted negatively on a minority of lessons



## 4.5 Integration of ICT in lessons

ICT was used in teaching Geography in half of the lessons observed and was not used in the remainder. The integration of ICT was observed in lessons through the use of digital photographs, process diagrams, and the analysis of maps and aerial photographs and in a few instances through the use of animations. The inspectors commented positively on the progress already achieved in schools but also encouraged teachers to build on the level of integration of ICT.

One report which reflected a number of others stated:

Both students and teachers have begun to use ICT in the teaching and learning processes. Teachers had prepared worksheets and had acquired support materials from the internet and TY students had used their ICT skills to research and present a project on the Indian sub-continent.

In lessons where ICT was not used but where its use would have aided students' learning the inspectors recommended that the integration of ICT should begin. One such report recommended that

the geography teaching team should engage in the process of integrating ICT in the teaching and learning of the subject. A digital camera, laptop [computer] and data projector could be used to further enhance the good work already in evidence.

Another report encouraged teachers to begin the integration of ICT through the setting of planning priorities in the collaborative subject planning process. It stated:

Another priority could see the geography department engaging in further planning for resources particularly in the area of ICT. The use of the *Trail Master* DVD to support the teaching of map and photograph interpretation skills would be a useful entry point for teachers in this aspect of the process.

### Features of good practice

- The effective integration of ICT in teaching and learning was evident in one half of geography lessons
- Where they were used ICT resources were particularly effective in enhancing the teaching and learning of geographical skills relating to maps, photographs and spatial information in lessons
- ICT was used by students and teachers as an effective research tool in some instances

### Concerns

- The absence of the integration of ICT was noted in one half of the lessons observed

## 4.6 Differentiation in lessons

Differentiation refers to the way the geography teacher takes account of the different aptitudes, interests and learning styles of students. Effective differentiation requires a planned approach and the use of a range of methodologies for engaging all students in learning. Most classes for Geography were mixed ability in nature. In inclusive mainstream classes teachers have responsibility for the teaching and learning of students with a diverse range of learning styles. Those with special educational needs and those for whom English is an additional language should also be appropriately included in these mainstream lessons. Teachers must use differentiated teaching and learning methodologies and strategies to manage teaching and learning in such inclusive classes.

The inspectors observed clear examples of differentiation by teachers in mixed-ability geography lessons as students made their final preparations for the State examinations. These lessons were normally concerned with revision and were differentiated in the depth of treatment of the topic for study and in the level of detail in applying geographical skills. Homework and particularly practice on examination questions were also differentiated. The requirements of particular examination questions for higher-level students and ordinary-level students and the quality of written answers were also

differentiated by teachers. This good practice was encouraged and affirmed by the inspectors and was evident in most lessons as the State examinations approached.

However, the inspectors observed limited evidence of differentiated methodologies in most other lessons. Differentiated methodologies for including students with additional educational needs including those with special educational needs and those for whom English is an additional language were not observed in most geography lessons. The inspectors encouraged the development of a formal dialogue between the education support team in such schools and the geography teachers to facilitate the inclusion of these students in mainstream mixed-ability classes. These links could also assist in the development of differentiated teaching and learning strategies in geography lessons. Formal links with the education support team had been established in a minority of schools. In significantly more schools, however, there were informal lines of communication between the geography teachers and those providing additional support for students. The inspectors affirmed these developments in the minority of schools where very good practice was observed. In one report this engagement was acknowledged as follows:

The geography department has established strong links with the education support department. Resources, learning

materials, revision plans, key word lists and a variety of creative assessments and worksheets are exchanged to enable all students to make progress.

Focused recommendations were made by the inspectors when it was clear that improvement in this area was necessary. One such report pointed to the further development of these links:

Given the mixed-ability class groupings it is recommended that further links be forged with the education support department to help and advise on the implementation of methodologies to differentiate the Geography syllabus to cater for the needs of students within the mainstream setting.

Another report pointed directly to the need for these contacts and stated:

The geography teaching team and the education support department should plan and develop differentiated teaching and learning strategies to further support students in the mainstream setting.

### Features of good practice

- Inspectors noted good examples of differentiated teaching approaches, especially in areas such as the setting of homework, practising examination questions and revision for State examinations
- In effective lessons using differentiated teaching methodologies
  - o the lesson content was suited to the different aptitudes, interests and learning styles of students
  - o the teaching methodologies were differentiated by level of language, task, depth of questioning and type of stimulus materials used
  - o differentiated assessment strategies and homework that included clear success criteria for the completion of tasks were used
  - o the teachers provided clear developmental feedback to the students
  - o a formal dialogue was maintained between the education support team and the mainstream geography teachers

### Concerns

- Inspectors found little evidence of differentiation to engage the diversity of students within mainstream mixed-ability classes other than in the period approaching the State examinations
- There was little formal communication and dialogue between the education support team and the mainstream geography teachers in a majority of schools





# Chapter 5

## The quality of assessment

## 5.1 Quality of assessment modes

In the majority of schools the inspectors observed an effective range of assessment modes in lessons. The questioning of students and the monitoring and correction of homework were among the main modes of assessment that were observed. Tasks in lessons and short informal written tests were also used by teachers. In a small minority of instances, students' project work was used as an aspect of assessment. It was clear to the inspectors that in almost all instances teachers systematically recorded the outcome of assessments whether informal, in the course of the lesson, or the more formal school examinations. Teachers also recorded students' attendance at lessons. These records were used by the teachers to evaluate students' learning and to provide feedback to parents and students and to other staff members, as appropriate.

The inspectors reported that a significant level of assessment of students' learning was taking place in the majority of geography lessons. One report that reflected many commented:

Ongoing assessment was observed in the classrooms visited as teachers checked student understanding by focused questioning as the lesson proceeded. Homework also forms

part of ongoing assessment and class tests are held on the completion of sections of the syllabus.

Another report illustrated the practices observed in most lessons and stated that:

Assessment on an ongoing basis is carried out in class through questioning, correction of homework and completion of task sheets.

The quality of students' written work was either good or very good in lessons. In the majority of schools, the students' work, whether completed at home or in class, was monitored by the teacher and in the majority of instances clear and worthwhile developmental feedback was provided to students. This is essential for learning and was acknowledged and affirmed by the inspectors in reports. One such report stated clearly that

students' work was regularly marked and monitored by teachers. Appropriate comments were placed in copybooks in a number of cases to direct students towards improvement.

Another report referring to developmental feedback observed that

there was evidence of teacher monitoring and marking of work. This annotation included comments that appropriately acknowledged and affirmed students' work and also

incorporated some developmental comments that provided guidelines on advancing the standard of work.

In a minority of reports the inspectors observed that the quality of assessment of students' work was varied in different class groups and was lacking in some lessons. The inspectors were concerned with the quality of monitoring and correction of homework in particular in the majority of these cases. One report stated that

students' copybooks contained appropriate homework tasks but in some lessons copybooks lacked any evidence of teacher monitoring, comment or assessment. In other cases the students' notebooks and copybooks were regularly checked and marked.

In a few reports the inspectors noted that homework was neither set nor monitored in some lessons. These reports make clear recommendations relating to the need to regularly monitor homework and to provide developmental feedback. One such report recommended that homework should be consistently corrected in all lessons. In another report the inspectors emphasised the value of homework as a learning and assessment tool. This report stated:

In line with the setting of homework it is recommended that it be consistently corrected if its full potential as a learning and assessment tool is to be realised.

The assessment of students' work should be complemented by clear developmental feedback to the students if assessment is to improve learning. However, the quality of feedback on written work was of concern to the inspectors in a significant minority of lessons. Copybooks and folders in these instances were often ticked and dated by the teacher. A comment, such as *Good* or *Poor* was added in many instances. This type of monitoring gives the teacher an indication of the quality, pace and depth of learning but gives a very narrow and limited message to the student.

The inspectors recommended that teachers and subject departments consider adopting assessment for learning (AfL) methodologies in a significant number of reports. AfL uses formative assessment to improve learning. Learning outcomes for the lesson or the success criteria for an assessment task are shared with students. AfL encourages comment-only marking and developmental feedback on tasks. It also directs teachers to adjust their teaching methods in relation to the outcomes of assessments. The inspectors recommended the use of AfL in many reports and also encouraged an emphasis on assessment within the subject planning process. For example, one report stated:

As part of the ongoing collaborative planning process the geography teachers should also focus on the type of feedback given to students following the correction of students' copies

and class assessments. The methods set out in assessment for learning should be used to implement these strategies.

### Features of good practice

- A range of assessment modes was used in the majority of lessons
- Students' written work was of a high quality in the majority of lessons
- Attendance and the outcomes of assessments were systematically recorded in almost all lessons
- There was regular monitoring and correction of homework and students' tasks in the majority of lessons
- Teachers provided formative developmental feedback to students on their work in the majority of lessons
- Inspectors noted that assessment for learning strategies had the potential to improve the effectiveness of assessment

### Concerns

- There was a lack of regular monitoring and correction of homework in a minority of lessons
- In a minority of lessons clear developmental feedback was not provided to students on homework and tasks





# Chapter 6

Summary of main findings and recommendations

### The quality of subject provision and whole-school support

#### Main findings

Geography was a well-supported subject in most schools.

Almost all schools offered Geography as a compulsory subject in the junior cycle and the majority of class groups were mixed ability in nature.

Most schools provided the subject with an allocation of three class periods per week in the junior cycle.

The majority of schools offered a geography module in TY and most provided an allocation of at least two class periods per week.

Most schools experienced a strong uptake of Geography in the Leaving Certificate. Almost all offered the subject within an open-choice structure and almost all provided an allocation of at least five class periods per week.

The majority of schools had a designated geography room.

While all Leaving Certificate Geography classes were engaged in the compulsory geographical investigation only one half of

TY geography programmes contained any investigative or fieldwork element. Only a very small minority of schools engaged in any fieldwork in junior cycle geography.

#### Recommendations

All students should have access to Geography at the higher level until they decide on their chosen level for examination.

As far as possible all geography teachers should have equal access to the geography room, where one exists.

The resources for geography teaching should be catalogued and, in schools where there is no geography room, should be stored in an accessible area.

Geography departments should work with the school management to develop the ICT facilities for Geography.

Geographical investigation skills and fieldwork should be included in the TY and junior-cycle geography programmes.

### The quality of planning and preparation

#### Main findings

Almost all schools had a geography department in operation and had appointed a subject co-ordinator.

A collaborative planning process was in place in the majority of schools.

Almost all geography teachers were engaged in individual planning of a very high quality.

A detailed subject plan had been developed in fewer than half the schools, while a similar number had been in the process of developing a plan. A small minority of schools had not developed a subject plan.

The majority of schools that offered Geography in the TY had a TY geography plan.

### Recommendations

All schools should have a subject plan for Geography and schools that offer TY Geography should have a TY geography plan in place.

The subject plan should refer to teaching and learning methodologies, learning outcomes, assessment, the integration of ICT, and inclusion.

Individual geography teachers and departments should reflect on the effectiveness of a linear approach to teaching the syllabus in the junior and the senior cycle within the context of their school and their classroom.

## The quality of teaching and learning

### Main findings

The quality of learning was generally good and in some instances it was very good but in a minority of lessons the students were passive in their learning.

The quality of the teaching of Geography was either good or very good in almost all lessons.

The quality of questioning was significantly good in the majority of lessons.

Visual stimulus materials and engaging students' tasks were integrated into a majority of lessons.

Where it was observed, ICT was integrated effectively in classroom activities.

### Recommendations

A variety of active teaching and learning methodologies should be employed to engage students in their own learning in lessons.

Improvement is needed in the quality of questioning in a minority of lessons.

The integration of ICT in teaching and learning should be further developed.

The use of differentiated teaching and learning methodologies should be expanded to ensure the inclusion of all students in geography lessons.

Formal links and communication should be established with the education support team to facilitate strategies for inclusion and differentiation in geography lessons.

TY geography lessons should be clearly distinct in content and methodology from Leaving Certificate geography lessons.

Almost all teachers systematically recorded students' attendance and the outcomes of assessments.

### Recommendations

Students' work should be monitored and corrected in all instances.

Formative and developmental feedback should be provided to all students.

Teachers should use assessment for learning strategies in subject planning, in classroom teaching and in student assessment.

## The quality of assessment

### Main findings

An effective range of assessment modes was used in the majority of lessons.

Students' written work was of a very high quality in the majority of lessons.

The clear monitoring and correction of homework and the provision of some formative and developmental comments were in evidence in the majority of lessons.





# Appendix

## References

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## Useful web sites

### General education web sites

<a href="http://www.education.ie">www.education.ie</a>	Department of Education and Science
<a href="http://www.examinations.ie">www.examinations.ie</a>	State Examinations Commission
<a href="http://www.ncca.ie">www.ncca.ie</a>	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
<a href="http://www.sdpi.ie">www.sdpi.ie</a>	School Development Planning Initiative
<a href="http://www.slss.ie">www.slss.ie</a>	Second Level Support Service
<a href="http://www.ncte.ie">www.ncte.ie</a>	National Council for Technology in Education
<a href="http://www.sess.ie">www.sess.ie</a>	Special Education Support Service

### Web sites for teaching and learning in Geography

<a href="http://www.agti.ie">www.agti.ie</a>	Association of Geography Teachers of Ireland
<a href="http://www.scoilnet.ie/geography">www.scoilnet.ie/geography</a>	Leaving Certificate Geography Support Service
<a href="http://www.geography.org.uk">www.geography.org.uk</a>	Geography Teachers' Association, UK

