

# Thematic networks as toolboxes: The case of the HERODOT Network for Geography in Europe

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## Abstract

In some countries, Geography is struggling to survive as a subject as other disciplines develop and absorb geographical thoughts and methods into them. The survival of Geography in schools and higher education institutions is critical to the understanding of world phenomena, particularly in view of the problems with climate change, global warming and globalisation among others. There is very little understanding of the importance and role of geography in modern societies. This paper looks at the role of the HERODOT thematic network as a toolbox for the promotion of geography. By analysing the current state of geography promotion across higher education institutions, the Network aims to provide a toolbox of materials to support teachers and academics, but also parents, students and the general public to understand the role of geography in society. This is achieved through a number of initiatives, particularly the development of the GEOCUBE. This paper concludes by arguing the importance of such Networks in providing tools for the promotion and awareness of geography.

**Key words:** geography, toolbox, GEOCUBE, promotion, higher education.

**Resum.** *Xarxes temàtiques com a font de recursos: El cas de la xarxa HERODOT per a la geografia a Europa*

En alguns països, la geografia està lluitant per sobreviure com a matèria, atès que hi ha unes altres disciplines que en desenvolupen els continguts i els mètodes i els absorbeixen. La supervivència de la geografia a les escoles i a les institucions d'educació superior és primordial per comprendre els fenòmens mundials, particularment els relacionats amb el canvi climàtic, l'escalfament global i la globalització, entre altres. Hi ha molt poc coneixement de la importància i del rol de la geografia a les societats modernes. Aquest article tracta el rol de la xarxa temàtica HERODOT com a font de recursos per promocionar la geografia. Amb l'anàlisi de l'estat actual de la promoció d'aquesta disciplina a les institucions d'ensenyament superior, la xarxa té per objectiu proveir un conjunt de materials per ajudar el professorat i els acadèmics i les acadèmiques, però també els pares i les mares, l'alumnat i el públic en general, a fi de fer-los comprendre el rol de la geografia a la societat. Això s'ha aconseguit mitjançant un bon nombre d'iniciatives, particularment el desenvolupament de GEOCUBE. El present article conclou amb l'argumentació del valor d'aquestes xarxes en el proveïment d'eines per promoure la geografia i conscienciar-se de la importància que té.

**Paraules clau:** geografia, font de recursos, GEOCUBE, promoció, educació superior.

**Resumen.** *Redes temáticas como fuente de recursos: El caso de la red HERODOT para la geografía en Europa*

En algunos países, la geografía está luchando por sobrevivir como materia, dado que otras disciplinas desarrollan y absorben sus contenidos y sus métodos. La supervivencia de la geografía en las escuelas y en las instituciones de educación superior es crítica para la comprensión de los fenómenos mundiales, particularmente los relacionados con el cambio climático, el calentamiento global y la globalización, entre otros. Hay muy poco conocimiento de la importancia y del rol de la geografía en las sociedades modernas. Este artículo trata el rol de la red temática HERODOT como fuente de recursos para la promoción de la geografía. Con el análisis del estado actual de la promoción de dicha disciplina en las instituciones de enseñanza superior, la red tiene por objetivo dotar un conjunto de materiales para ayudar al profesorado y a los académicos y a las académicas, pero también a los padres y a las madres, al alumnado y al público en general, con el fin de comprender el rol de la geografía en la sociedad. Esto se ha conseguido a través de un buen número de iniciativas, particularmente el desarrollo de GEOCUBE. El presente artículo concluye con la argumentación del valor de estas redes en la dotación de herramientas para la promoción de la geografía y la concienciación sobre su importancia.

**Palabras clave:** geografía, fuente de recursos, GEOCUBE, promoción, educación superior.

**Résumé.** *Réseaux thématiques comme source de recours: Le cas du réseau HERODOT pour la Géographie en Europe*

Dans quelques pays, la Géographie lutte pour survivre comme matière maintenant que d'autres disciplines développent et absorbent ses contenus et méthodes. La survie de la Géographie dans les écoles et dans les institutions d'éducation supérieure est critique pour la compréhension des phénomènes mondiaux, particulièrement les reliés avec le changement climatique, le réchauffement de la terre et la globalisation, entre d'autres. Il y a très peu de connaissance de l'importance et du rôle de la géographie dans les sociétés modernes. Cet article traite le rôle du réseau thématique HERODOT comme source de recours pour la promotion de la géographie. Avec l'analyse de l'état actuel de la promotion de la géographie dans les institutions d'enseignement supérieur, le réseau a pour objectif doter un ensemble de matériels pour aider le professorat et les académiciens, mais aussi les parents, les étudiants et le public en général afin de comprendre le rôle de la géographie dans la société. Ceci a été obtenu à travers un bon nombre d'initiatives, particulièrement le développement de GEOCUBE. Cet article conclut avec l'argumentation de l'importance de ces réseaux dans la dotation d'outils pour la promotion et la conscientiation de la géographie.

**Mots clé:** géographie, source de recours, GEOCUBE, promotion, éducation supérieure.

### Summary

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## Introduction

Many authors agree with the importance of geography in today's society. Geography provides a focus on places, regions, landscapes and environments, cultures and societies, all at a variety of different scales. This means that it alone as a discipline offers a unique bridge between people and the effects they have on our planet. Geography and geographers can and should make a strong case to be a core educational component supporting the development of citizens. Lambert (2007) justifies the place of Geography in the curriculum by suggesting that it is concerned with «making sense of the world». Geography as an academic discipline provides many clear links to learning for life and for living in a world where the critical decision of citizens have major implications for the future of our planet (Birzea, 2000; Clark and Higgitt, 1997; Rawling and Daugherty, 1996). Geography also develops fundamental skills for life, such as spatial thinking (Bednarz, 2007).

Despite this Donert (2007) reports a decline of geography in schools across Europe with almost all member states, with the exception of two (Estonia and Slovenia) reporting a stable or declining state of geography. This situation is increasing the concern over the lack of geographical knowledge that students demonstrate when they leave school (Healey, 1999). In some countries geography is under a lot of pressure which result in a number of strategies undertaken to improve the subject's position and image (Oost and Kannevorff, 2000).

The situation is different in higher education institutions. Geography here is not a tight discipline with a fixed curriculum across institutions and countries. Geography is taught in a number of inter-disciplinary units and there is a wide variety of subject matters and approaches. Geography is considered to be a popular and respected subject in higher education though there are predominantly limited and inaccurate views of what the subject is and what geographers do (Donert, 2007). Seven of the «older» European countries (Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Spain, Portugal and UK) report a decline in geography. The number of applicants for geography is stable or growing in the other 21 surveyed European countries. This was perceived to be the result of national expansion in the provision of higher education and revised educational policies (Donert, 2007).

In late 2002, the HERODOT network for geography in higher education ([www.herodot.net](http://www.herodot.net)) was set up following a successful bid for European Commission funding. HERODOT provided the opportunity to Europeanise geography alongside the Bologna declaration (European Commission, 1999) and allow for comparative research to be carried out about the subject in Europe. As a result reports were presented to the Commission on the state of geography in European higher education (Donert, 2007).

More recently, in 2005, the European Commission approved more funds to support HERODOT's new interest groups, amongst which was Thematic Pillar 2 «Promotion of Geography in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century». The identification of

this important thematic pillar in the new HERODOT phase came about because of:

- Concerns over the major differences between geography studied in schools and that studied in universities (therefore many people not understanding what geography at university level is all about).
- Reports from graduates experiencing difficulties with their employability after completing a geography degree (Ruepert et al., 2005).
- The concern over declining numbers of applicants in some European countries, thus increasing the awareness of the subject to students in higher education.

### **Objectives and methodology**

This paper looks at the current promotion of geography whilst setting the scene for future promotion of the subject. Effective promotion is critical, not only for the survival of the subject, but also for the future of geography (and geographers) in society. This paper concludes on the importance of tools and networks in the promotion of geography. This section will look at the methods applied by the HERODOT Network Thematic Pillar 2 in fulfilling its objectives.

The objectives of the Thematic Pillar 2 were laid down in March 2007 in the first meeting held in Malta, and included the design of a survey which captured the current state of affairs with regard to the promotion of geography in higher education across Europe and the creation of a toolbox, which would assist geographers (both academic and professionals) to promote the subject. This paper reports on the results achieved so far in the objectives of Thematic Pillar 2.

#### *Surveying the current state of promotion of geography*

In trying to achieve the objectives two approaches were set, first to collect the necessary information about promotion of geography across Europe and second, to create the toolbox. A questionnaire was developed in order to assess the different aspects of promotion. Table 1 outlines the main questions of the survey. Access to the online questionnaire is available at [http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=3\\_2fgrPMqOcJ0oDNwCAa2oaA\\_3d\\_3d](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=3_2fgrPMqOcJ0oDNwCAa2oaA_3d_3d)

The questionnaire was developed in early 2007 with responses being collected throughout the same year. A pilot survey was carried out in London at the IGU-CGE and HERODOT Conference «Changing Geographies: Innovative Curricula» in April 2007. Twenty-four questionnaires were collected from 15 countries. A first presentation of the results was done at the EUGEO Conference in Amsterdam in August 2007 (Attard, 2007) and later on at the second meeting of the Thematic Pillar in Utrecht in March 2008. Here there were already positive indications of the promotion carried out by geographers

**Table 1.** Aspects of promotion. The questionnaire content

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Is there promotion?
Who does the promotion?
What is promoted?
Why is promotion carried out?
What measures are used to promoted geography and the reason for promotion?
What is the focus of the promotion?
Who should be responsible for promotion of geography to various groups?
What instruments and tools would be most successful in promoting geography?

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in higher education, in their respective institutions and countries. By the end of 2007 there were a total of 63 responses from 23 different countries. The final results of the survey were presented at the Annual International Conference of the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers in London, in September 2008 (Donert and Attard, 2008).

### *The promotional toolbox*

The toolbox content was discussed in detail in the Malta meeting in 2007 where a list of possible tools was drawn up. Research into available tools was presented, which also inspired the tools to be considered for the Thematic Pillar. These included:

- The production of an online power point presentation (see for example AGI et al., 2001).
- The production and distribution of a leaflet.
- The production of various website materials including material on best practices.
- The production and distribution of a poster (see for example RGS, 2007).
- The creation of GEOCUBE.

Following discussions, also in Stockholm at the HERODOT Working Conference in September 2007 it was decided that the toolbox should focus on the GEOCUBE —a virtual Rubik Cube which contained information about the significance of geography in various aspects of society and the environment. The cube's six faces and nine smaller inserts (sub headings) provided an excellent opportunity for 54 topics to be covered by the GEOCUBE. Table 2 lists the topics discussed in the GEOCUBE whilst figure 1 shows the prototype website launched in September 2008 at the HERODOT Conference «Future Prospects in Geography» in Liverpool. At the same conference cardboard 3D versions of the GEOCUBE were also distributed. The GEOCUBE also presents opportunities for marketing and promotion of the concept when and if

funds are available for the manufacture of solid small GEOCUBEs for children and adults, promoting not only the GEOCUBE website (the tool) but also Geography.

**Table 2.** GEOCUBE Topics

<b>Living together</b>	<b>Earth from all angles</b>
migration	urban landscapes
mobility	rural landscapes
poverty	oceans and seas
literacy	rivers
ethnicity and religion	mountains
language	deserts
health	wetlands
economic development	karst landscapes
pollution in urban systems	polar regions
<b>The fascinating Earth</b>	<b>Shrinking planet</b>
earthquakes	energy resources
tsunami	food resources and distribution
storms	waste and pollution
floods	water resources
forest fires	nature
conflicts in the earth systems	minerals
volcanoes	land resources
hurricanes	housing
drought	agriculture
<b>Exploring our world</b>	<b>Useful Geographies</b>
climate change	education
weather forecasting	planning
ozone hole	resource management
population growth and distribution	facilities management
aging populations	transport
deforestation	risk
species extinction	GIS
atmosphere	using maps
war	geographic skills



Figure 1. GEOCUBE prototype website (launched Liverpool September 2008) (<http://www.geo-cube.eu>)

## Discussion. How and why promote Geography

In identifying the best ways of promoting geography the HERODOT Thematic Pillar tried to establish the current practices and investigate the most important aspects of geography that required promotion. The questionnaire provided a good basis to start this investigation.

In 92 per cent of the institutions surveyed promotion of geography is carried out. Departments and individuals engage mostly in promotion, with very little being done by students and institution's public relation mechanisms. In 82 per cent of the cases the reason for promotion is to attract students and raise awareness of the subject (51%). Forty-one per cent do promotion to raise public awareness, thus ensuring funding and survival of the department. Despite the hard work by students during their study years it is unfortunate that no promotion is carried out by students themselves. Comments made by individuals show that students could help in the promotion of their subject, particularly by presenting their research (dissertations) at conferences or by organising student events (e.g. through the setting up of student organisations). However this is not done in many European countries despite the creation and hard work carried out by the European Geography Association for Students and Young Geographers (EGEA [www.egea.eu](http://www.egea.eu)).

Another interesting aspect of the survey was the promotional message used in the marketing strategies. The highest percentage was scored by the attractiveness of the subject (90%) whilst the success of graduates and their employability is used in the promotional materials as well. These facts complement the reasons for promotion which will be outlined below. Other messages were also used and included:

- Fieldwork and the wide applicability of the acquired geographical skills.
- The understanding of everyday life and issues of sustainability.
- Public service.
- The importance of geographic knowledge.

The different types of tools used for promotion are important elements to study and understand since they make for successful and effective promotion. In looking at the tools which are mostly used in promoting geography, institutions were provided with an extensive list in the questionnaire. The results of the survey are shown in table 3.

It is clear that websites and events are the most common tools used for the promotion of geography. Table 3 also shows the reasons for promotion and it is evident that these tools are mostly used for the promotion of the subject to attract students and, in some cases to raise awareness of the subject. These results show positive approaches towards the promotion of geography. Other measures listed in the questionnaire, even though less frequent show involvement of the private sector in providing training, involvement of teachers and communities in awareness programmes, the involvement of pro-

**Table 3.** Percentage use of tools for the promotion of Geography

Tools	Reasons for promotion				
	Funding	Attracting students	Raise awareness of subject	Department survival	Public awareness of subject
Postcards	4	12	10	2	8
Leaflets / Prospectus	6	<b>57</b>	33	16	20
Poster	6	<b>47</b>	37	14	25
School network	12	33	25	14	14
Website	14	<b>67</b>	<b>45</b>	20	<b>47</b>
Marketing Gadgets	0	2	0	0	0
Lobbying	22	4	18	16	16
Competitions	4	20	10	2	6
News/press releases	2	16	18	6	24
Events	16	<b>65</b>	<b>41</b>	20	39
Others	4	6	4	0	2

professionals and rewards for professional geographers, festivals and events that celebrate aspects of geography such as GIS Day ([www.gisday.com](http://www.gisday.com)), Geography Awareness Week ([www.mywondergulworld.org/gaw.html](http://www.mywondergulworld.org/gaw.html)) and Geography Week ([www.geography.org.uk/download/GA\\_EYPSq2WhyDoAGeography-Week.pdf](http://www.geography.org.uk/download/GA_EYPSq2WhyDoAGeography-Week.pdf)), and finally the use of Networks, such as HERODOT to disseminate geography.

Promotion however should not be the remit of one institution or individual. Different messages should be disseminated from different sources in order to target specific audiences. The questionnaire identified four target audiences to whom promotion should be directed: students, public, decision makers, and business. Institutions were asked to identify whose responsibility they thought would be to promote geography to these different groups. Results are displayed in figure 2.

National associations, academics and professional geographers are the main bodies identified by surveyed organisations which should broadly promote geography to a variety of audiences. School teachers, on the other hand should focus on students and general public. There is a surprisingly low response towards the role of media in promoting geography to students, businesses and decision makers. Maybe the role of media is underestimated or else it is only perceived as an agent of promotion rather than conducting the promotion itself. More importantly these results indicate the responsibility of academics, above all others in promoting geography to the wider society.

Some best practice examples for the promotion of geography identified in the survey include:

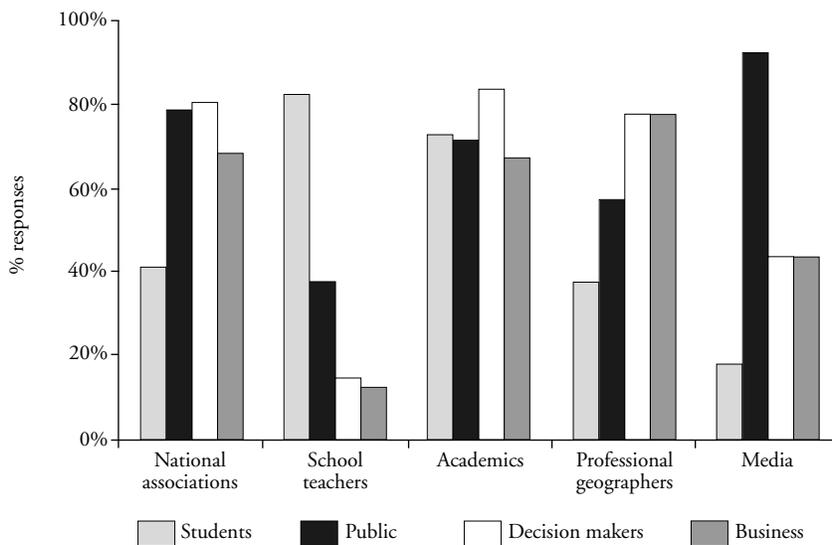


Figure 2. Promotion of Geography by various bodies to target audiences

- Well-prepared TV series (BBC Coast [www.bbc.co.uk/coast](http://www.bbc.co.uk/coast) which included among its experts the famous British geographer and journalist Nicholas Crane).
- In-depth interviews with geographers in the various media.
- Case studies showing where and how geographers work – exciting careers.
- Promotion of geographic concepts through the use of 3D tools such as Google Earth and other GIS internet services.
- National associations involvement (for example KNAG in the Netherlands and RGS in the UK).
- TV geography pupils competitions.

It was evident from the survey that many of the respondents saw the importance of promoting geography and subsequently decided to participate in the work of the Thematic Pillar. This work has, for the first time, provided a look into geography promotion across Europe. The diversity of institutional and national situations, the status of geography in each country and the increasing awareness of geographical matters makes this research invaluable when discussions about geography span across the whole of Europe. With increasing demands to lobby for Geography in higher arenas, such as the Council of Europe and the European Commission, there is more pressure for effective tools to be created. Such is the role of the GEOCUBE.

## Promoting Geography through GEOCUBE

Following an analysis of the results obtained in the questionnaire, the GEOCUBE was developed by a select Thematic Pillar group. GEOCUBE would target specific audiences and would focus primarily on the role of geography in the various aspects of life on earth. The content would reflect specific target audiences and messages. It therefore became immediately evident that there is the potential for developing a number of GEOCUBEs that would cater for different uses.

Given the restricted resources and timeframes to create a GEOCUBE, it was agreed that the first GEOCUBE (supported by the HERODOT Network) would target the public at large and would, in its format and content centre around how geography plays a role (or a function) in the various topics discussed (see table 2). In identifying the topics importance was given to the user-friendliness of particular terminology, thus ensuring that the public could associate itself with particular events or phenomena in their everyday life or events which they either face or hear about in the media. Translations into the different European languages was also seen as paramount to the effectiveness of the GEOCUBE as a promotional tool. This however is not set to be completed within the HERODOT timeframe, which expires in September 2009.

Inspiration for the GEOCUBE concept came from the Canon in the Netherlands (<http://www.entoen.nu/>) which describes the main events in Dutch history, thus not only promoting history but also providing basic facts which every Dutch person should be aware of. This concept was seen as a very good tool in getting across the messages of what geography is and what geographers do. The content however would not be academic, allowing for society in general to understand all the content of the GEOCUBE.

The objective of the GEOCUBE was never to describe or define the various topics but to underline the function of geography or geographers in dealing with the various issues. The cube provided an excellent opportunity to aggregate particular topics under specific headings, thus the six titles: Living Together, Earth from all Angles, Fascinating Earth, Shrinking Planet, Exploring our World, Useful Geographies. In each face of the cube nine sub-headings detail some of the aspects which are affected by geography. Once a sub heading is selected a short text describes the role of geography, whilst photographic and video imagery complement the user experience.

The GEOCUBE website is set to be fully operational towards the end of 2009. It will have its own web address and be promoted through the HERODOT Network and partner institutions, organisations and associations. GEOCUBE is also seen as the first tool to be promoted by EUROGEO, the new European Association of Geographers launched in September 2008 in Liverpool. This Association will bring together professional geographers, academics, students, teachers and all interested in geography under one European umbrella.

## Networks and the importance of promoting geography

The need for geography in our world and in European society is well established. We live in a time of concerns over sustainability, unstable economies, limited resources and increasing need for understanding our world. Geography as a subject provides the expertise necessary so that, alongside other specialisations, answers to today's challenges can be found. However without a proper understanding of what geography is and what geographers do, it is hardly an easy task for geographers to find their place and for geography to remain an important subject in school and higher education curricula. In the various sectors that geographers today engage, such as planning, surveying, GIS, hydrology and so on, geographers loose their identity and therefore the «geographer» becomes less understood by society. Promoting the subject is seen as a critical element, not only for the survival of the subject but also of the professionals and experts which geography provides in the world.

The HERODOT Network identified this need and set up a specific Thematic Pillar promoting geography in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Through the work of this Thematic Pillar and the HERODOT Network a study looked at the current promotion of geography across 23 countries and designed a toolbox in the form of the GEOCUBE to promote geography in the future.

National Associations, institutions and organisations exist which carry on the work of promoting geography in the individual member states of the European Union. However, if Europeanisation is the Commission's objective with the Bologna Declaration, then there needs to be Networks or Associations which carry a European flag – a network, such as HERODOT or an Association such as EUROGEO that oversee and promote Geography across Europe. The efforts in promoting geography through HERODOT and the support for creating the GEOCUBE are best practice examples of how effective integration and promotion could occur.

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