

# **Sustaining Economic Geography?**

## **Business/Management Schools and the UK's Great Economic Geography Diaspora**

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### **Abstract**

This Exchanges commentary is concerned with the health of Economic Geography (EG) as a sub-discipline, and economic geography (as a wider community of practice) in one of its historical heartlands, the UK. Against a backdrop of prior achievement, recent years have witnessed a noticeable migration of economic geographers in the UK from Departments of Geography to academic positions in Business and Management Schools and related research centres. For the first time, a new research report by the Economic Geography Research Group of the RGS-IBG – *We're In Business! Sustaining Economic Geography?* – has empirically evidenced this trend since 2000 (see James et al. 2018 for the full report). In this parallel commentary, we summarise the major findings of that project in order to identify: the scale of this cross-disciplinary labour mobility; its operation at different levels of the academic career hierarchy; and the underlying motivations and variegated outcomes experienced by those making the transition. We then move to consider the wider implications of this 'EG diaspora' for sustaining EG teaching, research and knowledge production. While economic geography clearly has a healthy appeal to Business and Management as an interdisciplinary community of practice, we raise multiple concerns around the largely uni-directional nature of this 'movers' phenomenon in UK universities. We make a number of suggestions for possible interventions to effect positive change and to prompt a larger conversation that benchmarks this UK experience against other national contexts.

# Exchanges: Sustaining Economic Geography?

## Business/Management Schools and the UK's Great Economic Geography Diaspora

### 1. Introduction: what's happening to Economic Geography (EG) in the UK?

Economic geographers have long been characterised as a self-conscious lot. Yet there is arguably much to celebrate about the contemporary vibrancy and relevance of our sub-discipline. In the wake of a dizzying array of intellectual turns over the last two decades, the pluralist project of economic geography has long involved more than just 'proper-noun Economic Geographers' (Foster et al. 2007: 297). Rather, it also includes human geographers with interests in geographies of economies more broadly defined, and engagement with scholars in cognate disciplines. This healthy pluralism is evident from the impressive impact factors of EG's multiple - namesake and other - international journals. Likewise, a slew of EG handbooks, readers and textbooks documenting the diversity of our sub-disciplinary art. EG also sits at the heart of undergraduate teaching in universities: as recognised in the UK's *International Benchmarking Review of Human Geography* (ESRC/AHRC/RGS-IBG 2013), popular courses in EG span uneven development, globalisation, finance, labour geographies, gender work and employment, cultural economy, innovation, and retail and consumption. EG is also represented by major research groups within the international scholarly communities of the RGS-IBG and AAG, while EG theory also enjoys policy influence within the World Bank, OECD, and amongst multiple regional and national governments.<sup>1</sup>

Despite these successes, recent years have simultaneously witnessed an increasing sense of unease amongst some economic geographers in the UK around the future of our sub-discipline. Here, concerns have been raised about growing external competition for ideas that economic geographers previously laid expert claim to, and which policy makers may even find more palatable (including a geographical turn in other social sciences, and the rise of geographical economics). These debates have been relatively well rehearsed (Martin and Sunley, 2001). More worrying perhaps – and certainly much less commented upon – is an apparent decline of the sub-discipline in former major centres of EG in UK universities, and its retreat to a progressively small number of Geography Departments. The last decade has also witnessed a concomitant decline in UK-based applications to and attendance at the Summer Institute in

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<sup>1</sup> A complete list of references is available in the full report, i.e. James et al. 2018.

Economic Geography, with the UK contingent dropping from a peak of 18 in 2006 to just 2 in 2014 (see also Peck and Olds 2007). Likewise, there have been concurrent reductions in the numbers of journal papers submitted by scholars based in UK Departments of Geography to *Economic Geography* and the *Journal of Economic Geography*, the international flagship mouthpieces for our field. Individually, each of these shifts might not seem significant. However, they have occurred alongside a new phenomenon in the UK, namely a notable migration of economic geographers from Departments of Geography to Schools of Business and Management (hereafter B & M) and related research centres. In combination, we argue that these multiple trends suggest that something significant and worrying seems to have happened to UK EG in the last decade or so.

A new research report by the Economic Geography Research Group (EGRG) of the RGS-IBG (*We're In Business! Sustaining Economic Geography?*) has, for the first time, investigated and evidenced this trend for 2000-15 through detailed analysis of new survey and interview data, generated through engagement with over 140 EG colleagues in the UK and overseas over the last two years (see James et al. 2018 for the full report). In this parallel commentary, we summarise the major findings of that project in order to identify the scale of this cross-disciplinary labour mobility, and the underlying motivations and variegated outcomes experienced by those making the transition. The main thrust of our commentary, however, considers the wider implications of this 'EG diaspora' for sustaining EG teaching, research and knowledge production in the face of contemporary economic change and upheaval. While EG clearly has a healthy appeal to B & M as an interdisciplinary community of practice, we raise multiple concerns around the largely uni-directional nature of this 'movers' phenomenon. In response, we suggest a number of possible interventions to effect positive change, and highlight the need to benchmark the UK experience internationally. Our aim is to provoke a constructive, but frank debate, about how to sustain a cadre of scholars at the centre of our sub-discipline who can speak with authority about the geographies of economies.<sup>2</sup> This is crucial at a time when discussions around the economy (including Brexit, anti-globalisation, and economic nationalisms) have never been more urgent and pressing.

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<sup>2</sup> We are grateful to Jane Wills for codifying this key insight.

## 2. Evidencing the UK Economic Geography Diaspora (in a Nutshell)

The recent EGRG study used published sources, EGRG membership data, and input from EG colleagues and UK Heads of Departments/Schools of Geography to compile a UK database of all economic geographers who have moved into B & M from 2000 to 2015.<sup>3</sup> A web-based questionnaire survey (N=54, 65% response rate) and semi-structured interviews (N=25) were subsequently undertaken to explore colleagues' motivations for and experiences of making such a move, and its implications for their academic identities, research activities, teaching and mentoring.<sup>4</sup> In this opening section, we summarise the major findings from that study as a springboard for the commentary which follows.

### *Scale and significance:*

- A total cohort of 87 Economic Geographers has moved from Departments/Schools of Geography in the UK to academic positions in Business & Management since 2000.
- This represents one third of the total membership of the EGRG of the RGS-IBG, and half of the total UK contingent at the most recent Global Conference on Economic Geography (Oxford 2015).
- Internationally, these movers represent over one tenth of the EGRG and EGSG email listserv memberships (around 800 each).
- Movers to B & M have left from *all levels* of the academic career structure in UK Geography Departments: Professors (10%), Readers (6%), Senior Lecturers/Associate Professor (8%), Lecturers (15%), Research Associates (31%), and Doctoral Researchers (27%) in EG.
- Movers' core substantive research interests are diverse, spanning: clusters, knowledge and innovation, GPNs/TNCs, local economic development, business geography, regional development, retail and consumption, and gender, work and employment.
- There is a predominantly one way flow (from Geography into B & M), rather than a more complex set of back-and-forth, cross-disciplinary career trajectories.
- The process is evidently accelerating over time: 40% moved in the 10 years 2000-2009, 44% moved in the next 5 years (2010-15).
- B & M is welcoming female colleagues from EG, with 17 women (or 20% of all movers) evident at all career stages, in a discipline that is already male-dominated.
- Movers are present in new and growing clusters of EG research within multiple B & M schools, most notably: Coventry University, Southampton Business School, Birmingham Business School, and Sheffield Management School.

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<sup>3</sup> Eligibility for inclusion in this mover sample was based on: (i) PhD students in EG who were trained in Departments of Geography and then took up their first academic postdoctoral post in a School of B & M or related research centre; (ii) mid-career and senior economic geographers who moved from EG faculty positions in Schools of Geography in the UK into Schools of B & M or related research centres from 2000 to 2015.

<sup>4</sup> The full methodology and empirical analysis of these data can be found in the accompanying EGRG report and data appendix (see James et al. 2018).

- A startling 82% of EG faculty posts previously held by movers in UK Departments of Geography were *not* subsequently replaced.
- A dramatic decline in the visibility of EG in UK Geography Departments is also evident through successive Research Assessment Exercise/Excellence Frameworks. In RAE2001 72% of submitting Geography Departments had an EG research group or group that included economic geographers. In REF2014 the equivalent figure was 35%.
- These trends are *not* occurring in tandem with a general reduction in UK human geography staffing more generally.

### ***Motivations for moving I: push factors in UK Geography***

- A lack of entry-level EG jobs in UK Geography Departments: Doctoral and Postdoctoral Researchers in EG represent a combined 58% of all movers to B & M (2000-15).
- Declining total numbers of jobs advertised in UK Geography that either include 'economic geography' in the job title, or EG as one of multiple preferred specialisms.
- A lack of permanent jobs in EG: half of all EG Lecturers, and two thirds of EG Research Associates who moved to B & M (2000-15) were on fixed-term contracts.
- Non-replacement of senior economic geographers who had retired or moved into University Administration.
- Common feelings of their 'research agenda not taken seriously by colleagues', feeling sidelined within their former Geography Departments, and negative attitudes towards quantitative methods and loss of numeracy skills amongst students.

### ***Motivations for moving II: pull factors in UK Business & Management***

- Significant growth of B & M schools in UK universities over the last two decades, yielding new job openings consequent from buoyant student recruitment, especially international Masters students.
- Movers' general perceptions of better pay, job security, support for teaching administration and research, and more rapid career progression in B & M than in Geography.
- Widespread agreement that economic geographers are well qualified to apply for B & M jobs based on substantive research fit and appetite for inter-disciplinary working.
- Major geography journals in which Economic Geographers publish have top rankings on the 'ABS list' (Chartered Association of Business Schools' Academic Journal Guide), including *Economic Geography*, *Journal of Economic Geography* and *Environment and Planning A*. The list is widely used in B & M to compare the quality of job applicants.
- Geographers follow geographers: one third of movers identified other economic geographers working in their B & M school. Movers act as role models and facilitators, staffing interview panels for subsequent movers, and actively advising PhD students on the benefits of B & M.
- B & M schools in the UK are actively head hunting senior economic geographers.

### ***Outcomes of moving:***

- Personal advancement: over three quarters of movers agreed that they had *enhanced their careers* by moving to B & M through greater engagement with policy makers and economic stakeholders.

- Hybridised EG identities: two thirds of movers identify as ‘an Economic Geographer working in a Business or Management School’ (57%) or as an ‘Economic Geographer’ (8%). But significant tensions are also evident, with other movers identifying as: ‘undercover economic geographer’, ‘economic migrant’, or past-tense ‘*trained* as a geographer’.
- A reduced overall affinity to EG (73% of movers), with two thirds reporting less frequent attendance at EG conferences (22% no longer attend EG conferences at all).
- A loss of research income to UK Geography: movers secured an impressive total grant income of £44.1 million (as PI and/or Co-I) since moving into B & M.
- Shifting publication patterns: two thirds of movers now target B & M journals more frequently than Geography journals since moving.
- Tendency to evacuate EG from teaching: 47 different course titles taught by economic geographers in B & M schools, but only one had ‘economic geography’ in the title.
- Reproducing the next generation of EG scholars? Movers have supervised a total of 49 PhD students since moving to B&M. Rarely did these students identify with EG as a sub-discipline.
- Point of no return? Coming back to Geography was commonly identified by movers as difficult, given that it would require a demotion and/or pay cut.

### **3. Keep On Moving On: Does it matter, and what, if anything, should be done?**

The EGRG research summarised above has, for the first time, documented a significant and apparently accelerating trend of Economic Geographers at all levels of the career hierarchy moving from UK Geography Departments to academic positions in B & M schools. We now move on, in this Exchanges commentary, to raise two key sets of questions that emerge from these findings, with the aim of prompting a wider conversation. First, does this trend matter, and if so, how and why? Second, what if anything could or should be done to try and address the issues raised?

#### ***UK economic geography is doing fine as an interdisciplinary nexus***

Optimistically, the trends described in the EGRG report can be read as a positive intellectual move for EG from a sub-disciplinary to an inter-disciplinary field better suited both to today’s university funding landscape, and to understanding complex economic phenomena which do not fit into neat disciplinary categories. This aligns with a view of EG as an interdisciplinary nexus of research activity that stretches well beyond Departments of Geography, to include researchers interested in geographies of economies, but who do not necessarily identify as ‘Economic Geographers’ (e.g. those who engage with economy from socio-cultural and/or urban geography perspectives). We also need to recognise that EG knowledge production happens outside of academic ‘disciplines’ (and always has done), including consultancy, practitioner and online communities. It is important, therefore, not to privilege a simple linear model of knowledge production that runs from universities to the outside world and which idealises a ‘pure form’ of

EG generated within Geography Departments<sup>5</sup>. Instead we should recognise that EG has always taken the form of a more dispersed, rhizomatic knowledge community ranging across the boundaries of both Geography Departments and universities. Perhaps, therefore, B & M schools should be seen as less of a threat and more as progressive interdisciplinary spaces for the development of EG; as an intellectual home for a range of like-minded researchers sometimes towards the margins of their own disciplines, encompassing not just economic geographers but also economic sociologists, heterodox economists, and critical accountants and lawyers, among others. There may thus be intellectual synergies within such schools that can exceed the possibilities of what is available within Geography Departments.

These arguments are persuasive and there are undoubted intellectual opportunities associated with the movement of economic geographers into B & M. What is notable from the EGRG research, however, is that positive discourses of interdisciplinarity do not come through strongly, either in terms of an aspiration for moving, or in describing the reality of subsequent interactions once within a B & M school. The EGRG report identifies relatively few movers who mentioned new collaborations, or new research frontiers and synergies; rather their new environment was typically presented simply as a space in which economic geographers could pursue the same or similar work and be rewarded for it, and that there were often only a few kindred spirits, from Geography or otherwise, to provide ongoing interaction. More prevalent were negative representations of the Geography Department environments they were leaving behind. This raises questions about the conditions through which intellectual synergies between EG and B & M might subsequently come to fruition.

Another set of issues relate to the labour market dynamics described in the EGRG report. Certainly the academic mobility trend described is not a new phenomenon, with other groups of movers from Geography to B & M readily identifiable in the 1980s and 1990s. And the problems of securing a first lectureship position and lack of opportunities for fresh PhD graduates may well be reflective of Geography more broadly as a discipline. Then there is the counterfactual question of what would have happened to EG *without* these opportunities to move? It may well be that there are now considerably more 'economic geographers' employed in UK universities than would have otherwise been the case. Gaining an academic job in a B & M school, while not being first choice and maybe feeling a little alien at first, may be highly preferable to not being in a position at all.

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<sup>5</sup> We are grateful to Nick Henry for codifying this point.

While these are all valid observations, the EGRG study indubitably shows that the trend has intensified since 2000 and we suggest that the (growing) gravitational pull of B & M puts EG in a different position to other areas of human geography. Discursively, it is also evident that this contemporary movers phenomenon is described in far less positive terms than earlier phases of EG migration (when there were 'too many economic geographers' and there was a 'wealth of opportunity'), with recent movers being concerned about the declining status of EG within human geography more broadly and a lack of EG posts to apply for in Geography Departments. Thus, while individually the contemporary moves make sense and sustain careers, in our view the *aggregate* effects threaten the very foundations of UK EG. We now move on to consider three interlinked elements of that argument.

### ***UK Economic Geography: under threat?***

We concur with the merits of EG's participation in the intellectual trading zones of a lively and open interdisciplinary landscape. However, sub-disciplines remain fundamental *to* that interdisciplinarity. There is a risk that the processes we identify in this paper are 'hollowing-out' EG within Geography Departments to such a degree that the sustainability of the broader project is being undermined. Our first argument, therefore, is that within UK Geography, EG is losing its critical mass in a process that is very hard to slow or stop, and still harder to reverse. The movers identified in the EGRG report are predominantly moving in one direction, and there is no discernible reverse trend. Once individuals have relocated, higher salary levels typically undermine the feasibility of returning to Geography, especially for those with young families, even if they ideally would like to move back for reasons of disciplinary affinity. These one-way movements are exacerbated by a wider post-2000 context in which (a) multiple senior EG colleagues have moved into university management; and (b) EG has seen the retirement of a range of influential figures including Peter Daniels, Peter Dicken, Ray Hudson, Roger Lee, Ron Martin and Linda McDowell, as well as absorbing the sad loss of Doreen Massey.

The net result is that the institutional landscape of EG in the UK has dwindled over the last ten-to-fifteen years. Based on an analysis of three successive RAE/REF cycles between 2001 and 2014, the EGRG report shows that places that were previously seen as bastions of EG – including Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Glasgow, Manchester, and the Open University – are now far less so, as a result of varying combinations of retirements, faculty moves into B & M, and lack of replacement hires. EG in the UK is now arguably concentrated in a small handful of Departments,



most notably (in alphabetical order) Cardiff, LSE, Newcastle, Nottingham and QMUL, in addition to some 'nodes' within the B & M landscape (notably Birmingham, Coventry and Southampton). While our main concern here is the implications for EG, is it also worth noting that something is being lost to Geography more generally at the same time in terms of both teaching and research. The danger is that some UK Departments may even find it difficult to maintain an EG curriculum at the undergraduate level, which may enhance a sense of isolation for economic geographers, thereby propagating more movements in what becomes a self-reinforcing dynamic.

Fewer and fewer UK departments, then, have a 'critical mass' of economic geographers – loosely defined here as a group of four or five researchers working on cognate economic issues. Such critical mass is important for engaging in substantive research programmes tackling big issues within the contemporary global economy. Wider networks matter, but 'local' critical mass is important in the generation of new ideas, theoretical innovations and, more pragmatically, the attraction of large grants. Such benefits are less obvious, or at the very least harder to accrue, in a context of isolated researchers in departments dominated by other forms of human geography. In turn, this raises concerns about sustaining a cadre of thought leaders at the centre of our discipline who can speak with authority about geographies of the economy, at a time when discussions around the economy are particularly pressing – for instance in relation to Brexit, the rise of economic nationalisms, corporate tax dodging, massive wealth inequality, uneven development, and anti-globalization movements. A diminished EG within Geography Departments leaves Human Geography progressively less well positioned to contribute to major policy or media debates around the economy.<sup>6</sup> Neither is it realistic for these gaps to be filled by economic geographers within B & M who, apart from some exceptional contexts, are always likely to be in the minority.

The issue of critical mass relates to a second concern, namely how does the migration trend have an impact on the *kinds* of EG being done, in B & M and Geography? The EGRG report suggests that certain kinds of economic geographers are likely to move, particularly those who do firm-based research and/or work on clusters/innovation. A potential risk, then, is that a certain kind of firm-centric EG gets reproduced within B & M schools, and other more critical/normative approaches get squeezed out or are left in isolated pockets in Geography Departments. The

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<sup>6</sup> Illustrative in this context was the 2016 post to the UK EG email list from Australian economic geographer Phil O'Neill asking why there was so little EG commentary on the Brexit referendum. That email in turn drew little response. Meanwhile, the ESRC's Autumn 2017 'Society Now' publication features on the front page the headline 'Mapping the UK's business geography'. The authors? Economists, with no discernible input from economic geographers.

limited penetration of critical labour geography into B & M programmes offers a useful case in point. In its focus on worker resistance and agency, and ontological concern to see the making and remaking of economies through the eyes of workers (rather than the firms who manage their 'labour' as an input to production), labour geography is distinct from Human Resource Management approaches commonly found in B & M Schools. Encouragingly, some EG colleagues are now developing a critical labour agenda in B & M – this reinforced by the inclusion of *Antipode* on the all powerful ABS list – but the dominant pattern remains. The larger question, then, is whether this migration trend is blunting EG's critical teeth?

Our third interlinked line of concern relates to the ability of the discipline to reproduce itself within Geography Departments, through subsequent cohorts of teachers, researchers, mentors and scholars. For reasons described above, EG is only likely to survive as a vibrant intellectual field in the UK if key thought leaders continue to be produced and reside within Geography Departments. As documented through the EGRG report, individual movers have a variety of perspectives on the extent to which they are able to maintain and practice their identity as an economic geographer (should they want to). However, almost without exception, movers were clear that the PhD students they are producing within B & M schools do *not* self-identify as economic geographers, even if their work may be inflected with EG ideas from their supervisor. In short, the idea that geographers in B & M will produce more economic geographers is unlikely due to the various rites of intellectual passage through which PhD students pass (from training programmes, joint supervision, internal seminars, internal upgrade, engagement with PhD peers, viva examination and subsequent patterns of publication) in a B & M school environment.

To try and quantify this element, the 87 movers identified the EGRG report had supervised approximately 50 students to completion in B & M, a significant number given the size of the UK EG community. Of course, not all would have got academic jobs post-graduation, but this is still a large pool of potential talent lost to Geography Departments. At the same time, there are fewer economic geographers and associated PhD students in Geography Departments, meaning that over time the 'conveyor belt of intellectual talent' moving to B & M schools may also dry up. In the most pessimistic reading, the last 15 years may represent a one-off movement of academics to a well-resourced and expanding B & M sector that will not necessarily realign intellectual agendas there, yet yield a profound effect on Geography Departments. Overall, it is the production of the next generation of economic geographers that is our gravest concern. Our sense is that if the effects of the migration trend have not yet been fully felt, they will play out

over the next 10-20 years. We know that EG is a relatively small field, and a handful of iconic and inspirational individuals can make a huge difference. But, it is increasingly hard to see where the next generations will come from.

### ***So what next?***

How one responds to the second big question will depend on where one stands in relation to the arguments set out above. Collectively, our stance leans more towards a pessimistic reading, and as such, we are in favour of at least considering possible interventions. Moreover, trying to energise and provoke debate within EG circles within and beyond the UK has intrinsic merit, even if one is generally unconcerned about the 'movers' phenomenon. The EGRG report, and this accompanying commentary, represent first steps by drawing attention to the trend, naming it, and mapping out its key parameters. But what else can be done? First, we need to continue to monitor this trend and its impacts, moving forward. We must assess the extent to which, and in what ways, the 'reproduction' issues we identify above start to bite over the next decade and beyond. For example, what could the trends mean for the future of the remaining EG nodes in the UK? A related endeavour is to open out this debate from its current UK focus to gauge to what extent it is UK-specific, and whether similar tendencies are evident in other national institutional contexts. For instance, respondents taking part in the EGRG study suggested that the movers trend is not replicated in the USA, where quantitative-leaning and less heterodox business schools are not interested in hiring economic geographers – despite the influence of the ABS list. And what about our potentially changing relationships with B & M in other key centres of EG worldwide, including Germany, Singapore, Canada, Australia, and Sweden?

Beyond direct research, however, there are perhaps two sets of interventions that we might seek to make and which we can broadly term intellectual and institutional. With regards the former, the time would appear ripe for developing and (re)asserting a vibrant core intellectual agenda in EG in the UK that has the potential both to spark the imagination of students and young researchers and to make major contributions to intellectual debates around Brexit, regional development, inclusive economic growth and the like. Building upon Jamie Peck's metaphor of contemporary EG being a (ring) donut (Peck and Olds 2007), with multiple divergent subfields working at various disciplinary interfaces but lacking a clear centre, perhaps it is time to debate, redefine and subsequently mobilise the core of our discipline. Even if one looks across the handful of UK departments that retain critical mass in EG, there are significant differences in foci

and approach. So how to discern a core intellectual project that integrates across those departments?

Clearly it is not for us to steer such a debate. But to provoke discussion, what seems to us to have been lost (and not just in the UK, it has to be said) is a core focus on explaining systematic patterns of uneven development (see also Phelps et al. 2017), which now must be an increasingly global project that necessarily engages with the global South. A tendency to focus on individual places, regions and case studies (and largely on western formal economies) has seemingly weakened the wider analytical purchase of EG<sup>7</sup>. For instance, inequality and how it is produced has become a big topic in intellectual and political/popular circles and yet with some notable exceptions (e.g. Danny Dorling) economic geographers are seemingly not contributing to the understanding of what are fundamentally geographical processes. EG has also witnessed a retreat from 'big picture', systemic accounts, underpinned by analytically strong geographical political economy – or what Peck (2016) terms 'macroeconomic geographies'. The powerful tools offered by previous generations of scholars – such as Massey's spatial divisions of labour and Dicken's conceptualisation of firms and globalization dynamics – would still seem to offer so much and yet are arguably under-utilised by contemporary economic geographers.

To put it even more bluntly, and whilst not denying the major advances of the labour geographies agenda, does EG also need some redress by researching firms and their activities and how they drive patterns of uneven regional development both within and across countries? Such concerns are critical to understanding contemporary economic debates (e.g. crisis of globalisation, unbalanced growth and inequality, uneven regional development, corporate power, trade disputes etc.). Surely something is lost if we cede this ground entirely to B & M schools? The corollary of these arguments is that we need to reassert the core principles and distinctiveness of an EG approach to show how we can add value to other disciplines. That is currently hard to do in a world of fragmented plurality, and may mean raising our sights intellectually to make some programmatic statements about what we do, why it is distinctive, and why it matters in the UK context. Without some measure of coherence, it is hard to 'sell' the project both to future researchers and department and institutional leaders in charge of hiring decisions<sup>8</sup>. In turn, this may mean re-tooling geographical political economy for today's world of

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<sup>7</sup> Such exclusionary tendencies are also apparent beyond Economic Geography: a major failing of much Business and Management scholarship is that that it is based on a mythical US market economy.

<sup>8</sup> To be very clear, we are not suggesting that economic geography should *only* be about such a core. Continued plurality and inter-disciplinary exchanges will continue to be vital to the health of the discipline. Our argument,

rapid environmental change, decarbonisation, accelerating global shifts of production and consumption, continued financialization, rising economic nationalism/austerity in some contexts, and new forms of regionalism in others. The notion of putting the jam back into the centre of the EG donut may seem a rather flippant metaphor in this context, but that is exactly what we are proposing!

Institutional interventions are perhaps harder to conceptualise and to our mind are only likely to succeed in combination with the intellectual initiatives just described. In supporting the research carried out by the EGRG, the RGS-IBG has already signalled its interest and concern in what is going on. Indeed the RGS-IBG would seem to have a vested interest in retaining the integrity of Geography as a rounded discipline and one that is able to offer critical commentary on a range of pressing societal issues. Within the RGS-IBG, the EGRG is the obvious starting point for initiatives, but while relatively stable and strong in terms of membership numbers (236 in 2017), for well over a decade now AGMs and organised events have struggled for attendees, indeed even populating the EGRG committee has itself been problematic. Nonetheless, EGRG events may be an important forum for identifying key issues and forging collective statements, and to engage with economic geographers now working in B & M schools.

In the UK context, one concrete suggestion is for the few remaining departments with critical mass in EG – Cardiff, LSE, Newcastle, Nottingham, and QMUL – to form a network-within-the EGRG-network and initiate some such activities. Clearly these are places where there is departmental and presumably wider institutional backing for EG research and what it offers. This could be extended to include certain B & M schools such as Coventry, Birmingham and Southampton where there are discernible clusters of self-identified economic geographers. A coordinated funding application for a rotating seminar or PhD training series, for instance, might allow an extended conversation on the issues we raise here, and in time possibly build to a large research programme application that brings together a network of researchers, not all UK-based, but with the UK at the core on a big picture topic (e.g. inequality, uneven regional development, links to Southern economies, or a post-Brexit UK in the global economy). Similar initiatives might target EG PhD students to bring them together for collective ‘disciplinary’ training. And given that the patterns of cross-disciplinary labour mobility identified in the EGRG report include a sizeable cohort of female colleagues moving out of already male-dominated

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however, is that without a distinct core project, it may be hard to defend UK economic geography, both intellectually and institutionally, in the context of the threats it currently faces.

disciplined, our conversations, networking and capacity building efforts also need to address this issue through meaningful engagements with the RGS-IBG Gender and Feminist Research Group. These may be small steps, but might provide somewhere to start.

Connecting up the hotspots of UK EG will already necessitate forging connections across Geography Departments and B & M schools. According to some movers documented in the EGRG report, there are reasons to be positive here, with cross-disciplinary EG connections within universities getting off the ground in some instances, reinforced by the research impact agenda. Specifically, some colleagues reported new engagements with their former respective Geography departments about how they might work together, share modules, and encourage geography and B & M students on different undergraduate courses to engage with one another. But whether such links are being initiated more from the B & M school end, possibly with a view to future staff recruitment, is less clear. The overarching labour market dynamic is never far beneath the surface, and it is hard to see how to intervene to try and slow it. More economic geographers in leadership positions might steady the ship, but there is an ever-smaller pool to draw on. Overall, it seems likely that the battle of ideas will have to be won before broader institutional conditions can be reworked.

#### **4. Debating the Great UK Economic Geography Diaspora**

In this Exchanges commentary, we have deliberately stopped short of diagnosing a full-blown crisis in UK EG. It is not our intention to be prophets of doom, or to create a self-fulfilling prophecy in which suitably alarmed economic geographers jump ship, thereby exacerbating the trends we describe. We are fully aware that the trends are not brand new, and that for some colleagues, UK EG has never been a very big or influential discipline in terms of academia and society writ large. However, EG in the UK was demonstrably larger, more vibrant, more coherent, and more relevant in previous eras, most notably the 1980s and 1990s. And whilst keen to avoid some idealistic 'exercise in nostalgia', we are also convinced that: there has been a step-change in the migration of economic geographers to B & M schools since 2000, that there are new driving forces in play, and there will be – and arguably already have been – consequences for EG as it is practised within Geography Departments. This in turn, inevitably, has potential consequences for the more broadly-defined economic geography project as a whole, which, without a clear disciplinary heartland, may start to wither, a process reinforced by the increasing incorporation of economic geographers into broader cross-cutting research groupings in UK Departments of Geography.

Against this multidisciplinary backdrop, this commentary is intended to start a conversation about EG in the UK and beyond: UK EG is far from a 'bounded' national academic enterprise, but rather is a networked, transnational community of practice. What kind of EG do we want, and how do we get there? What is the position of sub-disciplines within an multidisciplinary research environment, and does it necessarily mean the relative demise of disciplines? How can economic geographers undertake transformational research around big societal challenges? What kind of distinctive perspective can we bring to such endeavours? And how far should we strive for coherence among the plurality of concepts and ideas that characterise the contemporary field? Whilst not new concerns, at the very least, these are questions that seem worth reopening and debating amongst economic geographers in the current moment.

## 6. References

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