

Cartography in the Classroom

The ICA has long held the view that a commitment to cartographic education is needed to ensure the continuing vibrancy of the discipline. A Commission on Education and Training has existed for almost as long as ICA itself: its work will be reported in a future column. This month we offer a more reflective commentary on education.

As one of the five main pillars of activity which contribute to ICA's work (Art, Education, Professional Practice, Science & Technology, Society) it is clear that education has a high profile. The ongoing development of cartographic syllabi, both on-line and in formal programmes, remains an important issue. There is active promotion of cartography at all levels of education. Informal courses and workshops are presented and recognised by the ICA and young researchers are encouraged through the provision of travel awards. A directory of international education in cartography is maintained. A number of trends can be identified.

University Programmes

The past few years have seen a diminution in direct cartography education in formal university programmes. Courses in some countries, such as the UK, the Netherlands, Australia and Canada have declined due to staff retirement without replacement, lack of support from managers in higher education, and even, sometimes, the indifference of national mapping societies, agencies and employers. In contrast, the expanding higher education sectors in a variety of countries, including Albania, China and Brazil, seem to have embraced cartography more fully, and promotional work on the part of dedicated individuals in countries such as Switzerland and Austria has further raised the profile of cartography.

Technical Education

Technical education in cartography appears to be declining as more organisations show themselves willing to recruit university graduates only. Those employing technicians conduct all training 'in-house', and specific and identifiable job differentials and definitions are becoming increasingly blurred. It is vital to maintain technical training.

Continuing Education

The position as regards less formal education in cartography is also mixed. Continuing education through distance learning has been a major focus of educational research and development in recent years, and the Commission has embraced this.

Amateur Mapping

It is clear that the number of maps being produced by 'amateur' cartographers (from orienteers to web designers) is increasing significantly. There is a need to ensure that the compilers, producers and disseminators of such maps are aware of cartographic practice and of the need to create an effective and efficient product.

Cartography and GIS

There appears to be demand for the availability of cartography as an optional or compulsory subject within the increasing number of GIS courses at all levels. But there are also many GIS courses that suggest that cartography is not important. ICA must respond with education highlighting the link between cartography and GIS.

External Initiatives

There are initiatives external to ICA which can be closely monitored. The European Thematic Network EEGECS (European Education in Geodetic Engineering, Cartography and Surveying) has a range of working groups and publications of value in comparative analysis of geomatics education in Europe. They also promote student exchange.

Each of these trends and issues impact on or can be used by the international cartographic community to ensure the health of the profession. It is up to every cartographer to take note of the importance of education.