

It can be difficult to know at what scale a geographical enquiry should be focused. Geographers are frequently dealing with big ideas and concepts that are global in scope while being observed at a local scale.

In general, geographical studies that are being undertaken by secondary school students are best done at a relatively small scale. Not only does this make them more viable practically, but it also allows students to explore their ideas to a much greater depth. Compare for example these two scales of study:



Here the top line of the 'T' represents the breadth of the study. In this case, a wide variety of ideas are being investigated, or maybe lots of locations are being observed. The trunk of the 'T' represents the amount of detail a student can develop or the depth of their conclusions. In this case, because the student is studying lots of ideas, they are not able to do into a great amount of depth in any one of those ideas and the conclusions drawn are likely to be simplistic and somewhat superficial.

In the second 'T' however, the student might study a single concept or a micro-scale location. This might limit the scope of their study but it also allows them to study that one concept in a lot more depth. The conclusions this study draws are likely to be more complex, more interesting and represent higher level thinking than that found in the first 'T'.

The field site or the location of the study might cover a large spatial area. For example, students might attempt to look at a concept across a whole town or study a long stretch of coastline. This would be referred to as a macro-scale study. Alternatively, a micro-scale study might involve students studying a single building or a single section of sea wall. Meso-scale studies fall somewhere in between, such as studying a road or district within a town or focussing on a stretch of beach contained by one or two coastal management strategies.

In general, macro-scale studies are more likely to generate studies that are like the first 'T' above, while micro-scale studies will be more like the second 'T'. Before choosing what locational scale of study might work for you, there are advantages and disadvantages of each to consider.

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Macro	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wider choice of places to carry out data collection techniques and larger sample sizes are possible.</li> <li>Might be easier to study a wider variety of competing and contradictory variables.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tends to lead to generalist conclusions that have little meaning.</li> <li>Can generate huge volumes of data that are difficult or impractical to analyse.</li> </ul>
Micro	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Data collection can be focussed on one location which might be more practical and time efficient</li> <li>Can be more interesting to study as the researcher becomes the sole 'expert' on that location.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can be difficult to find comparable secondary data for such a small location.</li> <li>Conclusions might not be transferrable to wider ideas and concepts.</li> </ul>

As well as the location scale, students need to also consider the scale of the concepts they are investigating. When looking at big ideas such as globalisation or sustainability, students are highly unlikely to be able to do justice in a fieldwork enquiry to these huge concepts because they are so multifaceted and full of complex intertwining variables. Studies that focus solely on a smaller concept that is related to one of these bigger ideas is likely to produce a far more manageable outcome. For example, a student could look at how globalisation has influenced an average retail experience in an area of a city, or they could investigate a particular environmental sustainability initiative in a specific place or for a specific group of people.