

The Position of Geography in Secondary School Curricula: A Comparative Analysis of Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum and Malaysia's KSSM

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the position and strategic status of Geography as a secondary school subject in Indonesia and Malaysia, focusing on its compulsory or elective placement, curriculum depth, and contribution to students' geopolitical understanding. The research aims to highlight the novelty of subject positioning analysis rather than pedagogy alone, addressing how curricular structures shape geopolitical literacy outcomes. Employing a qualitative descriptive comparative design, the study integrates curriculum document analysis, semi-structured stakeholder interviews, and SWOT analysis to identify similarities, differences, strengths, and challenges in both education systems. Data sources include Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum and Malaysia's Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah (KSSM), supported by relevant literature and educator perspectives. Key findings show that Geography holds a strategic role in both countries by fostering spatial and geospatial literacy, regional awareness, and understanding of national and global issues, yet its positioning differs: Indonesia emphasizes Geography within social science specialization with stronger geopolitical orientation, while Malaysia introduces it at lower secondary but shifts it to an elective subject at upper secondary with broader environmental and development themes. The study implies that strengthening Geography's geopolitical contribution requires clearer curriculum integration, sustained subject continuity, enhanced teacher professional development, and wider use of geospatial technologies to better equip students for contemporary geopolitical challenges.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Geography education plays a crucial role in secondary schools by enabling students to understand spatial patterns, environmental processes, and human-environment interactions that shape contemporary society (Bagoly-Simó, 2023). In Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia, curriculum reforms have influenced how Geography is structured and prioritized within national education systems. However, while existing studies frequently emphasize Geography teaching

methods and learning outcomes, far less attention has been given to its curricular positioning as a subject, including its compulsory or elective status and its continuity across secondary levels (Heidari et al., 2023). Therefore, this study addresses this gap by examining the position of Geography within the secondary school curricula of Indonesia and Malaysia and analyzing how its subject status supports students' geopolitical literacy and spatial understanding.

Furthermore, from a curriculum theory perspective, school subjects are not merely collections of knowledge but are socially and institutionally constructed elements within an educational system that reflect national priorities, ideological orientations, and educational goals. Curriculum theory explains how subjects are organized, sequenced, and legitimized within formal education structures, influencing what knowledge is considered essential for students. Within this framework, the status of a subject—whether designated as compulsory, elective, or integrated with other disciplines—serves as a key indicator of how educational policymakers prioritize specific domains of knowledge within national curricula (Hallingfors & Åström Elmersjö, 2025; Harrison, 2022). Besides, the concept of subject status in the curriculum is closely related to the allocation of instructional time, curricular continuity, and its placement within academic streams or tracks (Hashim et al., 2019). Subjects with strong curricular status generally appear consistently across grade levels and are often designated as core or compulsory subjects. Conversely, subjects with weaker status may be offered only as electives or integrated into broader learning areas. Understanding subject status therefore provides insights into how a discipline contributes to the development of specific competencies, including spatial literacy and geopolitical awareness.

This study also draws on the theory of knowledge classification proposed by Basil Bernstein. Bernstein's framework distinguishes between strongly classified subjects, where disciplinary boundaries are clearly defined, and weakly classified subjects, where knowledge is integrated across disciplines (Zhou, 2020). In the context of geography education, this perspective helps analyze whether Geography is treated as an independent academic subject or integrated within broader social science or environmental studies curricula. The strength of classification influences how clearly geographical knowledge is defined, taught, and assessed within the curriculum.

Moreover, to analyze differences between national education systems, this research employs a comparative curriculum framework. Comparative curriculum studies examine similarities and differences in educational structures across countries to understand how policy orientations shape curriculum design. By comparing Indonesia and Malaysia, this study explores how different curriculum reforms influence the positioning of Geography within secondary education. Such comparison is particularly relevant in Southeast Asia, where education systems share regional similarities yet reflect distinct national policy priorities.

At the secondary school level, geography supports the development of spatial literacy and critical thinking by helping students connect physical environments with social, economic, and cultural processes (Solem, 2023). As an interdisciplinary subject, it provides a structured way for learners to interpret complex relationships between people and place, which is increasingly recognized in international frameworks focused on sustainability and global citizenship (McDaniel, 2022). Geography therefore plays a strategic role in developing students' competencies to address current environmental and global concerns, ensuring that it remains both academically significant and vital for enabling learners to navigate the complex challenges of the twenty-first century (Bendl et al., 2025).

In Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia, geography education has been shaped by ongoing curriculum reforms aligned with national education goals and global trends (Hodgkins et al., 2025). Indonesia's curriculum reforms emphasize holistic learning, contextual understanding, and character education, while Malaysia adopts a standards-based and competency-oriented curriculum framework at the secondary level (Cho, 2023). These differing policy orientations influence how Geography is structured, allocated, and positioned within national curricula. Consequently, curriculum reforms in both countries have significantly affected the status and role of Geography in secondary school education.

Furthermore, previous studies on geography education in Indonesia and Malaysia have largely concentrated on curriculum content, instructional strategies, learning outcomes, and the integration of technology in classroom practice (Hall & Lin, 2024; Healy et al., 2025). In addition, research has emphasized teachers' pedagogical competence, student achievement, and innovative approaches to geography learning (Pearce et al., 2024). While these contributions provide valuable insights into how geography is taught and experienced at the classroom level, they provide limited attention to broader structural questions concerning geography's institutional standing within secondary school systems. In particular, existing studies rarely examine how geography is formally positioned within national curriculum structures, including whether it functions as a compulsory subject, an elective subject, or an integrated component of social studies. As a result, the literature remains strong in pedagogical discussions but limited in analyzing geography's subject status within national curriculum policy frameworks.

In addition, comparative education research between Indonesia and Malaysia has similarly tended to prioritize major subjects such as mathematics, science, and language education, which are often viewed as central to national development agendas (Lathifah et al., 2025). Geography, by contrast, is frequently discussed only as part of integrated social studies, without detailed examination of its independent subject status, instructional time allocation, or its continuity across different levels of secondary education (Heidari et al., 2023; Smit et al., 2023). More importantly, no previous studies have conducted a systematic comparative analysis of geography's subject status within the secondary school curricula of Indonesia and Malaysia at the policy level. Existing research therefore does not sufficiently explain how curriculum reforms in both countries influence the institutional positioning of geography as a discipline. Consequently, a clear research gap exists in the absence of policy-oriented comparative curriculum studies that specifically investigate how geography is structured, classified, and prioritized within national secondary school curricula. Addressing this gap requires examining not only whether geography is included in the curriculum, but also how it is positioned in relation to other subjects, how consistently it appears across grade levels, and whether it is treated as a core academic discipline or a supplementary learning area.

The curricular position of a subject plays a decisive role in shaping educational priorities, influencing resource allocation, teacher professionalism, and students' learning opportunities (Alm Fjellborg & Kramming, 2022; Smit et al., 2023). When geography occupies a marginal or elective position within the curriculum, its potential contribution to developing spatial thinking, geopolitical awareness, and environmental responsibility may be reduced (Sakaue et al., 2024). Subject positioning determines not only how much instructional time is provided, but also how strongly a discipline is supported through assessment systems, teacher preparation, and curriculum continuity. Understanding geography's curricular status is therefore essential for evaluating its sustainability and relevance in addressing global issues such as environmental degradation, spatial inequality, and regional geopolitical complexity (Knecht & Spurná, 2022). Therefore, analyzing geography's curricular positioning through a comparative curriculum perspective becomes critical for strengthening its educational impact in secondary schools.

In response to this gap, the present study conducts a comparative analysis of the position of geography as a subject in secondary school curricula in Indonesia and Malaysia. The novelty of this study lies in its explicit focus on geography's curricular status rather than solely on content or pedagogy, integrating curriculum policy analysis, subject positioning, and instructional allocation (Golightly & Sprenger, 2024; Solem, 2023). By comparing two neighboring countries with shared regional contexts but different curriculum structures, this study offers new insights into how national education systems shape the institutional role and strategic value of geography education. Accordingly, this research contributes original and policy-relevant knowledge to the field of comparative geography education and curriculum studies. Specifically, this study aims to address the following research objectives: (1) to examine the curricular status of geography in Indonesia and Malaysia, including its compulsory or elective position; (2) to compare the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats

of Geography in Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum and Malaysia's KSSM in order to formulate strategic recommendations for strengthening Geography education in both countries.

2. METHODS

2.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative comparative curriculum analysis design. It is intended to describe and compare the position of Geography within secondary school curricula in Indonesia and Malaysia. Specifically, the study examines how Geography is structured and allocated in the Indonesian Merdeka Curriculum and the Malaysian Secondary School Standard Curriculum (KSSM), with attention to curriculum organization, policy orientation, and subject status in both national contexts

2.2 Setting

The research was conducted in secondary schools in Malaysia and involved a comparative analysis with curriculum documents and relevant data from Indonesia. The study was carried out over a one-year period, to allow for comprehensive data collection, document analysis, and interpretation.

2.3 Source of Data

a. Primary Data

The primary data in this study consist of official curriculum documents, policy guidelines, and institutional records related to the implementation of Geography education in secondary schools. The primary data sources are presented in the following table.

Table 1. The primary data

No	Source of Data	Instrumentation
	Modules and Learning Outcomes (CP) of the Merdeka Curriculum	- Observation - Interview
	Curriculum and Assessment Standard Document (DSKP) for KSSM Geography Level 1	- Observation - Interview

b. Secondary Data

Secondary data is displayed in the following table.

Table 2. Secondary Data

No	Source of Data	Instrumentation
	Reports from the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) and the Malaysian Ministry of Education (KPM) on curriculum implementation.	- Document Analysis
	Journals, reports, and supporting literature for journal articles or theses on comparative studies of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia and the KSSM in Malaysia.	- Document Analysis

2.4 Data Collection Techniques

2.4.1 Comparative Curriculum Analysis through Document Analysis

This study formulates a comparative analysis of the position of Geography as a subject in Indonesian and Malaysian secondary school curricula primarily through **document analysis**. Document analysis is used to collect and interpret data from official curriculum materials and policy guidelines. The researcher systematically examines key documents, including:

- a. The Indonesian Merdeka Curriculum Geography framework
- b. The Malaysian KSSM Geography Curriculum (Form 1–Form 4)
- c. Government policy reports
- d. Instructional guidelines and learning materials

Through careful reading and coding, the researcher identifies essential curriculum components such as:

- a. Curriculum objectives
- b. Subject allocation and structure
- c. Teaching and assessment approaches
- d. Competency and skills emphasis
- e. Innovations and implementation challenges

2.4.2 Interviews with Key Stakeholders

In addition to document analysis, this study employs **semi-structured interviews** to gain deeper insights into curriculum implementation and the institutional position of Geography in schools. Interviews are conducted with ten stakeholders:

- a. Malaysia (5 participants):
 1. Officials from the Kuala Langat District Education Office
 2. Geography teachers
 3. School principals at the Form 4 level
- b. Indonesia (5 participants):
 1. Principals of SMA Negeri 1 Padang and SMA Negeri 2 Padang
 2. Geography teachers from both schools
 3. A lecturer from Universitas Negeri Padang

These interviews provide qualitative evidence on how Geography is perceived, implemented, and prioritized within each national education system.

2.4.3 SWOT Analysis for Comparative Evaluation

This study applies SWOT analysis as an analytical tool to evaluate the internal and external factors influencing Geography curriculum implementation in Indonesia and Malaysia. SWOT analysis examines:

- a. Strengths: Internal advantages of each curriculum
- b. Weaknesses: Internal limitations or gaps
- c. Opportunities: External conditions supporting development
- d. Threats: External challenges affecting implementation

The stages include:

- a. Identifying strengths and weaknesses based on document findings, interviews, and observations
- b. Recognizing opportunities and threats from broader educational and socio-economic contexts
- c. Developing SWOT matrices for both curricula
- d. Formulating strategic recommendations using the TOWS framework (SO, WO, ST, WT). For each internal or external factor:

Factor Score = Weight × Rating

Weight: The level of importance of each factor (ranging from 0.0 to 1.0), with the total weight of all factors equal to 1.

RatingScale:**For Strengths and Opportunities:**

4 = Very strong / Highly supportive

3 = Strong / Supportive

2 = Weak

1 = Very weak

For Weaknesses and Threats:

4 = Very low negative impact

3 = Low negative impact

2 = High negative impact

1 = Very high negative impact

2.5 Data Analysis Techniques**2.5.1 Analysis of Geography Curriculum Position through Document and Qualitative Data**

The first stage of analysis examines the objectives and institutional position of Geography within:

- a. Malaysia's KSSM Geography Curriculum
- b. Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum

The first stage of data analysis focuses on examining the objectives and position of Geography as a subject in the Malaysian secondary school curriculum, specifically the KSSM Geography Form 1 curriculum. This analysis is conducted through observation, literature review, and stakeholder interviews.

In Malaysia, interviews are conducted with five key stakeholders, including officials from the Kuala Langat District Education Office, Geography teachers, and school principals at the Form 4 level. In Indonesia, interviews involve five stakeholders, consisting of the principal of SMA Negeri 1 Padang, the principal of SMA Negeri 2 Padang, a lecturer from Universitas Negeri Padang, and Geography teachers from both schools. These qualitative data sources are triangulated to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the curricular objectives, implementation practices, and institutional positioning of Geography education in both countries' contexts.

2.5.2 Comparative SWOT-Based Curriculum Assessment

The second stage involves comparing the Merdeka Curriculum and KSSM using SWOT analysis. The comparison highlights differences in:

- a. Curriculum flexibility vs. structure
- b. Competency-based learning approaches
- c. Technology integration
- d. Character and citizenship education

SWOT matrices from both countries are compared to identify potential hybrid strategies and provide recommendations for strengthening Geography education, strengths and weaknesses of the Indonesian Merdeka Curriculum and the Malaysian KSSM using SWOT analysis. The comparison focuses on key dimensions, including learning approaches, technology integration, and character education.

SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) is a strategic analytical technique used to evaluate internal factors (strengths and weaknesses) and external factors (opportunities and threats) influencing an object of study, such as an educational curriculum. This technique is widely applied in comparative research to identify differences, advantages, and challenges across systems, thereby enabling more comprehensive and evidence-based recommendations.

In the context of comparing the Indonesian Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes flexibility, creativity, independent learning, and the Pancasila Student Profile, with the Malaysian Secondary School Standard Curriculum (KSSM), which is more structured and competency-based and emphasizes 21st-century skills such as critical thinking and innovation, SWOT analysis helps reveal how each curriculum supports its respective national education objectives.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings

3.1.1 The Position of Geography

The following table highlights clear differences in the position and implementation of Geography within the secondary school curricula of Indonesia and Malaysia. In Indonesia, Geography holds a stronger role at the upper secondary level as a core subject within the Social Sciences track, supported by deeper and more detailed content that emphasizes spatial analysis and geostrategic understanding. In contrast, Malaysia places greater emphasis on Geography at the lower secondary stage through compulsory instruction for all students, while its elective status at the upper secondary level leads to declining participation. Overall, the comparison shows that Indonesia prioritizes advanced geographic competencies and national-oriented perspectives, whereas Malaysia focuses more on contextual learning, environmental awareness, and global development issues, reflecting distinct curricular priorities in both education systems.

Table. 3 Key Comparison of Geography as a Subject in Indonesia and Malaysia

No	Aspect	Indonesia	Malaysia
1	Status at Lower Secondary	Integrated into Social Studies (IPS)	Compulsory subject (Forms 1–3)
2	Status at Upper Secondary	Compulsory for IPS track (SMA/MA)	Elective subject (Forms 4–5)
3	Curriculum Depth	More extensive and detailed	More concise and contextual
4	Main Focus	Spatial analysis, national and regional geography, GIS	Environment, development issues, map skills
5	Assessment Orientation	Projects, character education, school-based assessment	National examination (SPM) at upper secondary
6	Student Participation	Stable within IPS stream	Declines at upper secondary due to elective status
7	Teacher Readiness	Varied academic backgrounds	Relatively standardized training

Furthermore, the interview data reveal important differences in how Geography is positioned within the secondary school systems of Indonesia and Malaysia. In Indonesia, respondents emphasized that Geography holds a relatively strong academic position at the upper secondary level because it is a core subject within the Social Sciences specialization track. A Geography teacher from SMA Negeri 1 Padang explained:

“Geography becomes more important in senior high school because students who choose the Social Sciences track study it more intensively. The subject focuses not only on physical geography but also on spatial analysis and national development issues.”

Similarly, a school principal highlighted that Geography contributes to students’ understanding of national territory and development planning:

“Through Geography, students learn about Indonesia’s spatial potential and regional challenges, which are important for developing national awareness.”

In contrast, interview data from Malaysia indicate that Geography is strongly emphasized at the lower secondary level because it is a compulsory subject for all students. However, its status changes at the upper secondary level where it becomes elective. According to an official from the Kuala Langat District Education Office:

“At the lower secondary level, all students learn Geography, which helps them understand environmental issues and global development topics. But in upper secondary school, students may choose other subjects instead.”

A Geography teacher in Malaysia also noted that the elective status affects student participation:

“When Geography becomes optional in Form 4, fewer students select it because they prioritize subjects that are perceived as more important for examinations.”

The interview findings support the document analysis by showing that the subject status of Geography significantly influences its implementation and visibility in schools. In Indonesia, its placement within the Social Sciences specialization track strengthens its academic depth at the upper secondary level. Meanwhile, in Malaysia, compulsory instruction at the lower secondary stage ensures broad exposure to geographic knowledge, but its elective status later reduces sustained engagement with the discipline. These perspectives demonstrate that curriculum policy not only determines the formal placement of Geography but also shapes how teachers, school leaders, and policymakers perceive its educational importance. Consequently, differences in subject status contribute to distinct curricular priorities, with Indonesia emphasizing advanced spatial competencies and national perspectives, while Malaysia highlights environmental awareness and global development themes.

In Indonesia, Geography is compulsory only for senior secondary students in the Social Sciences (IPS) track and is integrated into Social Studies at the junior level, with elective options available through the cross-interest scheme; the curriculum is relatively extensive, covering physical and human geography, regional studies, remote sensing, and GIS with a strong emphasis on spatial analysis. In Malaysia, Geography is compulsory for all students at the lower secondary level (Forms 1–3) but becomes an elective subject at the upper secondary level (Forms 4–5), offered depending on student demand, with content that is more concise and contextual, focusing on basic geographic concepts, population issues, resource use, and regional studies of Malaysia and Asia, remaining less detailed than Indonesia’s at the upper secondary stage. These differences indicate that Indonesia places Geography within a specialized academic stream, while Malaysia ensures broader exposure at earlier stages of schooling. Overall, both curricula reflect national educational priorities, with Indonesia emphasizing depth and spatial skills, and Malaysia highlighting contextual understanding and developmental perspectives.

3.1.2. SWOT Analysis Analysis of Geography Curriculum: Indonesia (Merdeka) vs Malaysia (KSSM)

The SWOT analysis below highlights the key internal and external factors influencing the implementation of Geography in Indonesia’s Merdeka Curriculum and Malaysia’s KSSM. It identifies the strengths that support Geography education, such as curriculum flexibility, spatial skills development, and structured learning approaches. The analysis also outlines weaknesses, including differences in subject status, uneven teacher readiness, and limited depth at certain levels. In addition, opportunities are examined, particularly the growing use of digital geospatial technologies and the relevance of global environmental issues. Both curricula provide potential for innovation through

project-based and contextual learning. At the same time, threats such as declining student interest, competition with other subjects, and exam-oriented practices may weaken Geography's position. This comparison offers insight into how Geography contributes to national and global awareness among students. Overall, the SWOT framework helps formulate strategic recommendations to strengthen Geography education in both countries.

Table 4. SWOT Analysis of Geography Curriculum: Indonesia (Merdeka) vs Malaysia (KSSM)

SWOT	Indonesia (Merdeka Curriculum)	Malaysia (KSSM Geography)
Strengths (S)	The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes flexible and project-based learning, encouraging spatial inquiry and contextual analysis. Curriculum documents indicate the integration of spatial analysis and geospatial literacy in upper secondary geography learning outcomes. Interviewed teachers also reported that the curriculum allows students to explore regional development and environmental issues through projects.	The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes flexible and project-based learning, encouraging spatial inquiry and contextual analysis. Curriculum documents indicate the integration of spatial analysis and geospatial literacy in upper secondary geography learning outcomes. Interviewed teachers also reported that the curriculum allows students to explore regional development and environmental issues through projects.
Weaknesses (W)	Geography is mainly offered within the Social Sciences (IPS) track at upper secondary level, which limits its exposure to students from other academic streams. Interview respondents noted uneven teacher readiness in applying GIS and spatial technologies, particularly in schools with limited technological facilities.	Geography is mainly offered within the Social Sciences (IPS) track at upper secondary level, which limits its exposure to students from other academic streams. Interview respondents noted uneven teacher readiness in applying GIS and spatial technologies, particularly in schools with limited technological facilities.
Opportunities (O)	Advances in digital geospatial technologies, such as GIS platforms and satellite imagery tools, provide opportunities to enhance spatial learning. Teachers interviewed reported increasing use of tools such as digital mapping applications and online geographic resources to support project-based learning.	Advances in digital geospatial technologies, such as GIS platforms and satellite imagery tools, provide opportunities to enhance spatial learning. Teachers interviewed reported increasing use of tools such as digital mapping applications and online geographic resources to support project-based learning.
Threats (T)	Ongoing curriculum reforms and policy shifts may affect the continuity of Geography's position in the curriculum. In addition, disparities in educational resources across Indonesian regions may limit the effective implementation of spatial technology-based learning.	Ongoing curriculum reforms and policy shifts may affect the continuity of Geography's position in the curriculum. In addition, disparities in educational resources across Indonesian regions may limit the effective implementation of spatial technology-based learning.

The SWOT analysis reveals that the institutional positioning of Geography differs significantly between the two education systems. In Indonesia, Geography benefits from deeper disciplinary content at the upper secondary level, supported by the flexible learning orientation of the Merdeka Curriculum. However, its concentration within the Social Sciences track limits its broader accessibility. In contrast, Malaysia ensures early exposure to geographic knowledge through compulsory instruction at the lower

secondary level, but its elective status at the upper secondary level creates challenges for sustained student engagement. Interview findings reinforce these structural differences. Indonesian educators emphasized the importance of Geography in developing spatial awareness and national territorial understanding, whereas Malaysian respondents highlighted the subject's role in environmental education and sustainability awareness.

Overall, the SWOT analysis demonstrates that while both curricula provide meaningful opportunities to strengthen Geography education—particularly through digital geospatial technologies and sustainability-focused learning—policy decisions regarding subject status and curriculum structure remain key determinants of Geography's long-term educational impact.

3.2 Discussion

3.2.1 The Position of Geography as a Subject in the Secondary School Curriculum in Malaysia and Indonesia

Geography occupies a strategic position within secondary school curricula in both Malaysia and Indonesia, reflecting each country's educational priorities in spatial literacy, national development, and civic awareness. From a curriculum theory perspective, the positioning of Geography within the school system illustrates how particular forms of knowledge are socially and institutionally prioritized. Curriculum theorists argue that the organization of school subjects reflects broader policy agendas and national educational goals. In this context, Geography functions as a key disciplinary bridge linking physical environments, human activities, and spatial interactions, enabling students to develop spatial thinking and global awareness—competencies widely recognized in geography education literature as essential for active citizenship and engagement with contemporary environmental and geopolitical challenges (Golightly, 2025; Harrison, 2022). Thus, Geography's curricular placement is not neutral, but instead signals whether spatial literacy is treated as a core educational foundation or a specialized field accessible only to some learners.

The findings of this study demonstrate that the curricular positioning of Geography differs significantly between the two national systems. Malaysia ensures universal exposure to geographic knowledge during lower secondary education by making the subject compulsory for all students in Forms 1–3 under the Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah (KSSM). From a comparative curriculum perspective, this model reflects an inclusive approach in which foundational spatial literacy is treated as a general competency that all students should acquire. However, the transition to elective status at Forms 4–5 illustrates a pattern frequently discussed in curriculum studies: once a subject becomes optional, its institutional status may decline. This phenomenon has been widely noted in research on subject marginalization, where non-STEM subjects gradually lose visibility when curriculum structures prioritize examination-oriented or economically strategic disciplines (Hallingfors & Åström Elmersjö, 2025; Jordan et al., 2022). Consequently, although the Malaysian curriculum emphasizes applied competencies such as spatial analysis, topographic map interpretation, fieldwork, disaster studies, and introductory GIS, the elective structure can lead to unequal student access and declining participation at the upper secondary level.

From a theoretical standpoint, this pattern can be interpreted through the framework of curriculum knowledge classification developed by Basil Bernstein. Bernstein's theory distinguishes between strong and weak classification of knowledge within curricula. In Malaysia, Geography maintains a clearly defined disciplinary structure at lower secondary level, but its elective status later weakens its institutional classification relative to core subjects. This shift affects not only student participation but also the long-term visibility of the discipline within the school system. Curriculum research suggests that such structural positioning may influence teacher professionalism as well, since declining enrollment can reduce institutional support, professional development opportunities, and sustained investment in subject specialization (Mitchell, 2025; Rushton et al., 2022). From a curriculum theory perspective, Malaysia's approach reflects an applied and competency-oriented model in which

Geography is expected to equip students with practical analytical tools, particularly through fieldwork, disaster studies, and introductory GIS. However, the elective status of Geography at the upper secondary level raises concerns of subject marginalization, as curriculum scholarship suggests that optional subjects often lose institutional priority, resulting in reduced student participation and weaker long-term subject visibility. This structure can create unequal student access, since only learners in schools with sufficient demand are able to continue studying Geography in Forms 4–5. In turn, elective positioning may also influence teacher professionalism, because fluctuating enrollment can limit staffing stability, professional development opportunities, and sustained investment in Geography as a specialist discipline.

In contrast, Indonesia positions Geography more strongly at the upper secondary level within the Social Sciences (IPS) stream. Under both the 2013 Curriculum and the Merdeka Curriculum, Geography is designed to develop higher-order spatial reasoning, regional analysis, and contextual understanding of Indonesia's diverse geographic environment. This curricular orientation reflects a model of disciplinary depth, where Geography contributes not only to spatial literacy but also to national contextual understanding. The inclusion of concepts such as *Wawasan Nusantara*, territorial integrity, and regional diversity demonstrates how Geography is used to strengthen national identity and territorial awareness. From the perspective of curriculum theory, this illustrates how school subjects can function as instruments of nation-building, where knowledge about space and territory supports broader civic and political objectives (Mitchell, 2025; Paulus & Nolan, 2021). Compared with Malaysia, Indonesia positions Geography more strongly as a subject of conceptual development and national relevance at the upper secondary stage, rather than primarily as an applied elective. Yet, Indonesia's track-based structure also shapes access, since students outside the IPS stream may have limited engagement with Geography, suggesting a different form of curricular stratification. Overall, the comparison illustrates how each curriculum reflects national priorities: Malaysia emphasizes early universal exposure and applied skill-building, while Indonesia emphasizes upper-level conceptual depth and contextual national understanding. Both models demonstrate Geography's strategic educational value, but also reveal how curriculum structures—core versus elective, compulsory versus streamed—directly shape student opportunity, teacher capacity, and the long-term status of the subject within secondary education.

Geography in Indonesia also plays a strategic role in strengthening national literacy and civic understanding through curriculum-based concepts such as *Wawasan Nusantara*, territorial integrity, and regional diversity. From the perspective of geography education literature, this reflects the long-standing view that Geography contributes not only to spatial competence but also to identity formation and national awareness by connecting place, territory, and social responsibility (Hashim et al., 2019; Supianto et al., 2023). In curriculum theory terms, Indonesia's approach illustrates how school subjects can function as instruments of nation-building, where Geography is positioned to deepen students' understanding of Indonesia's archipelagic character, maritime space, border regions, and resource governance. This national orientation demonstrates that Geography is treated as a subject of strategic relevance, particularly within the senior secondary IPS track, where disciplinary depth and contextual learning are emphasized.

However, Indonesia's track-based structure also creates a different form of curricular stratification. While Geography is compulsory within the Social Sciences track, students outside the IPS stream may have limited exposure to the subject. From a comparative curriculum perspective, this model emphasizes disciplinary specialization rather than universal exposure. Previous comparative education studies suggest that such streaming structures can deepen subject expertise among specific groups of students but may simultaneously restrict broader access to disciplinary knowledge. Consequently, while Indonesia strengthens Geography's conceptual depth and national relevance at the upper secondary stage, the system does not necessarily guarantee that all students develop advanced spatial literacy.

Taken together, the comparison reveals two distinct curriculum models. Malaysia emphasizes early universal exposure and applied skill development, ensuring that all students encounter geographic knowledge during the foundational years of secondary education. Indonesia, by contrast, prioritizes conceptual depth and contextual national understanding at the upper secondary level, particularly for students specializing in the Social Sciences. These contrasting approaches highlight how curriculum structures—compulsory versus elective status and universal versus streamed provision—directly shape the institutional status of Geography, the stability of teacher specialization, and students' long-term opportunities to develop spatial competencies (Anum et al., 2025; Ratnasari et al., 2019). In conclusion, a comparative perspective reveals that Geography holds strong potential as a core subject for developing comprehensive geopolitical literacy in both countries.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that strengthening Geography education requires balancing accessibility and disciplinary depth. In Malaysia, maintaining Geography as a compulsory subject for a longer period or strengthening its integration within upper secondary programs could help sustain student participation and institutional support. In Indonesia, expanding cross-stream exposure to geographic knowledge may broaden spatial literacy beyond the Social Sciences track. Such adjustments would help ensure that Geography continues to contribute meaningfully to students' understanding of environmental sustainability, regional development, and geopolitical complexity. Overall, the comparative analysis demonstrates that Geography remains a strategically important subject for developing spatial literacy, civic awareness, and global understanding. However, its educational impact is strongly shaped by curriculum structures and policy priorities. Ensuring that Geography retains both institutional visibility and broad accessibility is therefore essential for preparing students to address the spatial and environmental challenges of the twenty-first century

3.2.2 SWOT Analysis (Analysis of Geography Curriculum): Indonesia (Merdeka) vs Malaysia (KSSM)

Geography is widely recognized as a strategic discipline in secondary education because it connects spatial concepts, territorial dynamics, resource distribution, and human–environment relationships with national development priorities. Rather than simply describing landscapes, Geography provides analytical tools that enable students to interpret how geographic conditions shape policy decisions, regional planning, and global interdependence. Scholars emphasize that Geography education strengthens spatial thinking and geospatial literacy, which are essential competencies for understanding contemporary global challenges (Garside, 2020; Hadiyanto et al., 2021). From the perspective of curriculum theory, the placement of Geography within school systems reflects how educational institutions prioritize particular forms of knowledge and determine which competencies are considered essential for national development.

Within this theoretical framework, the findings of this study demonstrate that Indonesia and Malaysia adopt different curriculum strategies in positioning Geography within secondary education. Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum places Geography as a core subject within the Social Sciences track at the upper secondary level, emphasizing conceptual depth, contextual analysis, and national territorial awareness. This structure reflects a curriculum orientation that prioritizes disciplinary understanding and national contextualization. Concepts such as *Wawasan Nusantara* reinforce students' understanding of Indonesia's archipelagic geography, territorial integrity, and regional diversity, illustrating how Geography education contributes to civic identity and national cohesion. From a curriculum theory perspective, this approach demonstrates how school subjects can function as instruments of nation-building by linking geographic knowledge with broader social and political objectives (Sakaue et al., 2024; Vollmer & Rothgangel, 2025). However, weaknesses remain in uneven teacher readiness and limited access to geospatial learning resources across regions. Variations in infrastructure, laboratory support, and professional training may constrain the effective implementation of spatial and technological components.

However, the Indonesian system also illustrates a structural limitation associated with streaming. Because Geography is primarily offered within the Social Sciences track, students in other academic streams have limited exposure to advanced geographic learning. Comparative curriculum studies suggest that track-based systems often strengthen disciplinary specialization but may reduce equitable access to knowledge across the student population. Consequently, while Indonesia emphasizes depth and national relevance, its curriculum structure may restrict the broader development of spatial literacy among students outside the IPS stream.

In contrast, Malaysia's Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah (KSSM) adopts a different curricular strategy by making Geography compulsory at the lower secondary level while allowing it to become elective at the upper secondary stage. This structure reflects a competency-oriented model that prioritizes early universal exposure to geographic knowledge. The Malaysian curriculum emphasizes practical skills such as topographic map interpretation, fieldwork, disaster awareness, and regional development analysis, aligning with international frameworks that promote sustainability education and global citizenship. By introducing these applied competencies early in secondary education, the Malaysian system ensures that all students develop foundational spatial literacy before specialization occurs (Rushton et al., 2022; Hallingfors & Åström Elmersjö, 2025). Nonetheless, a major weakness is the elective status of Geography at the upper secondary stage, which can reduce student participation, limit curriculum continuity, and contribute to subject marginalization compared to core science-based subjects. This also affects teacher professionalism, as declining enrollment may reduce teaching opportunities and long-term subject development.

Nevertheless, the shift to elective status at the upper secondary level introduces challenges related to subject marginalization. Curriculum research indicates that when a subject becomes optional, it often loses institutional priority, particularly in education systems that emphasize STEM-related disciplines. As a result, elective subjects may experience declining enrollment, reduced instructional time, and diminished investment in teacher specialization. This pattern has been observed in several international studies of geography education, where the subject's status weakens once it is no longer compulsory. The Malaysian case therefore illustrates how curriculum structure can influence not only student participation but also the long-term sustainability of a discipline within the school system.

From a comparative perspective, the findings align with previous research indicating that national curriculum policies shape how Geography contributes to broader educational goals such as sustainability, civic literacy, and spatial awareness. Studies on geography education across different countries have shown that curriculum models generally follow two main approaches: one emphasizing universal foundational exposure to geographic knowledge, and another prioritizing disciplinary depth through specialization. In Malaysia, Malaysia reflects the first approach, providing broad access to geographic learning during early secondary education. Indonesia reflects the second approach, emphasizing advanced conceptual development within a specific academic track. Each model offers advantages but also presents limitations related to accessibility, subject continuity, and long-term student engagement (Bagoly-Simó, 2023; Hall & Lin, 2024; Hodgkins et al., 2025; Knecht & Spurná, 2022).

At the same time, both systems face significant threats. Hashim et al (2019) highlight important policy implications for strengthening Geography education in both countries. In Indonesia, expanding cross-stream exposure to Geography could help ensure that spatial literacy is not limited only to Social Sciences students. Integrating geographic competencies into interdisciplinary learning or offering introductory modules for other streams may broaden students' understanding of spatial issues relevant to national development. In Malaysia, maintaining stronger continuity of Geography at the upper secondary level could help prevent subject marginalization and sustain student engagement with advanced geographic knowledge. Policy measures such as strengthening the integration of geospatial technologies, promoting interdisciplinary environmental education, and supporting teacher professional development could further reinforce the subject's institutional position.

Overall, the SWOT comparison indicates that Indonesia prioritizes depth, national contextualization, and curriculum flexibility, while Malaysia emphasizes early compulsory exposure and applied, skills-based learning. Strengthening teacher capacity, expanding access to geospatial resources, and ensuring Geography's core status within curriculum structures are key policy directions for both countries. Through these strategies, Geography can more effectively serve as a central discipline for developing spatially literate, critically aware, and nationally grounded students prepared for future regional and global challenges.

4. CONCLUSION

This comparative study shows that the position of Geography in secondary curricula in Malaysia and Indonesia reflects different national educational priorities. Malaysia places Geography as a compulsory subject at the lower secondary level and emphasizes practical skills such as fieldwork, map analysis, and understanding development and environmental issues. In contrast, Indonesia prioritizes deeper conceptual content and strong national contextualization at the upper secondary level, particularly within the Social Sciences track, focusing on spatial concepts, regional diversity, and national territorial awareness. These differences highlight how subject status, compulsory or elective, directly affects student access, continuity of learning, and the consistency of spatial literacy development across both education systems. The curriculum implications suggest that Geography requires stronger recognition to avoid marginalization, especially when it becomes an elective subject at higher levels. Therefore, policy recommendations include integrating geopolitical themes, spatial analysis, and geospatial technologies more explicitly within both curricula, supported by applied learning approaches such as project-based activities and field experiences. In addition, governments should prioritize continuous professional development for Geography teachers, particularly in GIS skills, contemporary global issues, and interdisciplinary pedagogy. Through these strategies, Geography can function more effectively as a core subject that strengthens spatial literacy, national awareness, and students' readiness to respond to future development and global challenges.

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