Consultation response to Ofqual from the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)

I am responding to the consultation as the Director of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG), on behalf of the Society as its formal response.

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The Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) is the UK learned society and professional body for geography and geographers. The Society maintains a strong overview of the discipline, its standing and practice in schools, higher education, and the workplace, including professional accreditation. We advise on, and support the advancement of, geography; the dissemination of geographical knowledge to the public, policy makers and other specialist audiences including teachers, scholars, and those involved in expeditions and fieldwork; and training and professional development for practising geographers. We have 16,000 members and Fellows and our work currently reaches more than three million people per year. Each year the Society works with teachers and pupils from about 50% of English secondary schools and our online educational resources receive 1 million+ ‘user sessions’ annually. The Society’s Education Committee advises its work with schools.

This consultation response is not confidential and is an official response on behalf of the RGS-IBG.

Pleased do contact the Society if you would like any further details about our views and work.

Overview of response

1. Consultation Questions

- To what extent do you agree or disagree that AS qualifications in geography should be assessed entirely by exam?
On balance the Society agrees. This comment is made on the basis of a clear requirement for fieldwork to be undertaken by all AS geography students and that schools make an annual declaration reporting what fieldwork has been undertaken.

The Society would be supportive of creative approaches to examination assessment at AS Level, such as decision making exercises, pre-release materials and (if manageable within the scrutiny of an exam setting) the incorporation of student's individual, or their class, fieldwork data

We do note that there are requests from others for the introduction of non-exam assessment (for fieldwork in particular) at AS. We do not see this as a priority, given other demands on teachers’ time. In contrast, the Society’s focus is on ensuring that the full A Level, from which students will progress into Higher Education geography courses, carries the necessary balance of exam and non-exam assessment to support transition to HE, as proposed. Further detailed comments are made below.

- To what extent do you agree or disagree that for A levels in geography 80 per cent of the available marks should be allocated to exams, and 20 per cent to non-exam assessment? The Society strongly agrees, and has clear views on the nature of the non-exam assessed work that is required, as set out below.

- To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed assessment objectives are appropriate for A levels and AS qualifications in geography? The Society feels these objectives need modifying, as set out below.

- To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed weightings of the assessment objectives are appropriate for AS qualifications in geography? The Society is suggesting some modifications to the weightings, as below.

The key elements of our reasoning behind these responses are outlined below.

**AS qualifications assessed entirely by exam**

The Society's view is that it is not practicable to assess AS level other than by examination. We view non-examination assessment at A Level as being the priority. The additional load on teachers and students could be too high in our view if non-exam assessment was also introduced at AS Level. Non-exam assessment for AS could also present an additional significant challenge for the potential to co-teach AS and A Level. Instead, we urge the use of more creative approaches to examination questions and assessment at AS Level for fieldwork.

**Allocating 20% of marks to non-examination assessment for A Level**

The Society strongly welcomes Ofqual’s recommendation that 20% of an A Level’s final grade be allocated to the non-exam assessment. We firmly believe that all specifications should require students to undertake an independent and individual research project. In this context, we do not support the idea of a ‘fieldwork report’ as a simple record of the fieldwork they have undertaken.

A requirement for an independent, individual study will address the reduction in demand for A Level that has occurred since the removal of course work in 2010. For example, Ofqual’s research in 2012 judged A2 “to be less demanding because of the removal of the coursework element. Coursework … was an effective way to assess skills by, for example undertaking and reporting on investigative fieldwork. While awarding organisations assess skills … within … external examinations, reviewers found that they were not as effective at assessing skills as coursework.”

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1 Review of standards in GCE A Level Geography 2001-2010 Ofqual (2012)
The allocation of 20% of marks to non-examination assessment will also provide a model that underpins a key the recommendation of the Geography ALCAB panel that, “A Level specifications should include opportunities for students to undertake some independent investigative and research work which must include fieldwork.”² ALCAB also recognises the need for such work to support transition to undergraduate courses noting that developing extended geographical knowledge and skills as well as extended writing and research skills, “is an essential preparation for higher education geography”.³

The Society believes that ALCAB’s recommendation for independent investigative and research work should (and can best) be met through an ‘individual research project’ which should constitute either all, or the majority, of the 20% of non-examination assessment. The characteristics of such a project should, in our view, be as follows:

- It is a piece of work individually written by a student and which can demonstrate their individual geographical capabilities and understanding, and the ability to apply geographical knowledge and skills to investigate the selected topic.
- It is of a length between 4,000 – 4,500 words.
- It requires the student to formulate a project, and demonstrate appropriate primary data collection, analysis, presentation and communication skills relevant to that project, together with, where appropriate, the use of relevant secondary sources.
- That the geographical enquiry is set within the context of wider geographical understanding (e.g. through a literature review of an appropriate level for A Level) and can demonstrate the application of existing knowledge, theory and concepts to the chosen subject.
- It provides the opportunity (within reasonable parameters of guidance in relation to practicalities and safety) for A Level students to follow their own geographical passions and interests, rather than necessarily having to be tied to course options.

The Society notes recent interest in the separate Extended Project Qualification (EPQ). This includes a research report of up to 5,000 words and commentators have noted that the EPQ supports:

- “The development in skills, in research, writing and investigation, that they (universities) find particularly valuable in helping young people prepare for their university courses.” Andrew Hall AQA
- And “It also gives them an opportunity to pursue an area of particular interest they have by conducting a piece of research, or an in-depth study, of an area of interest”. Brian Lightman ASCL⁴

Such characteristics are at the heart of the ALCAB, and the Society’s, proposals for an individual research project which would be rooted within the subject specific context of geography and based on geographical research techniques including the collection of primary data through geographical fieldwork. For many years, until relatively recently, an independent project in geography was a required part of A Level for all students. Clearly the EPQ is not an alternative to an embedded individual project in geography A Level since EPQ is not offered in all schools, is optional for pupils, and it is not a subject specific qualification.

It will be important, and in our view, entirely possible, to ensure the authenticity of students’ individual work and the quality of teacher marking. The proposed model of internal (teacher) assessment together with external moderation is welcomed. As previously identified, the Society urges that there should be an accompanying programme of sampling of students’ work and vivas with individual students⁵ - which may be in person or via video conferencing – and applied in a similar manner across all Awarding Bodies.

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² Report of the ALCAB Panel on Geography July 2014 (pg2)
³ Report of the ALCAB Panel on Geography July 2014 (pg7)
⁴ Times Educational Supplement 15.8.2014
⁵ RGS-IBG Consultation on the Assessment of Geography A Levels (Ofqual) January 2014
The Society notes that last year over 30,000 students undertook an EPQ and can see no reported negative evidence from the Awarding Organisations in relation to the validity of students’ individual work towards this qualification or the quality of teachers marking. The Society believes that this experience potentially provides the Awarding Bodies with valuable experience in the development of approaches to validation, marking, standardisation and moderation relevant to a geographical individual research project.

At the heart of a geographically focused individual research project should be a student’s own enquiry and research investigation (supported with appropriate guidance from their teachers) through which their geographical interests can be demonstrated and developed. In this respect, specifications should provide a breadth of opportunity across the full range of geographical content at A Level (and potentially beyond) upon which students can conduct their individual research. The Society strongly urges that specifications take this approach, rather than seek to narrow the scope and topic of study for their students.

We do recognise concerns about practicalities and safety. However, the Society believes that by drawing on appropriate guidance from their teachers, students should be able to undertake the collection of data on an individual or possibly paired or small group basis safely. Given that students will be at least 17 years old the Society does not feel it should be an absolute requirement that a teacher accompanies all their students during the data collection phase of the investigation, providing appropriate risk assessment has been undertaken. The Society believes that if this requirement is imposed the practicalities of it will lead to a situation where some schools ‘bus in’ all their students to one location and the data is collected wholesale as a group. Such an approach, whilst providing fieldwork, would severely limit the opportunities for a genuinely individual approach.

We recognise that there may be an appropriate (and modest) role for students to use ‘pooled’ data which might be collected by individuals within a class and then is available for all students to use. However, individual students must be able to demonstrate how the data they collected and pooled is relevant to their own individual research enquiry. The Society recognises that one locality can provide many different opportunities for individual research, spanning physical, human and integrated geography. However, the Society would not welcome a situation developing whereby all the students in a particular centre undertook broadly similar individual projects on the same geographical place, process or issue.

Note: We recognise that a very small number of centres, such as FE colleges, may have exceptionally large geography A Level cohorts. The introduction of an individual research project for such centres may be viewed an issue; although the re-introduction of non-examination assessment at A Level would in essence be a return to the pre 2010 situation when course work was a required element of A Level geography.

However, such large FE geography classes are not the typical experience of school based geography A Level groups and the Society does not wish their possible concerns to be the ‘FE tail wagging the school dog’.

A further consideration is ensuring schools commit the necessary out-of-classroom time to provide their students with good quality fieldwork. The Society strongly welcomes the recommended guidance provided by ALCAB that there should be a “minimum of four days of fieldwork as part of A level study and two days for AS level”, and that many schools have the capacity to exceed this. Such time in the field will be necessary if students are to develop the skills, approaches and experience to underpin their own projects which will be worth 20% of their final A Level grades.

The Society continues to support strongly the need for A Level pupils to undertake independent research through a fieldwork investigation. Fieldwork is an essential element of the subject discipline of geography and the requirement to undertake such work better prepares pupils to
progress to study geography at university and develops and applies a range of enquiry and analytical skills that cannot be examined effectively through a formal examination.

**Assessment Objectives and weightings**

**Objectives**
The Society has some significant concerns over the balance, pitch and level of demand of the proposed assessment objectives for AS and A Level geography, particularly in comparison with the revised Assessment Objectives for the new GCSE. We would like to see the A and AS level assessment objectives revised to reflect progression from GCSE and to relate more specifically to A Level demand, scope and pitch.

For example, within the four AOs for the revised GCSE there is a clearer expectation of:

- What knowledge will be demonstrated in terms of the location, context, places, environments, at which scales and in which temporal contexts.
- How understanding is relevant to changes, interrelationships, and interconnections between people and environments at different scales and in different context
- Greater clarity in the range of skills (including fieldwork and GIS) and the need for students to ‘explain and communicate geographical evidence, ideas and questions’.
- And the need for the application of ‘geographical knowledge, understanding and skills to make well evidenced judgements, understand different perspectives and construct sound arguments

Such level of exemplification is missing from the proposals for AS and A Level which, as written in their current generic terms, could be interpreted to be less demanding than the new AOs for GCSE

**Weightings**

AO1. The Society does not support the limiting of AO1 ‘demonstrate knowledge and understanding’ to be between 30-40%. In the former A Levels this could be as high as 55%. We recommend it being changed to between 35-50%. We are of the view that knowledge and understanding of the (proposed more) demanding content at A and AS level should comprise at least one third of the assessment and that it would be wholly appropriate for it to constitute 50% of the assessment, leaving the remaining 50% for application of knowledge and for skills assessment.

AO2. The Society welcomes the raising of the base of AO2 to ‘apply, analyse, interpret and evaluate’ to account for between 30-40% of marks; whereas previously the minimum for this AO was 20% of the marks

AO3. The Society is content with the proposed 20-30% weighting for AO3.

**Footnote: Separation of AS and A Level**
As previously noted in the Society’s consultation response to the Ofqual Consultation on A Level Reform (2012), the Society does not support the separation of AS and A Level.

Dr Rita Gardner CBE, Director
Steve Brace, Head of Education

This consultation is being submitted by the Society in consultation with leading members of its Education Committee including:
Andrew Linnell, Vice President (Education)
Laura Stone, Honorary Secretary

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