

# Consultation Response from the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)

## Ofqual consultation on proposed changes to the assessment of GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2021

The Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the [Ofqual Consultation on the 2021 Examinations and Assessments](#)

The following is made as a public response from the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG).

This response has been developed in collaboration with the Society's Education Committee which includes representation of colleagues who are head teachers, heads of school geography departments, teacher trainers and geography teachers.

### Question level optionality

#### 1. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the 2021 exams should not include more optional questions than usual?

Disagree

#### 2. Do you have any comments on the use of optional exam questions in the 2021 exams?

Introducing more optional questions will lead to the 2021 papers having a different approach to the existing SAMS and past papers, with consequential changes to the examination rubric and question format. This will have the potential to confuse some candidates.

Recognising the circumstances of the 2020/21 cycle there may be some value in exploring whether there might be some additional optionality *within* sections and/or the selection and use of some case studies.

However, the RGS-IBG would not welcome changes which significantly reduced the range or depth of study across geography.

The RGS-IBG notes Ofqual's proposal for the removal of the assessment of geographical fieldwork within GCSE. If this proposal is implemented it would reduce the range and depth of geographical subject knowledge and allied skills for the ~260,000 candidates who will be assessed in 2021.

If any additional optionality was introduced into geography such changes would need to be in place early to allow new SAMSs/mock papers to be available to the 2021 cohort so that they (and their teachers) had the opportunity to work through the new papers before the summer examinations.

There would be significant potential for confusion and consequent disadvantaging for some students if the first time they encountered a new rubric and optional question framework was in the live summer 2021 examinations.

The RGS-IBG recommends the following:

- If there is the appetite for the introduction of optionality within sections that this be explored as a matter of urgency by the Awarding Organisations (AO), Ofqual and subject experts from the geographical community including representation from the RGS-IBG, the Geographical Association (GA) and others.
- If a change is to be made, the new arrangements need to be in place early so that they can be introduced into the mock examination series and that teachers and students are made fully aware of them for the summer 2021 series.

## **Changing the number and the length of the exams**

**3. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the number of exams taken for each subject in 2021 should be the same as usual?**

Agree

**4. Do you have any comments on the number of exams taken for each subject in 2021?**

The RGS-IBG feels it is impractical and undesirable to seek to make changes to the numbers of papers within the geography examinations.

This would remove sections of the subject from its assessment, have the potential to create an uneven distribution of assessment objectives across the full exam and create significant upstream issues for teachers and students in relation to their coverage (or not) of relevant sections of the specification.

**5. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the exams taken in 2021 should not be longer than usual?**

Agree

**6. Do you have any comments on the length of exams in 2021?**

The RGS-IBG can see no material benefit in lengthening the examinations in 2021.

We do not feel it would ease the examination process for students and may also have unintended consequences. For example, providing more time may increase the potential for widening outcomes with 'better prepared' students utilizing the extended time to provide even fuller answers and/or review their work, in comparison to their peers.

**7. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the GCSE timetable should start after half term in 2021 if results can still be released on 26 August 2021?**

Strongly agree



**9. What would be the advantages and disadvantages of delaying the start of GCSE exams in 2021?**

Delaying the start of the GCSE exams would provide the opportunity for schools to have more time for teaching of the geography GCSE course and (if maintained as part of the assessment) to cover the fieldwork requirements.

The RGS-IBG believes this would be helpful for schools and provide recognition of the disruption that has occurred to students’ learning since March, and which may still be experienced with the start of the new 2020/21 academic year. Additional time may help reduce the move in some schools to [reduce the range of GCSEs studied by their pupils](#).

Subject to Public Health England’s advice, an extended period of teaching into the summer of 2021 would also provide greater flexibility over the scheduling of geographical fieldwork.

The RGS-IBG recognises the need for GCSE results to be provided in a timely manner in the summer of 2021 in order to support students’ progression into post-16 study, training and the workplace.

**10. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the A level and AS timetable should start after half term in 2021 if results can still be released on 19 August 2021?**

Strongly agree

**11. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the A level and AS timetable should start after half term in 2021 even if this necessitates a delay in the release of results?**

Agree

**12. What would be the advantages and disadvantages of delaying the start of A level and AS exams in 2021?**

Delaying the start of the AS and A Level exams would provide the opportunity for schools to have more time for teaching of the geography specification and to cover the required fieldwork in AS and A Level geography – including students undertaking of their independent investigations (NEAs).

The RGS-IBG believes this would be helpful for schools and provide some recognition of the disruption that has occurred to students’ learning since March, and which may still be experienced with the start of the new 2020/21 academic year.

With due regard to Public Health England’s advice in relation to Covid-19 the autumn term will be a critical time for students work on their NEAs (if they have not already been progressed during the late spring and summer of 2020). Creating more teaching time by moving the examinations back into the summer of 2021 would free up some early time for the NEAs, whilst still providing corresponding time in 2021 to dedicate to the remainder of the course.

The RGS-IBG recognises the need for A Level results to be provided in a timely manner in the summer of 2021 in order to support students’ progression into post-18 study, training and the workplace.



**13. We know that some respondents to this consultation will have specific interests in different qualifications and/or subjects. This consultation includes proposals on a subject- by-subject basis. Please use the list below to select the subjects about which you would like to answer:**

Geography

**14. Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree that students taking GCSE geography exams in 2021 should not be required to undertake or be assessed on fieldwork?**

Strongly disagree

**15. Question: Do you have any comments on the proposal to remove the fieldwork requirement and exam questions relating to fieldwork from GCSE geography exams in 2021.**

The RGS-IBG fundamentally disagrees with this proposal, which has an immediate impact for current GCSE students and potential implications for the place of fieldwork within GCSE geography over the longer term.

The challenge presented by Covid-19 is well recognised. However, the RGS-IBG notes that the Department for Education’s [Guidance for Full Opening: Schools](#) has identified that:

*“Schools should also make use of outdoor spaces in the local area to support delivery of the curriculum. As normal, schools should undertake full and thorough risk assessments in relation to all educational visits to ensure they can be done safely.”*

Considering such guidance, and for the reasons outlined below, Ofqual’s proposal to remove fieldwork from the assessment of GCSE geography should be reversed.

The RGS-IBG notes that geographical fieldwork remains a statutory requirement within the Geography National Curriculum at KS1, 2 and 3 and fieldwork is to be retained within the assessment of A Level geography for 2021.

Fieldwork’s educational value to young people is long established and expresses geography’s commitment to enquiry, discovery and the subject’s encouragement to be curious [about the world](#).

Geographical fieldwork is not just an important skill, but also a means through which identified geographical contexts and subject content are investigated and revealed to young people.

Throughout the GCSE specifications, and sometimes in different ways, fieldwork is used to address elements of geographical subject knowledge spanning physical and human geography. Its proposed removal creates the potential for such knowledge to be absent from a student’s experience of geography and has implications for how the assessment objectives are applied. Geography’s Assessment Objective 3 requires students to “Apply knowledge and understanding to interpret, analyse and evaluate geographical information and issues to make judgements” and make up 35% of the final assessment including 10% to be applied to assessment relating to fieldwork context/s.

Further, it is difficult to balance the proposal to remove fieldwork from the 2021 assessment with Ofqual’s comment that “the content, specified by DfE, which forms the foundation of the subjects should not be changed”.

Ofsted’s proposal would also lead to a double disadvantage for the 30,000 pupils who will move on from GCSE geography and start an A Level in this subject in autumn 2021. By removing fieldwork from their experience, there will not only be an impact on their GCSE work but also an erosion of their preparation for





