

Consultation: New A Level Regulatory Requirements

Royal
Geographical
Society

with IBG

Advancing geography
and geographical learning

● Response from the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)

The Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) is the learned society and professional body for geography and geographers.

The Society maintains a strong overview of the discipline, its position and its practice in schools, higher education, and the workplace, including professional accreditation. We advise on and support its advancement, dissemination and practice in these realms and within wider public engagement and policy. We have 16,000+ members and Fellows and our work currently reaches more than three million people annually. Each year the Society works with a substantial number of secondary school teachers and their pupils and annually our online educational resources receive c. 1 million 'user sessions'.

Introductory comments

The Society **strongly supports** the following areas of the Ofqual consultation proposals:

- The recognition that fieldwork is an essential element of A Level geography.
- The assessment of A Level geography through both terminal examinations (80%) and non-exam assessment (20%).
- The broad balance and weighting of the proposed Assessment Objectives for A Level geography.

The Society wishes to **propose** the following, the detail of which is exemplified in the following sections:

- That the majority of marks for non-exam assessment (and not less than 15% total marks) should be allocated to a student's 'individual research project', which should have a word length of c4,500 words. This should be a feature of all new A Levels, regardless of the specification/Awarding Organisation.
- The individual research project should be internally assessed by teachers and externally moderated. In addition, there should be an accompanying programme of sampling of students' work and vivas with individual students.
- The detail of the Assessment Objectives should be redrafted to both clearly identify the appropriate level of demand for A Level and to clearly differentiate it from the proposed Assessment Objectives for GCSE.
- An A Level 'fieldwork declaration' should be made by a school to its Awarding Organisation; in a comparable way to proposals for GCSE geography fieldwork.

Finally, and it is recognised that these issues lie outside the current Ofqual consultation, the Society wishes to note the following:

- The Society has registered its fundamental disagreement with the proposed subject content for A Level geography and cannot support the proposals in their current form (DfE consultation December 2013). Please see the following response for further details:

<http://www.rgs.org/NR/rdonlyres/CADCFBE8-C778-47C2-8AE8-6F12E1817428/20111/RoyalGeographicalSocietywithIBGresponsetoDfEconsul.pdf>

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- As the Society has previously noted, we do not support the uncoupling of AS and A Level geography courses.

Consultation Question 31: To what extent do you agree that for the geography A level 20 per cent of the available marks should be allocated to non-exam assessments?

- Strongly agree

The Society strongly welcomes the proposal that 20% of assessment in A Level geography should be allocated to non-exam assessment.

This provides for the reintroduction of an individual research project (ideally based on fieldwork and involving data collection) to be undertaken by A Level geography students. The Society has repeatedly called for the reintroduction of such work, which represents an integral part of this discipline's preparation for progression to HE. The Society believes that the majority of the marks (no lower than 15%) within the 20% available for non-exam assessment should be allocated to an independent research project.

Higher Education colleagues have frequently commented that many (indeed most) students now arrive at university with no experience of this style of work or an understanding of the level of demand it places on undergraduate students. An individual research project, ideally of a c4,500 word length would require A Level students to identify and frame their research question, collect primary and/or secondary data from a range of sources, undertake the analysis and interpretation of their data and present their findings in relation to their original research question.

In response to the Society's discussions with HE colleagues concerning A Level, one commented; *"Not a single one of the year 1 geographers this year has experience of having written (A Level) coursework for geography. Their only experience of writing has been in the form of short essay-style answers written in the examinations. As such, many are really struggling with writing longer coursework and the associated skills such as referencing."*

The Society believes that these research projects should be 'student led' i.e. projects which are chosen by the individual students themselves. These should stem from the students own geographical interests and also draw on the guidance and advice of their teachers. They should not be selected from a pre-set list of topics that is provided by an exam board (e.g. requiring that all students should undertake an individual project on rivers in one year or housing the next). It is the Society's belief that a pre-set list of topics would potentially narrow fieldwork opportunities and also the range and nature of students' individual work.

The Society recommends there should be a common submission deadline, across all Awarding Bodies, for this work. For example, a suitable time might be towards the end of the winter term or the start of the spring term. The submission date should provide sufficient time for the students' work to be internally marked and moderated, and externally moderated and reviewed. The Society recommends there should be regular sampling and reviews of students work and vivas, using remote technologies for cost and efficiency saving (e.g. via video-conferencing) with selected candidates.

Consultation Question 32: To what extent do you agree that the proposed assessment objectives are appropriate for A level and AS qualifications in geography?

- Agree

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The Society supports the balance of the assessment objectives for A Level and AS geography and their broad focus is correct.

However, the Society would welcome further drafting of the three Assessment Objectives to indicate more fully the level of challenge required at A Level, especially in comparison to the proposed Assessment Objectives for GCSE geography.

The consultation proposals for GCSE currently provide greater detail in relation to the range and focus of assessment. For example, at GCSE the types of geographical information which should be used to underpin the assessments are more fully exemplified (e.g. GCSE identifies the following: “maps, GIS, visual, graphic and numerical data”).

In addition, the Society would welcome redrafting of AO3 to reflect the need for students undertake higher level activities in the following way; “investigate questions and issues, *evaluate evidence*, *reach reasoned conclusions* and communicate geographical findings.”

Consultation Question 33: To what extent do you agree that the proposed weightings are appropriate for A level?

- Agree

Subject to our comments in Q32 the Society welcomes the broad weighting of marks across AO1, AO2 and AO3, and that there is still a degree of flexibility available to Awarding Organisation across the three.

The Society also welcomes the proposals that mathematical skills appropriate for A Level geography must be tested across the Assessment Objectives and that the weighting for this must be 10%.

The Society would recommend that the marks for the ‘10% mathematics’ are allocated across the full range of assessment opportunities, not aggregated into one particular area. The Society would not welcome new A Level specifications which unimaginatively allocated the 10% to be assessed, in their entirety, through one specific activity e.g. either a ‘skills paper’ (AS) or the use of a statistical technique as part of an individual research project (A Level).

In addition, the Society would not wish to see the full set of available marks for AO3 (20%-30%) to be entirely allocated to the assessment of an individual research project. The assessment of an individual project should also, in our view, include marks drawn from AO1 and AO2. For example, (and presented here only for illustrative purposes) a research project might constitute 20% of the final marks and its assessment could be built up by allocating marks from across the three Assessment Objectives in the following way: AO1 5%, AO2 5% and AO3 10%.

Consultation Question 34: To what extent do you agree that the proposed weightings are appropriate for AS?

- Agree

Consultation Question 35: Do you have any further comments relating to geography?

The Society would wish to make the following comments:

Internal assessment and the validity of students work:

For the 20% of marks to be assessed through non-examination assessment the Society would welcome a model of internal (teacher) assessment overseen by external (Awarding Organisations) moderation.

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This should be accompanied by a programme to sample a percentage of each year's students' work and also vivas with selected students (including both the most able students and those across the ability range).

The use of vivas, conducted by external examiners, would provide a regular opportunity to test how well students understood the work they had completed and in relation to the validity of their work to probe whether they had received any inappropriate levels of help or support.

It is the Society's firm view that the use of technology (e.g. scanning students' scripts and video conferencing for moderation and vivas etc) would be a time saving and cost effective way of Awarding Bodies and their examiners to undertake such work.

Fieldwork: individuals with protected characteristics

The Society welcomes the renewed commitment to fieldwork within the proposals for both AS and the new A Level for geography. This continues the existing requirement for fieldwork within this subject discipline and places no *new* additional burden on schools and their students in relation to specific groups e.g. individuals who may have access issues in relation to fieldwork.

The Society has extensive experience in supporting schools to undertake fieldwork through a popular range of continuing professional development courses and a wide range of online support and resources. For further details please see www.rgs.org/OurWork/Schools/Fieldwork+and+local+learning/Fieldwork+and+local+learning.htm

The Society recognises that the new opportunity for an individual research project may raise some access concerns about particular sites. It needs to be appreciated that the chosen research sites can just as effectively be based in the local area - and be potentially more accessible - rather than sites further afield. It should be the quality of a student's research; how they set up their enquiry; the data they collect and how they analyse, interpret and present findings that should form the basis for assessment. The mark scheme for the individual projects should not preference remote or 'exotic' locations.

Ensuring geographical fieldwork is undertaken

In ensuring geographical fieldwork is undertaken the Society has consistently recommended that schools should be required to submit an annual 'fieldwork declaration' to their Awarding Organisation and which records the fieldwork that has been undertaken for the course. We believe it is a 'light touch' check and balance, which realistically should not take a geography teacher and their head teacher more than a few minutes to complete. Teaching colleagues have welcomed the opportunity that the declaration would present in engaging their head teacher with the validity, need and contribution of geographical fieldwork. The Society's Education Committee strongly supports this proposal.

We are pleased to see that this suggestion was included in an earlier Department for Education consultation on GCSE geography and believe it is equally appropriate to include within A Level geography courses.

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Follow up/information sharing

We use quotes from responses to highlight views expressed in the consultation document. It is helpful to attribute those quotes to specific organisations. We will not name individuals. If you do not want us to attribute your organisation to the quote, please opt out by ticking the box below

Do not attribute my name/organisation to the quote

Please only respond to the next statement if you have ticked 'no' or 'don't know' above. We intend to forward your response to Department for Education where your comments are relevant to Department for Education's consultation. If you do not want us to do this, please opt out by ticking the box below

Do not share my response with Department for Education

Personal data

For the purposes of the Data Protection Act, we are the data controller for any personal data you supply in response to this consultation. We will process all personal data (such as your name, address and any other identifying information) in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998. In most circumstances, this means that your personal data will not be disclosed to third parties.

Please do **not**:

- provide information in comments boxes that might identify you unless you are content for that information to be released into the public domain; or
- provide information in your response that might lead to the identification of other living individuals.

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Would you be happy for us to contact you again in relation to this consultation response?
X Yes

Additional information

How did you find out about this consultation?

- Ofqual's newsletters or website
- Media/press
- Internet search
- Department for Education (newsletter or website)
- Awarding organisations / exam boards
- Subject associations / learned societies
- Schools / headteacher / local authority
- Other (please state) _____

We want to write clearly, directly and put the reader first. Overall, do you think we have got this right in this document?

- Yes
- No