

Ofqual Consultation on A level reform

● Response from the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)

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Questions on Section 1: Background and purpose

The following questions refer to Section 1: Background and purpose.

1. I believe that all equality issues have been considered in the accompanying equality analysis.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

2. Do you have any comments or suggestions?

We set out some overview comments below as there is no dedicated space for such comments. These include some comments about equality towards the end.

The Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) is the UK's learned society and professional body for geography. We welcome the opportunity to respond to Ofqual's A Level Reform Consultation.

The Society maintains a strong overview of the discipline, its position and its practice in higher education, schools, fieldwork and the workplace, including the professional accreditation Chartered Geographer. We also advise on and support its advancement, promotion, dissemination and application in these realms and within wider public engagement and policy. We have 15,000 members and Fellows and our work, as a charity, reaches several million people each year. We work collaboratively and closely with all Higher Education (HE) geography departments in the UK.

For schools we provide online support and resources; CPD and the professional accreditation (C.Geog. teacher); advice and training for fieldwork; and the Geography Ambassador programme which promotes the relevance of geography to further study and careers. The Society engages, both face-to-face and online, with teachers and pupils from more than 75% of English secondary schools. Our online educational resources for teachers receive 400,000+ 'user sessions' annually.

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The Society strongly supports the need for A Levels to provide a robust and rigorous assessment and to support the development of young peoples' knowledge and skills as a basis for progression into Higher Education. We welcome and support this review.

The Society welcomes the involvement of HE, Learned Societies and teachers in the review of A Levels. We note, and agree, with Ofqual's findings that over the period 2001 – 2010 the content of A Level geography has 'softened' and that there has been a narrowing of subject coverage and fewer opportunities to assess the skills of students (Ofqual 2012). The current review provides the opportunity to stem this trend.

In addition, there are also two key issues relevant to geography.

Firstly, the Society, teachers and HE geographers strongly support the need to reintroduce *course work* into GCE geography. This move would promote extended writing, facilitate individual research, analysis and evaluation, and provide additional depth to a student's geographical learning. The removal of course work has led to less effective assessment of students' geographical skills and resulted in A2 geography being judged to be less demanding (Ofqual 2012).

A small number of teachers (and some awarding bodies) have expressed concern to the Society over the additional workload of course work linked to an independent study. This is not a sufficient reason to shy away from reintroducing course work. Its introduction can only serve to improve young peoples' geographical education at GCE. For reasons of equality coursework linked to an independent study should be a requirement in all specifications.

Secondly, the Society is concerned about the variety in the range, extent and quality of geographical fieldwork at A Level and that this too has the potential to be an equality issue across the A level cohort. In addition to any fieldwork carried out for an independent study, structured field teaching and learning should be part of all GCE Geography courses given the nature of the subject and the requirements for fieldwork in HE.

We recognise that an A Level specification in itself cannot remedy disparities in field-based learning. However, the Society would welcome discussions on the practicalities of establishing a 'minimum fieldwork entitlement' as a proportion of the guided learning hours for A Level geography (and a comparable minimum entitlement with GCSE specifications too). It would be for schools to decide how this would be undertaken.

In relation to supporting students' access to the full range of universities, the Society welcomes the Russell Group Informed Choices report with its identification of preferred facilitating subjects, which includes geography, at A Level.

Questions on Section 2: What we hope to achieve

The following questions refer to Section 2: What we hope to achieve.

3. I support the general principles as set out in this section.

(X) Strongly agree

() Agree

-
- Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree

4. I support the need for comparability of demand and content in different specifications in a subject.

- Yes
- No

Do you have any comments or suggestions?

If a number of specifications continue to be provided for within a single subject it is essential that there is comparability in the levels of demand and content across the specifications.

The current situation where many teachers hold differing perceptions (whether accurate or not) about easy or hard specifications is undesirable. Further the Society notes that Ofqual has identified that variability exists across current geography specifications in terms of the demand and style of content and performance of students (2012). All future specifications should be seen to be equally demanding in terms of these attributes.

It is a matter for further discussion with HE colleagues as to whether there needs to be comparability in the range of topics studied or whether consistency of demand is best placed at GCE in terms of the understanding and application of geographical concepts and skills that can be studied through a variety of different topics.

With regard to comparability of demand between different subjects, the Society believes that such comparability should certainly exist for all those subjects identified as facilitating subjects in the Russell Group Report.

If there are current 'A Levels' that do not support effective progression into HE to study, either into their own subject area or for other HE programmes, we question whether these qualifications should continue to carry the 'A Level' designation.

If the suite of A Levels was to be more narrowly defined, an initial starting point may be to consider extending a core of 'E-Bac/ Facilitating Subject' A Levels with other academically based A Level subjects which can demonstrate the necessary support from HE in terms of progression into undergraduate courses.

Section 3: Design rules - The purpose of A levels.

The following questions refer to Section 3: Design rules - The purpose of A levels.

5. I believe that Condition 1 adequately defines an appropriate primary purpose of A levels for regulation.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree

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The A* to E grades are widely understood and appropriate for discrimination between candidates.

8. Even considering the other changes being made to A levels, the A* grade (or similar) should be retained as it will continue to facilitate differentiation of achievement.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

The A* should be retained as it provides the facility to differentiate achievement at the very highest level of GCE. This is a particularly valuable tool for selection onto oversubscribed courses which recruit from the top end of achievement.

9. The expectations for the performance of learners should be set out for the upper and lower levels of the grading scale (currently grades A and E).

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you have any comments or suggestions?

The following questions relate to the options regarding the future structure of A levels:

Condition 3 - Qualification structure and availability of assessments

10. The opportunity for assessment in January should be removed.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

The development of a modular approach with assessments in January has not been favoured by the Society. We support terminal examinations at the end of the full AS and A2 years respectively.

11. I believe that Option 1 is the right option - Removing the AS qualification – which would mean a return to a linear two year course of study.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree

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Strongly disagree

A two year course would reduce breadth of study at Year 12. The current availability of AS level provides for greater breadth in Year 12.

12. I believe that Option 2 is the right option - Making the AS a standalone qualification but where the results do not contribute to the A level.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Uncoupling AS from A2 would raise the issue of why study for an AS if you cannot then progress into the full A2.

13. I believe that Option 3 is the right option - Retaining the AS qualification in its present form – but making changes as outlined in paragraphs 48-53.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you have any comments or suggestions on these three options?

The continuation of AS and A2, in their present forms, helps maintain breadth of study at Year 12. It also provides a useful staging post between the first and second years of 6th form, with an externally assessed review of progress at the end of the first year of study. Maintaining AS provides the opportunity for students to start a course of study (sometimes in a new area) without having to ‘sign up’ for two years. The Society notes that geography, second only to English and history, achieves high levels of progression from AS to A2.

In addition, maintaining the separation of AS and A2 provides a better opportunity to review and bring greater coherence to the development and progression of content across A level geography. It has been identified that in recent years there has been a softening of geographical content at A Level. In part this has occurred through ‘harder’ geographical topics being moved into A2 leaving ‘easier’ topics within AS.

The following questions relate to Option 3 - Retaining the AS qualification – but making changes as outlined in paragraphs 48-53.

14. The opportunity for AS/A2 assessment and therefore resits in January should be removed.

Strongly agree

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- Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree

If the removal of resits in January removes a modular approach to the teaching and assessment of geography it is to be welcomed.

15. I believe that where a student resits an assessment the highest mark should count towards the student's qualification.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

16. AS and A2 should contribute equally to the overall outcome of A levels.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

I think that the weighting should be split as follows:

c40% AS - 60% A2

Do you have any further comments or suggestions?

Changing the proportion of marks allocated to AS or A2, with a weighting to A2, would signal the greater intellectual rigour and performance needed for study at A2. Specifications for A2 should reflect this, and should include a requirement for individual course work (an independent study in geography) which would help demonstrate the rigour sought at this level.

The Society believes such a re-weighting could work well with a review process that aimed to bring greater coherence and progression in the content of AS and A2. This would also provide HE colleagues with greater confidence in the range, depth and style of content that will be studied, regardless of which specification a student sits.

Questions on Section 3: Design rules - A level design

The following questions refer to Section 3: Design rules - A level design.

17. To enable Ofqual to secure standards in A levels (GCEs), the rules outlined in Condition 4 are:

Needed?

- Strongly agree
- Agree



- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Sufficient?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you have any comments or suggestions?

While the Society believes the use of multiple choice questions can make a modest contribution in the assessment of students' understanding of breadth of subject content, there is real need to promote the development of extended writing and independent research skills in the subject within both external and internally assessed work.

18. To enable Ofqual to secure standards in A levels (GCEs), the rules outlined in Condition 5 are:

Needed?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Sufficient?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you have any comments or suggestions?

Geography is by its nature a synoptic subject spanning the social and physical sciences. It is vital that the assessment of GCE geography requires the drawing together of different areas of geographical knowledge, skills and understanding from across the discipline, together with an appreciation of geographical concepts.

19. To enable Ofqual to secure standards in A levels (GCEs), the rules outlined in Condition 6 are:

Needed?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree

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The Society believes that course work would be best placed in A2 and should make up a substantial proportion of the assessment of a student's achievement at that level.

22. I believe that the weighting of synoptic assessment should be flexible.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you have any comments or suggestions?

Geography, by its very nature is synoptic, and the specifications should be able to provide for a significant component of synoptic assessment.

Questions on Section 3: Design rules - Qualification support

The following questions refer to Section 3: Design rules - Qualification support.

23. I believe that universities should be able to provide this level of engagement.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

24. I believe that the level of support required is sufficient to demonstrate that the qualification will allow progression to study at higher education.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you have any comments or suggestions?

25. Do you have any suggestions about how we might categorise universities as defined in Condition 8?

The categorisation given is probably about right; ie 12 of the 20 being respected in the field of study and/or leading universities. However, it begs the question, respected by whom? And even if they are a leading university, they should also teach the subject in question.

If you wanted to tie this down more fully, then you may want to think about a requirement that the 12 universities have at least a 3* REF rating in the subject of the A Level. However REF is a measure of research output, not teaching performance (there is no equivalent any more for subject-based teaching performance in HE).

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An alternative, and probably more rounded, approach is to seek the views of the Learned Society, which will have a good overview of the standing of each department in its subject.

26. Would you propose a different number or proportion of universities providing support?

- Yes
- No

Do you have any comments or suggestions?

No because some subjects, unlike geography which has departments/courses in more than 85 universities, are not widely taught in HE and thus to find 12 leading/respected departments may be a challenge. And not a great deal more would be gained, while the admin challenges would rise.

27. I believe that the level of support required is sufficient to demonstrate that most universities will accept a qualification for entry.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you have any comments or suggestions?

Yes, but more universities will be willing to accept the qualification readily if they feel they have had the opportunity for their views to be considered in the process and if they feel that a consistent approach has been taken by the Awarding Bodies. The only way that will happen is if the process is facilitated.

The Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) has much experience at facilitating and leading the development of community-based standards and inputs to consultations. Our work in this area has often been used by others as an exemplar of good practice. For example we were an early exemplar in the QAA subject benchmarking and we successfully developed a community based, collaborative approach that was then adopted by others. We have recently coordinated community input to and support for the ESRC International Benchmarking of Research in Human Geography, in a way that has been far more inclusive than in other subject reviews and more effective in working with the subject community.

This leads to the suggestion that in the case of geography there is much merit in, and support for, a facilitated approach led by the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) and involving representatives of leading universities / geography departments, the subject association and teachers, and employers to either (a) define core content as guidance for all Awarding Bodies, followed by review and sign off on their proposals; or (b) individual discussion, review and then sign off on Awarding Body proposals without core content identification. Either way we would provide an administratively easy way of managing the process for all stakeholders; a consistent approach across all Awarding Bodies; a transparent process; involve the breadth of HE institutions

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while meeting the criteria of 12/20; and would enable teachers and employers to contribute in addition to HE.

This approach will be much more likely to gain maximum buy in to the qualification from universities in our discipline and to result in better products than if each Awarding Body pursued its own group of universities.

28. I believe that the support required should also provide additional assurances to those set out in paragraphs 73 and 74.

- Yes
- No

If your answer is Yes, please give further details:

Yes, I think there should be a requirement for sign off from the learned society in that discipline in Paragraphs 73/4. There is a requirement to show that they have been consulted, but in many cases learned societies have a much better feel for the HE/school interface than either teachers or those working in HE. It would be a lost opportunity not to use that expertise.

29. I believe that exam boards should be expected to consult schools, colleges and employers specifically for each qualification.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Questions on Section 4: Exceptions

The following questions refer to Section 4: Exceptions.

30. Exceptions to Condition 1 should be allowed in relation to the purpose of A levels.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

31. Exceptions to Conditions 4–7 should be allowed in relation to the design of A levels.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

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32. Exceptions to Condition 8 should be allowed in relation to the support secured for an A level.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

33. If you anticipate that there will be particular challenges for specific subjects which may require exceptions, please outline them below.

We do not think that exceptions, as specified, will be relevant to geography A Level.

Questions on Section 5: Making sure standards are right year on year

The following questions refer to Section 5: Making sure standards are right year on year.

34. These review arrangements are sufficient and appropriate to secure standards.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you have any comments or suggestions?

There will be a need for review of A Level specifications from the different Awarding Bodies on a regular multi-year basis so that the A Level continues to provide for the needs of university entry. No specific timescale or mechanism is proposed for such a review. Learned Societies could play a very useful role in reporting every three or five years on the continued relevance of the specification content.

The expansion of more opportunities for extended writing will place an additional demand on Awarding Bodies. They will need to provide assurances that the marking of this work is undertaken by markers who are sufficiently trained and quality assured so that they can fully assess the achievement of students through more extended pieces of writing.

In relation to internally assessed work, such as the assessment of course work, significant support will need to be provided to ensure:

- Clarity of expectation and outcome
- Safeguarding against plagiarism and inappropriate levels of support
- Comparability in marking within and between schools
- Effective moderation of marking across the cohort.

The Society would also wish to raise general concerns about examiners and Awarding Bodies writing or endorsing text book series and other resources and support. This is a clear conflict of interest. It also serves to narrow the curriculum and the range of case studies that students will

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study and may mean that the teaching practice fails to be sufficiently cognisant of the development of the subject discipline within HE.

Questions on Section 6: Implementation

The following questions refer to Section 6: Implementation.

35. I support the proposed staged approach to the reform of A levels.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

36. I agree that all current A levels should have been reviewed by 2018.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

37. I agree that the priority subjects for implementation in September 2014 should be:

Please rank in order of preference, 1 being your first choice.

- _____ physics, chemistry, biology
- _____ French, German and Spanish
- _____ mathematics
- _____ English literature
- _____ 1 _____ geography and history
- _____ a combination

Do you have any suggestions for other subjects/combinations of subjects?

The Society believes that geography would be very well placed to be in the first set of reviews for the following reasons:

1. Ofqual has identified some serious issues with the subject at A level and these need to be addressed sooner rather than later.
2. The HE community is supportive and coherent and has a natural leader for this work in the Royal Geographical Society, an organisation that already coordinates the HE benchmarking and other subject reviews, and that contributes fully to the school curriculum review, with the support and confidence of the whole community.
3. The subject is a popular A Level and taken by students studying across the full range of subjects in various and broad combinations.

The Society does not believe a drawn out phased approach would be helpful to universities and nor will it provide parity across the key subject areas at A Level. Thus we would strongly prefer to

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- UCAS
 - Other voluntary or community group
 - None of the above

Organisation name*

Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)

Nation*

- England
- Wales
- Scotland
- Northern Ireland
- International

Email address*

director@rgs.org

May we contact you for more information?

Yes

Would you like us to treat your response as confidential?

Yes

We are changing the way we communicate. 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

Do you have any comments or suggestions?

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