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Developing new GCSE, A level and AS qualifications for first teaching in 2016

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**Royal
Geographical
Society**
with IBG

Advancing geography
and geographical learning

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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."¹

¹ Review of standards in GCE A Level Geography 2001-2010 Ofqual (2012)

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

September 2014