Review of A-Level geography subject content

Dear Andrew, Lesley, Gareth and Mark,

Thank you for inviting the Geographical Association (GA) to submit its views on the content of GCE A-levels being reviewed for first teaching in September 2015. As the leading professional organisation for geography in education, with the charitable mission to ‘further geographical knowledge and understanding through education’, the GA would like to focus its feedback on A-level geography only.

The GA recognises that A-level geography courses and qualifications serve a number of purposes. As an introduction to a scholarly disciplinary approach, A-level geography provides a foundation for further study, not only in geography but in a wide range of other subjects. The knowledge and skills developed by A-level study are also prized by employers, giving these qualifications value in the job market. Finally, A-level geography courses are (or should be) intrinsically of interest to students and facilitate their personal and intellectual growth. We are therefore curious about a review process which appears to focus exclusively on one of these purposes and suggest that any process of review should involve all stakeholders, including universities, schools and parents.

Responding directly to the terms of reference of the present review, the GA does not regard the current A-level criteria for geography as fit for purpose. The criteria do not ensure that students studying the range of specifications which meet them are always prepared for progression to higher education. We note with dismay the growing trend in HE geography departments for providing a foundation year or ‘year zero’ course, which is intended to equip all students with the core knowledge, understanding and skills required for undergraduate study. Of equal interest and concern to us are the frequent comments, from HE geographers, that they accept or even prefer to recruit undergraduates with science A-level backgrounds, rather than geography. These observations reflect poorly on the fitness for purpose of the current A-level criteria.
Reviewing the current criteria in detail, we wish to make the following comments (ref: GCE AS and A level subject criteria for geography Ofqual/11/4958 Sept 2011):

**Aims and objectives of AS and A level specifications** (page 3)

- These make no reference to a body of knowledge about the world which learners should acquire. Whilst reference is made to the need to encourage learners to be ‘inspired by the world around them’ (a worthy aspiration) we suggest that learners at this level should also acquire a substantial body of knowledge about locations, places, environments and processes and of different social, political and cultural contexts around the world. This requirement should be expressed in such a way as to signal clear progression from the equivalent statements now being drafted and consulted upon at GCSE.

- Nor do they make reference to the need to understand geographical models or theories, critically analyse models or theories, understand their purpose or distinguish the theoretical from the real world. We suggest that reference is made to this aspect of learning, and is expressed in such a way as to signal clear progression from the equivalent statements now being drafted and consulted upon at GCSE.

- The aim for learners to ‘develop their awareness of the complexity of interactions’ is insufficiently demanding at this level. At A-level, the aim should be for learners to do more than develop awareness of complexity – they need to show their understanding of complex systems and interactions and be able to analyse complex data and problems.

- Learners are currently required to ‘develop as global citizens’, in other words, to undergo changes to their attitudes and behaviours outside as well as inside the classroom, which is a laudable but not educational aim. However, the need for learners to develop as geographical thinkers is relegated to page 6 of the same document, as a footnote to the requirement for synoptic assessment. We suggest that this is a case of misplaced priorities: we argue that thinking geographically – through the lenses of place, space, scale and environment – is a pre-requisite for this level of study.

- Given the pivotal role of fieldwork as a tool of geographical study, we recommend that an explicit reference to fieldwork is made in the aims and objectives of A-level geography. The need for learners to engage with and interrogate the world around them is integral to the aims of geography. Broad experience of working in the field also underpins many of the other aims of the subject, from the development of skills and application of theory through to aesthetic appreciation of landscape and engagement with people, places, environments and issues.

- The current aims do include reference to ‘skills and new technologies’. We suggest that this wording does not signal what is really needed: A-level geography students need to be confident users of maps, be adept in handling geographic information and be able to manipulate maps and data using Geographic Information Systems (GIS). We find the reference to ‘new’ technology an oblique one: whilst GIS is not ‘new’ it is certainly of vital importance to geographical education.
Finally, we note the fundamental importance of learner independence at A-level. In order to prepare for work or further study, and to develop the investigative skills required for success at this level, learners do need to exercise greater independence (in their thinking, questioning, researching, reflecting etc.) than at GCSE. The fact that the latest survey evidence identifies geographers as the most employable group of graduates suggests that learners in this subject do acquire independent skills, at least by the end of their university education. We therefore argue that this strength of geography should be reflected in its aims.

**Subject content (pp.3-4)**

- We support the requirement (p.3) that specifications ‘should reflect new ideas and developments about the changing nature of geography’ and applaud those awarding organisations which have met the spirit of this requirement through their current specifications. However, this broad statement has proved difficult to apply across the board. In some instances, whilst the topic titles of individual specifications have signalled a modern approach, the detail in examination questions and mark schemes has remained reliant on out-dated thinking. Nor has a way been found to ensure that new developments feed in to specifications once they receive approval: the outmoded approach to quantitative techniques advocated by some specifications is a case in point (and one much criticised by HE geographers).

- Of particular relevance to this review is our observation that the current criteria do little to specify domain-specific content. Instead, the criteria set out broad aspects of study, such as the need to study at a range of scales. We believe there is a case, worth exploring, that A-level geography criteria should prescribe specific domains of geography for study, and provide a ‘core’ on which specifications could build and add further choice. We recognise that, in undertaking this task, there would be a difficult balance to be struck: framework statements that are too general give too much scope for different interpretations, yet too much detail would turn the criteria into a specification, reduce freedom of interpretation by awarding organisations and choice by schools, and suppress the range of subject approaches reflected in A-level geographical study.

- We note with great interest the overview of ‘thematic coverage of human geography’ conducted by Bob Digby (Digby, R. (2012) ‘Examining geography’ in Lambert, D. & Jones, M. (eds.) *Debates in Geography Education* p.162. Routledge.). This overview gives a clear indication of the sheer breadth of content available at A-level and helps to illustrate our question about the extent to which the subject criteria should define a ‘core’ or foundation of knowledge and understanding.

- Whatever the answer is to this question, we note that there is no requirement within the current content to provide a balance of human and physical geography. Indeed, the requirements proceed from the assumption that geography should be studied thematically (rather than from an areal perspective). Detailed examination of the various specifications shows that it is possible for learners to meet specification requirements by undertaking a relatively limited amount of study of, for example, physical geographical processes. Whilst we support the idea that specifications should allow for a range of content, so that schools can follow specifications suited to the needs of their learners, we note with interest Ofqual’s *Review of standards in GCE A level geography: 2001 and 2010* (Ofqual/12/5159 April 2012), which concluded that “when we compared 2001 and 2010, the subject content had shifted towards...
human geography and away from physical geography” (p.3). This trend, which has resulted in fewer learners acquiring a detailed knowledge and understanding of physical processes in geography, has in our view helped to undermine the preparedness of learners for further study.

- If the argument presented above about the need for learners to think geographically is accepted, there will also be a need to develop the means for them to do so, through the subject content. For example, the content would need to provide opportunities for learners to show a general understanding of key geographical concepts, to use geographical language, know how geographers approach a topic or analyse data and complex challenges. Synoptic and research exercises provide ideal conditions for geographical thinking to be expressed. However, the current criteria leave the question of geographical thinking and synoptic assessment too open to interpretation by individual awarding organisations. Whilst this is a complex area, learners would be much better served if the subject criteria defined the requirement in this respect more precisely.

- We also repeat here our earlier points about the need to acquire world knowledge, skills in handling maps, geographical information and in quantitative methods, as well as understanding of geographical models and theories. These priorities should all be expressed clearly within the subject content. In our view, amendments to the criteria such as these would help to reverse the conclusion of Ofqual’s Review of standards 2001-2010 that “changes in subject criteria resulted in the geographical content of specifications becoming less scientific and more centred on impacts and issues” (p.3).

- Finally, we note that the current criteria set out requirements for both AS and A level geography. The GA does not support the de-coupling of these two qualifications. The evidence shows that currently a high proportion of learners at AS are retained into A2 – geography is one of the most successful subjects at retaining learners. Our view is that a proportion of learners embark on AS geography unsure about their intentions after the first year. As they develop – as learners and as young adults – their level of engagement and interest with broad social, political, economic and environmental issues examined through a geographical lens increases to the extent that many choose to continue to A2 and beyond. We do not think this flexibility of choice should be closed off, forcing learners to decide shortly after their GCSE examinations whether they wish to study geography for one or two more years.

**Assessment objectives** (p.5)

- We suggest that the current weightings, which operate over a range of up to 25%, contribute to the wide interpretation of the subject criteria by awarding organisations. The GA does support the principle that teachers and learners should have choices over curriculum content and approach at A-level, as this allows schools to choose specifications best suited to the needs of their learners. However, too broad a range of choice can lead to variable outcomes for learners. We would therefore support a narrowing of the AO weightings at this level.

- We suggest that the changes we have argued for in the aims and content be reflected in the wording of the assessment objectives e.g. by making reference to knowledge and understanding of places, models and theories.
Scheme of assessment (pp.5-6)

- We fundamentally disagree that assessment of A-level geography should be entirely through external assessment in the form of terminal examinations. As we said in our response to the DfE’s consultation on proposed English Baccalaureate Certificates in the autumn of 2012 (www.geography.org.uk/download/GA_AUKS4ReformDec2012.pdf), the GA regards fieldwork as an essential element of a worthwhile geographical education, and we stand by this assertion. Investigating and experiencing the real world first hand is a means of providing stretch and challenge for the most able. It provides a genuine test of the independent investigative skills which underpin A-level geography. We consider fieldwork skills are best assessed through practical activity, rather than through discrete examination questions which test the theory of fieldwork (and which thus tend to focus on knowledge, rather than knowledge, understanding and enquiry skills). Recognising and rewarding students with highly-developed fieldwork skills is therefore an important aspect of assessment in geography. The GA regards terminal written examinations as an inadequate tool for assessing the broad range of complex skills involved in fieldwork design, data collection and interpretation and fieldwork evaluation, as well as broad skills such as teamwork, self-organising and research. We regard local fieldwork contexts as an ideal opportunity for candidates to apply and develop their general theoretical knowledge and understanding.

- We therefore note with great interest the conclusion reached by Ofqual in their Review of standards 2001-2010 that “Reviewers judged A2 to be less demanding because of the removal of the coursework element. Coursework - typically a 4,000-word investigation - was an effective way to assess skills by, for example undertaking and reporting on investigative fieldwork. While awarding organisations now assess skills in a variety of ways within the four-unit, external examination structure, reviewers found that they were not as effective at assessing skills as coursework” (p.3). We agree with Ofqual that internal assessment as part of A-level geography has proved effective in the past. Applied to local fieldwork, the unique nature of each location acts as an impediment to plagiarism and, since teachers routinely accompany candidates in the field, they are also in a position to exercise professional oversight of data collection and practical skills. (We make the assumption here that AOs would continue to moderate and validate judgements made by teachers.) Our internal consultation in response to last year’s Ofqual review of A-level standards also suggested teachers would support increased internal assessment, especially if this was linked to fieldwork. (www.geography.org.uk/download/GA_AUOfqualALEvelReformSep12.pdf).

- However, we do recognise that a number of approaches to assessment which take learners beyond standard terminal examination questions have been used over the past 20 years or so. These include independent fieldwork based research projects (subsequently externally assessed), Decision Making Exercises (sometimes based on pre-release data) and extended/research essays. Each of these approaches – done well – can enable skills such as research and independent investigation, as well as synoptic geographical thinking, to be evidenced, and each can be assessed internally (by the school) or externally (by the awarding organisation).
The key question for consideration is therefore whether the assessment of these broad and complex skills is formulaic - as is often the case in terminal examinations - or whether it permits the appropriate skills to be evidenced. Once a suitable mode of assessment is identified, the question of whether this can be reliably assessed internally or externally becomes a secondary consideration.

Grade descriptors

- We argue that the criteria could be returned to fitness for purpose by applying the reasoning laid out above to the performance (grade) descriptors for geography.
- For example, the performance descriptors could make clear that, at the highest level, learners of A-level geography should:
  - demonstrate excellent knowledge of a range of places and environments
  - show appreciation of context (both breadth and depth)
  - be able to draw a range of ideas from across the subject together
  - understand complex ways in which human and physical systems interact
  - be able to marshal evidence and arguments using extended writing (such as essays)
  - demonstrate good numeracy and quantitative skills and sound ‘information literacy’.
- This review also presents an opportunity to fine-tune our expectations of progression in geography, from GCSE and towards undergraduate level. Currently, the wording of some parts of the performance descriptors does not signal an appropriate level of demand, and these aspects could be strengthened. Whilst we recognise that the context of learning is an important factor when considering overall demand, requirements such as ‘offer a valid evaluation of geographical information, issues and viewpoints’ fail to indicate our expectation at A-level. Expectations and required standards are also expressed through the process of assessment. In the case of extended writing, for example, most GCSE candidates are currently not required to produce a piece of prose, under examination conditions, of more than 8 marks and AS learners are rarely set questions of more than 15 marks, whereas A2 candidates face the steep incline in challenge presented by 40 mark essay questions under examination conditions. This review presents an opportunity to amend issues connected to expectations and progression.

In conclusion, the GA view is that the A-level geography criteria do need to be reformed. We believe that the arguments and evidence presented above point clearly towards this conclusion, and hope that our comments will provide some initial indication of our desired direction of travel. We would also like to take this opportunity to make the following general observations:

- Whilst A-level geography criteria and specifications do need to evolve, the scale and pace of curriculum and qualification reform is currently creating a great deal of uncertainty and anxiety within schools and in society more generally. Many teachers currently receive information from sometimes ill-informed announcements in the national media. As we have said in each of our previous consultation responses on qualification reform, public announcements on the process of reform need to be timely and consistent. They also need to recognise the tremendous work and achievements of teachers and students, if for no other reason than to protect public confidence in the integrity of the examination system and the standards it measures.
We are therefore concerned that the process of A-level reform itself needs to be conducted openly and at a pace which allows the genuine involvement of all stakeholders. In particular, schools and teachers must be involved in shaping the next generation of A-levels, and piloting changes in schools is a sound approach. Educational change must never be a matter of political expediency.

We sincerely hope that these comments and observations assist in the necessary process of reform which lies ahead. As ever, the GA is ready to play its role at the heart of the geography education community.

Yours sincerely

Alan Kinder
Chief Executive
On behalf of the Geographical Association