

# Ofqual controlled assessment review

## ● Call for evidence

The Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) is the learned society and professional body for geography and welcomes the opportunity to respond to Ofqual's Controlled Assessment Review. The Society maintains a strong overview of the discipline, its position and its practice in schools, higher education, fieldwork and the workplace, including the professional accreditation Chartered Geographer. We advise on and support its advancement, promotion, dissemination and practice 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.

The Society works on a face-to-face basis with teachers and pupils from more than 50% of English secondary schools and our online educational resources receive 400,000+ 'user sessions' annually. For schools we provide online support and resources, CPD and the professional accreditation (C.Geog. teacher), support for fieldwork, and the Geography Ambassador programme which promotes the relevance of geography to further study and careers.

This response draws on the Society's on-going work with schools, discussion held with our education committee (which includes representatives from the independent and maintained sectors and ITE) and a focus group held with 20 expert geography teachers from across the independent and maintained sectors<sup>1</sup> who teach across six GCSE and three IGCSE specifications. We also note information relevant to geography within the following Ofqual research:

- Evaluation of the Introduction of Controlled Assessment: report on qualitative and quantitative research (2011)
- Review of Standards in GCE A Level Geography 2001-2010 (2012)
- The New GCSE Examinations: Findings from the Monitoring of New Qualifications in French, Business and Geography 2010-11 (2012)

The Society makes the following points:

1. Teachers have indicated that Controlled Assessment (CA) has reduced the opportunities for plagiarism that were inherent in the previous approach to coursework.
2. However, there are mixed, and polarised, views among specialist geography teachers about the pros and cons of Controlled Assessment (CA) on their pupils' achievement.
  - a. A number of teachers from across maintained and independent schools are strongly opposed to controlled assessment. Many of these teachers, particularly those from independent schools, have 'voted with their feet' and moved from GCSE to IGCSEs. A number have specifically cited the lack of CA with IGCSEs as the reason for this move, "*it (CA) was the key factor*". In addition, such teachers have indicated that the introduction of CA within GCSE had a negative impact on the achievement of their high performing (A & A\*) pupils. One teacher commented, "*controlled assessment failed to allow for more able*

<sup>1</sup> Schools involved in this focus group include representatives from: Altrincham Grammar School, Camden School for Girls, Charterhouse, Eton, Harrow, James Allen's Girls School King Edward VI Five Ways, King Edward VI Grammar School, Latymer Upper School, New Charter Academy, New Hall School, Shrewsbury, Sir Joseph Williamson School, St Helena School & Swanwick Hall School



*students to really display their ability*". A number of teachers in the maintain sector hold similar views and have expressed interest in moving from GCSE to IGCSE or the new Certificates.

- b. Some maintained teachers identified that CA has improved the achievement of their students, particularly their weaker students. The latter was often expressed in comparison to the achievement of comparable students under the previous coursework regime. One teacher commented, *"weaker ones, who would miss deadlines and produce very little or lose work, have benefited."*
  - c. We note that Ofqual has also commented on the variable impact of CA (for OCR geography B) on students' achievement. The level of demand was not always comparable across the geographical investigation tasks and the marking criteria for the fieldwork task did not encourage outcomes that were accurate and fair to the full range of candidates<sup>2</sup>.
3. Controlled assessment has definitely impacted negatively on teaching time within geography lessons. Many teachers have complained that the introduction of CA has significantly cut into their "teaching time". Estimates range from a loss of 10 hours to up to half a terms worth of lesson time. One teacher noted, *"I have less lesson time to teach the syllabus, and do revision, due to having to complete CA in lesson time"* These comments chime with Ofqual's research which identified that 24% of geography teachers identified the loss of teaching time as the biggest problem with CA<sup>3</sup>.
4. Across all geography teachers there is unanimous support for geographical fieldwork being a compulsory element of geography study at GCSE (and indeed at all phases of geographical education.) The Society strongly supports the need for fieldwork to be an essential and required element of geographical learning at all stages. Teachers are concerned that unless geography GCSEs include the assessment of fieldwork there will be pressure from School Leaders to reduce the range and extent of fieldwork and that this would negatively impact student achievement, engagement with, and understanding of, the subject. The Society would not wish to see any reduction of geographical fieldwork within GCSE.
- a. The introduction of CA in some schools has limited the range and style of fieldwork that is now undertaken. Teachers noted that the flexibility that was provided through coursework has been removed. One teacher commented, *"we used to offer a wide choice of fieldwork and conduct an enormous range of primary and secondary research techniques. Under CA that all became a distraction and now exam success seems to be guaranteed with such a limited range of skills and choices."*
  - b. Teachers also argue that fieldwork is necessary to enable pupils to undertake specific geographical tasks which cannot be fully assessed through external assessment. These tasks include:
    - i. Geographical fieldwork observation, measurement techniques, investigation approaches and analytical skills i.e. *"getting your hands dirty with real geography"*
    - ii. Undertaking independent work through all the stages of a project in a real setting: from hypothesis/question setting, data collection, handling, processing and analysis and reviewing the original question
    - iii. Using Geographical Information Systems (GIS) in a real context, alongside the practical handling of equipment in the field (e.g. GPS and sampling equipment) and application of statistical techniques.
  - c. Teachers have little enthusiasm for a paper based externally assessed 'fieldwork exam' at either GCSE (or A Level). A number of teachers argued that pupils might be taught how to pass this exam without setting foot outside the classroom

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<sup>2</sup> The New GCSE Examinations: Findings from the Monitoring of New Qualifications in French, Business and Geography 2010-11 Ofqual pg 14 & 15

<sup>3</sup> Evaluation of the Introduction of Controlled Assessment Ofqual 2011 pg 37



5. The Society also notes that the previous removal of coursework from A Level geography has had a detrimental impact on the assessment of geographical skills, particularly in relation to fieldwork. As Ofqual has identified, "Coursework - typically a 4,000-word investigation - was an effective way to assess skills by, for example, undertaking and reporting on investigative fieldwork. Reviewers found that (the current A Level examinations) were not as effective at assessing skills as coursework"<sup>4</sup>. The Society strongly recommends that coursework is reintroduced into A Level geography.
6. Specific practical aspects of CA have been difficult for geography teachers to implement. These include access to ICT, managing the number of pupils undertaking CA and the time-tabling of fieldwork alongside CA lessons. These comments concur with Ofqual's research which identified that geography teachers were more likely than average across all teachers to highlight problems with time-tabling, managing student numbers and limited ICT resources<sup>5</sup>. The impact of this, alongside the other work necessary to implement CA, has increased geography teachers' workload (although teachers note CA has reduced their pupils' workload).
7. Teachers have also called for better support to be provided by the awarding bodies.
8. Many teachers expressed support for the important and continuing role of teacher assessment and wished to see this as part of GCSE and A Level geography.
  - At GCSE there is not an agreed view among the teachers consulted as to whether this should be through coursework, current controlled assessment or a revision of the latter.
  - At A Level both the Society and the teachers consulted argue strongly for reintroduction of a requirement for coursework linked to fieldwork.
9. Can the practical operation of controlled assessment be improved? Some teachers indicated that over time CA was becoming less problematic as teachers (and their schools) became more familiar with its implementation. Suggestions for improving the current CA arrangements included lower levels of control; reducing the time requirement; shorter reports; and improving the quality of external moderation. However, many geography teachers would still recommend that CA is removed from geography GCSE.

**In summary the Society's views are:**

Meaningful fieldwork is an essential part of the geographical learning experience and must be retained at GCSE and A Level.

At A level, fieldwork should be part of an individual, independent study that is assessed through traditional coursework.

At GCSE there remains a need in our view to undertake and assess fieldwork and to do this in a manner that (a) helps safeguard against plagiarism and undue external support, (b) has the capacity to engage and stretch the full range of learner across the ability range, (c) is realistic in terms of both teachers and pupils time and (d) does not eat heavily into lesson time. We are not convinced that either traditional coursework or CA does this well, for different reasons. We suggest Ofqual set up a short term working party to consider alternatives that meet these needs, and to consider whether the current allocation of 25% the marks to CA is appropriate.

Dr Rita Gardner CBE  
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<sup>4</sup> Review of Standards in GCE A level Geography 2001 and 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Evaluation of the Introduction of Controlled Assessment Ofqual 2011 pg 72