

RGS-IBG response to consultation

● Draft GCSE Subject Criteria for Geography

1. The Society

The Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) is the learned society and professional body for geography and geographers. We were founded in 1830 and are one of the most active of the learned societies. The Society was pivotal in establishing geography as a teaching and research discipline in British universities, and has played a key role in geographical education ever since. Today the Society is a world centre for geographical learning – supporting education, teaching, research and scientific expeditions, as well as promoting the public understanding and enjoyment of geography and geography in policy. The Society's recent expertise in supporting the learning and teaching of geography in English schools includes:

- Leading on the Action Plan for Geography, jointly with the Geographical Association, funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families.
- Awarding professional accreditation for specialist teachers of geography; Chartered Geographer (Teacher)
- Running national CPD programmes and producing award winning online educational resources.
- Promoting fieldwork and 'local learning' and working with the Department for Children, Schools and Families within the Learning Outside the Classroom Sector Groups and the Engaging Places (DCMS) programme.
- Working with Defra specifically on learning about climate change

2. Draft GCSE Subject Criteria for Geography

We welcome the opportunity to comment on the Draft GCSE subject criteria for Geography. In preparation for this response the Society consulted with its Education Committee which includes leading experts in the field of geographical education; members include head teachers, teacher trainers, head of geography departments and educational consultants.

We have one serious and substantial concern that we believe is essential to be addressed. It has arisen in part from the piecemeal manner in which the curriculum review process has been undertaken. The concern is the substantial similarities (either directly in repeat wording or in aggregate meaning) between the Key Stage 3 programme of study and GCSE and A level criteria in terms of concepts, aims and subject content. While a conceptual underpinning across the 11-19 range is desirable and is well set out in the KS3 PoS, the degree of overlap in aims and content is highly undesirable; and furthermore, in some instances the KS3 programme of study is more demanding than the criteria specified for GCSE.

For example: KS3 PoS requires "appreciating the differences and similarities between people, places, environments and cultures to inform their understanding of societies and economies"

This is rather more demanding than the GCSE stated aim of: "appreciate the differences and similarities between people, places, environments and cultures".

There are other examples that can be documented should you require.

Such similarities will reinforce a tendency to lack of progression, repetition of case studies and content, and de-motivation of students as a result, all of which lay at the heart of the concerns about the 'old, content-based' curriculum and contributed to declining numbers of students opting for geography. In short, the curriculum has been modernised but not clearly differentiated by phase or considered in a joined up way that

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builds in progression and encourages both Awarding Bodies and teachers to do so too. That is a very great lost opportunity and will not serve learners or teachers well.

We encourage the QCA to grasp positively this opportunity to devise a more distinctive focus for GCSE, around building understanding of the key concepts and skills through a focus relevance, applications and topicality. This could quite easily be achieved by building on the current document and does not require 'starting over'.

We think this is important for four reasons:

1. It would differentiate GCSE clearly from the A level focus on deeper understanding of processes; of understanding change over time; and the exploration of the complexities of interactions between economies, societies, cultures and environments as they shape places and regions.
2. It would differentiate GCSE clearly from KS3 PoS with its focus on the study of places and environments and simple physical and human processes through which the basic understanding of concepts will be introduced.
3. It is consistent with the underlying emphasis 11-19 on core concepts and reducing the extent of detailed content.
4. It is engaging and more appropriate for those who end their study of geography at age 16 and will be appealing to a wide range of students.

In addition, we think it essential that the Awarding Bodies are asked to present in their proposals and specifications clear statements on:

- How they see progression conceptually from KS3 to GCSE and A level
- How that is embodied through the differentiation of their individual geography specifications at GCSE and A level, so as to build in progression and limit repetition.
- This is in addition to the requirement to include a rationale for the geographical approach adopted (point 8).

Furthermore, that QCA should be required to approve individually their approaches, 14-19, after seeking input from the subject bodies. Without this, much of the potential good work in a more modern curriculum 11-19 will be lost.

3. Aims and Learning Outcomes

Our views on this section are closely tied to the overall comments above.

Specifically, we feel that the two aims of 'developing a framework of spatial awareness' and 'appreciating differences and similarities between people' are substantively covered to at least the same depth by the statements in KS3 PoS and are thus unnecessarily repetitive and do not move the aims and learning outcomes forwards from KS3. After discussion with informed HE geography colleagues we also feel that bullet point 3 is overgeneralised and has little meaning in its current form. The suggestion (see below) is for one aim that takes a different approach to appreciating difference and similarity.

The aim of developing knowledge and understanding of geographical concepts starts to move into the welcome direction of relevance, but needs supporting by an additional new aim that embodies understanding the applications of geographical approaches, knowledge and concepts to topical environmental and social issues, locally, nationally and globally.

The current aims of fieldwork (6th bullet), personal interest (1st bullet); and onto the aim of global citizenship (5th bullet) then follow logically in that order.

With this relatively small amount of reshaping, nothing is lost, distinctiveness is attained, attention to core concepts is maintained, repetition is reduced, and relevance to 'me as an individual' and to 'my experience gained from my local area and through fieldwork' is strengthened.

Specific suggested changes to achieve this are in bold, explanations in italics:

5. GCSE specifications in geography should encourage students to:

- Develop their knowledge and understanding of geographical concepts and appreciate **the relevance of the concepts** to our changing world.
(Word change as not clear what the second 'their' referred to)
- **Develop their understanding of the applications of geographical approaches, knowledge and concepts to topical environmental and social issues, locally, nationally and globally.**
(New aim to strengthen focus on application and relevance.)
- Develop and apply their learning to the real world through fieldwork and other out of classroom learning.
- Develop a personal interest in why geography matters **to me and to society**, and be inspired, moved and changed by studying a broad, **relevant and** coherent course of study.
(Add relevant, and omit satisfying and worthwhile as these are highly value-laden and the focus on relevance should deliver that anyway.)
- Develop their responsibilities as **British and** global citizens and recognise how they can contribute to a future that is sustainable **and inclusive**.
(Suggestion reflects that important application of geography to key issues at home around social inclusion, diversity, community and ethnicity etc and which also reflects new areas of the subject.)
- **Appreciate that differences and similarities exist between peoples' views of the world: its environments and societies and key geographical issues.** *(new aim to embrace difference and similarity of people, places and environments, but with an approach that is distinctive and more akin to new ideas in geography.)*
- Become more independent learners through the use of geographical skills, new technologies, enquiry **and analysis**, to serve them well in their future.

4. Subject Content

As it currently stands this section does not provide a convincing framework for the selection of content. Similar comments over repetition, and lack of progression and distinctive clarity apply to some of the content as proposed. Some statements are also overgeneralised to the point of being meaningless.

We welcome the current distinctive and new aspects, which provide a basis for development of the statements to emphasise the applied and topical elements, in line with suggestions for the aims and learning outcomes. The proposed changes below demonstrate how easily the content statements could be tweaked. The distinctive new elements that are especially welcomed are the new ideas and approaches to the study of geography, the fieldwork and out of classroom learning, the specific use of new technologies including GIS, and topical issues.

We suggest changes to the order and to the way in which some of these are expressed for reasons of clarity, distinctiveness from KS3 and A level, and to encourage progression. Proposed changes in bold and explanations are given in italics. We would like to see:



- A range of topical issues **of local, national and global importance** studied from a geographical perspective, and including climate change and issues of sustainable development. *(including an appreciation of scale in topical issues is vital)*
- New ideas and approaches to the study of geography **in recent years**. *(This change is because the new ideas and approaches in the discipline in the 21st Century – ie the last 7 years – are minimal).*
- The use of new technologies, including GIS, to assist geographical investigation and analysis, **and in exemplifying some applications of geography to topics of contemporary relevance**. *(This takes account of the important use of GIS as a key tool in applications of geography.)*
- Fieldwork and **other forms of** out of classroom learning.
- Aspects of physical, human and environmental geography, **and their associated processes, particularly those with applied relevance**. *(To differentiate it from the study of process at KS3 and especially at A level.)*
- Geographical concepts.
- A range of places including the UK, Europe and regions or countries **globally** in varying stages of development **and at a various scales**.
- The appreciation of how and why contemporary geographical issues **vary in different locations and as perceived by different communities**. *(This brings in location in a meaningful way and some aspects of new ideas /work in geography around perceptions and communities).*

Regarding point 10 we feel it important to include reporting, analysis, and the collection and analysis of primary data. i.e changes to two points as follows:

GCSE specifications in geography must require students to develop the ability to:

- Carry out **and report** fieldwork, **including the collection and analysis of primary data**.
- Use geographical skills including enquiry **and analytical** skills

5. Assessment Objectives:

We note and support the requirement for each scheme of assessment to include assessment of fieldwork experience and the GCSE specifications must allocate a weighting of 75% to external assessment and a weighting of 25% to controlled assessment in the overall scheme of assessment. However, the Society is concerned that, in this context, the assessment of fieldwork experience could be reduced to a single externally assessed question framed around hypothesis testing which would be generically applied to all fieldwork. Such an outcome would be undesirable. We believe it may drive fieldwork into an oversimplification of hypothesis testing and lead to fieldwork being used to practise for an exam question at the expense of it being a unique opportunity for pupils to deepen their geographical knowledge, understanding and skills through application of learning in the real world. **One means of overcoming such a situation would be for further exemplification to be provided in the criteria that suggested that the 25% controlled assessment was applied to the assessment of geographical enquiries resulting from fieldwork activities.**

The Society would be happy to work with QCA and Awarding Bodies to help in the developing of robust and meaningful opportunities for the assessment of the fieldwork experience.



We also believe that the new GCSE criteria should provide greater opportunities for extended writing in geography, work which can give pupils the chance to demonstrate the high level application of their geographical studies.

We welcome Assessment Objective 3 which requires the need to select and use new technologies.

Dr Rita Gardner CBE, Director
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