



Qualifications and
Curriculum Authority

A level geography

Review of standards 1980-2000

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Introduction

Changes in A level geography examinations between 1980 and 2000 were influenced by a number of key events:

- the publication in 1983 of the voluntary common core for geography
- the introduction in July 1994 of the GCE Code of Practice
- the introduction of a subject core for geography syllabuses from September 1995
- the introduction in 1995 of rules for modular syllabuses, for example the requirement for synoptic assessment to test candidates' understanding of the connections between different elements of the subject.

About 38,000 candidates took A level geography in 2000. The syllabuses included in this study accounted for approximately 63 per cent of those candidates.

Examination demand

Materials available

Where materials were available, reviewers considered the syllabus documents, question papers and associated mark schemes and examiners' reports for syllabuses from each of the awarding bodies in 1980, 1990, 1995 and 2000. Details of the materials used in the review are given in Appendix A.

Syllabus changes

Most syllabuses included in the review evolved in similar ways over the period of the review. The emphasis on different aspects of the subject content changed, and there was an expansion in the range and type of skills required. The amount of detail provided in syllabuses also increased. Typically in 2000, syllabuses were between 30 and 60 pages, compared with five pages in 1980. The content and assessment requirements of syllabuses in 2000 were therefore not only different from those in 1980 but more explicit.

In 1980, syllabuses consisted of physical, human and regional geography components. In 2000, components were more thematically organised, with an increased focus on the interaction of people with their environments. Demand in physical geography changed over time: the understanding required by candidates of the range and depth of physical processes decreased, while the knowledge and understanding required of aspects such as flood control, hazards and pollution increased. There was also an increase in the coverage of ecological topics. Some syllabuses adopted a minimalist approach to physical geography, either through a narrower syllabus or through the introduction of optional routes that allowed candidates to concentrate on popular topics also covered at GCSE, such as drainage basins, coastal management and hazards. Overall, coverage of physical geography, particularly in geomorphology (glaciation and desert processes, for example) and atmospheric studies, decreased. The reviewers considered that, over time, the decrease in emphasis on physical geography represented a reduction in the level of demand.

The type of locational knowledge required also changed. From 1980 regional geography was phased out of syllabuses. The requirement for locational knowledge at this time was usually indicated in the rubrics as 'appropriate exemplification', reflected in mark schemes as an indicator of higher ability. Since 1997, however, most syllabuses have required candidates to demonstrate detailed locational knowledge and understanding through specific case studies in physical, human and environmental geography. This represented a change to the transparency and focus of locational content within syllabuses rather than a quantifiable change in demand.

The range of skills that syllabuses required broadened over the period of the review, and increasingly candidates were expected to apply their knowledge and skills in unfamiliar contexts. In

2000, syllabuses required fieldwork enquiry skills and the interpretation, analysis and synthesis of a very wide range of data and visual resources. Syllabuses also required the application of generic skills such as problem solving and decision making, as well as the formulation and analysis of values and attitudes. In contrast, some of the more difficult statistical calculations and the more challenging skills demanded by topographical map analysis in the syllabuses of the 1990s were phased out by 2000. While all syllabuses in 2000 listed map interpretation as a required skill, no examination paper had a compulsory OS map question, which was common in 1980. Two syllabuses in 2000 included an optional question on this aspect, one meeting the syllabus requirement for 'a basic understanding', while in the other the question was worth only 3 marks. The loss of more challenging skills was compensated for largely by an increase in the breadth of skills required. However, the impact of the change may have been different across the ability range.

In general, the range of requirements of the syllabuses was greatest in the 1995 syllabus. At this time, the characteristics of the 1980s' examinations – such as detailed locational knowledge and in-depth process geography – had been added to by other dimensions of geography such as statistical analysis, environmental geography and values and attitudes. By 2000, some of the earlier geographical dimensions had been phased out, while others were retained. This produced a different geography but one which was similar, in terms of the overall level of demand, to that in 1980.

Scheme of assessment

The assessment scheme for A level geography evolved in similar ways across awarding bodies over the period of the review. In 1980, the assessment usually consisted of two or three examination papers consisting of essay-type questions totalling an average of seven hours of examination time. There was also an optional piece of fieldwork of up to 4000 words. In 2000, the total examination time was similar (at seven and a half hours). This usually comprised five modules of written examinations and a requirement for a personal fieldwork enquiry of up to 4000 words. The assessment objectives in 2000 reflected the greater emphasis on the skills referred to in the previous section. The weighting given to such skills increased from a maximum of approximately 20 per cent in 1980 to 35 per cent in 2000. The reviewers judged that although this represented a change in demand on candidates, any reduction in the requirement for knowledge and understanding was generally balanced by the increase in the range of skills required and, in particular, the requirement for the *application* of knowledge and understanding.

In 1980, all syllabuses were 100 per cent externally assessed. In 1990 most required candidates' fieldwork and enquiry skills to be internally assessed, although some syllabuses offered an alternative of an externally assessed written practical paper. The reviewers considered the two routes to be different but equal in demand. Two of the 1990 syllabuses (those of OCR and AQA/A) also included a candidate interview, which the reviewers felt had the potential to increase the examination demand. Only Edexcel's syllabus B had more than one internally assessed component. Between 1987 and 1997, 35 per cent of Edexcel's syllabus B was internally assessed. By 2000, in line with subject core requirements, internal assessment was either 0 per cent in those syllabuses offering an externally assessed written practical paper or between 15 per cent and 20 per cent in those with a personal fieldwork enquiry component.

Question papers

Over the period of the review, the format of questions changed considerably. Questions in 1980 were largely single-sentence, open-ended essay questions which gave little indication of what was required. Many questions used complex language, were intellectually demanding and were likely to have been accessible only to more able candidates. However, it was also possible that some questions could have been answered by well-rehearsed, regurgitated responses. From 1990, examination papers included more structured essay questions alongside traditional essay questions. In addition, examination papers included many more structured short-answer questions using a range of stimulus material. The reviewers considered that the increase in structured questions

provided more opportunities for differentiation and allowed access to a wider range of candidates. At the same time, structured questions allowed the full range of candidates to demonstrate knowledge and understanding in a manner not possible with open-ended essay questions.

The increase over the period in the use of stimulus material had a number of impacts. Questions in which familiar maps or diagrams were provided were less demanding in terms of knowledge, whereas tasks requiring the application of knowledge in an unfamiliar context provided a greater challenge. Questions which used large amounts of text as a stimulus were judged the least effective, as they encouraged the ‘lifting’ of material and resulted in the crediting of comprehension skills rather than geographical understanding. In 2000, four of the five reviewed syllabuses included an examination paper that was based on a resource booklet, often very complex and containing large amounts of data connected with one theme. However, the demand of the examinations varied across the awarding bodies according to the time allowed to study the materials, the predictability and requirements of the questions, and the extent to which practical tasks had to be completed. Predictable questions often occurred in problem-solving and decision-making exercises when the requirement was an evaluation of the strengths and the weaknesses of a scenario. When such exercises were combined with a pre-release of material the result was a reduction in demand.

Mark schemes

Mark schemes changed and improved over the period of the review so that in 2000 they provided descriptions of the knowledge, understanding and skills expected. The descriptions were codified into bands of marks to identify differentiated performance and promote consistency. Mark schemes in 2000 also provided general information, for example on strategies for marking diagrams and the quality of language. Marking strategies are therefore more transparent in supporting the exemplification of demand. The best practice was demonstrated by those awarding bodies whose marking strategies were consistent across the suite of examination papers.

Summary

The 1980 syllabuses, with their focus on in-depth knowledge and understanding and on assessment by open-ended essay questions, were challenging. The level of demand of syllabuses in 2000 was similar, although different in kind. The emphasis of the content had changed. The knowledge and understanding required of some physical geography processes had been reduced, while optional routes through syllabuses had increased. Although the reviewers recognised that new aspects of geography had been introduced, they judged that the decrease in physical geography represented a reduction in the level of demand. However, skills had increased in importance, and candidates were required to apply their knowledge and understanding in a greater range of unfamiliar contexts. The increase in structured questions made the examinations very much more accessible but provided adequate challenge for the full range of candidates. The reviewers considered that, for all syllabuses, the changes in the format of questions and the broader range of skills required compensated for the changes in emphasis of the content and that, overall, the level of demand was maintained.

Most of the 1990 and 1995 syllabuses – for example those of Edexcel A and CCEA – were more demanding than the syllabuses in either 1980 or 2000. Between 1980 and 2000 the content of syllabuses expanded to reflect new dimensions of geography, without any reduction in the depth of understanding required. Assessment included structured and data-response questions while still requiring essay answers to open-ended, single-line questions. In addition, some syllabuses – for example those of AQA/A and OCR – required a personal fieldwork enquiry and even an interview. Mark schemes made clear the requirement for locational exemplification and accurate, well-argued and structured responses. There were also some significant differences between syllabuses. Some were less demanding – for example Edexcel B in 1990. Such syllabuses usually had many of the following characteristics: minimal physical geography with high skills weightings, low weightings for assessment objectives for knowledge and understanding, numerous optional routes and high

proportions of internal assessment and pre-release materials. However, after 1995 the introduction of a regulatory subject core for geography brought about a greater uniformity across all the syllabuses in terms of content, assessment schemes and the level of demand.

Standards of performance at grade A and grade E

Materials available

Reviewers considered candidates' work at each of the key grade boundaries A/B and E/N from four of the five awarding bodies from 2000. Two of these four awarding bodies also provided scripts from 1995. One awarding body provided scripts at the grade E/N borderline for 1980, 1990 and 1995 only. The evidence for the review of standards of performance over time was, therefore, somewhat limited. The review was also affected by the type of evidence provided. One awarding body provided no coursework materials, and some modular courses were evidenced by 'composite' candidates, which by their nature demonstrated inconsistent characteristics. Appendix B shows the material used in the script review.

The descriptions of expected performance used in this exercise were developed from published grade descriptions, adjusted to take into account the fact that the work was from borderline candidates. These performance descriptions can be found in Appendix C.

After considering candidates' work, the reviewers amended the performance descriptions for both grades so that they more accurately reflected the standards of performance seen in 2000. These are provided in Appendix D.

Performance at the grade A/B boundary

In 2000, candidates at this grade boundary were able to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of places, themes and environments, though this knowledge was by no means comprehensive and was frequently not in-depth. Detailed knowledge of case studies was apparent but was often 'rote' learnt and not applied to the specifics of questions. Some processes, especially in human geography, were well understood. Others in physical geography, especially on atmospheric topics, were poorly understood or explained at a simplistic level.

Candidates in the syllabuses that provided pre-release information for resource-based examinations candidates frequently demonstrated a greater knowledge, understanding and focus in their responses than other candidates. They dealt competently with discursive answers that led to judgements and were able to demonstrate well-ordered decision-making skills, as well as including strongly held personal opinions which they articulated with confidence. However, better responses to predictable questions used a well-rehearsed format. These responses gained high marks for skill and opinion without necessarily demonstrating geographical understanding.

Candidates demonstrated an impressive range of geographical skills. Through their personal enquiries and in written examination papers they demonstrated research skills, application and enthusiasm for the topics under investigation. Within the written papers candidates were able to use resources and apply analytical ability and make connections, though not all questions provided candidates with adequate opportunities for analysis or evaluation. In the personal fieldwork enquiry, skills and techniques were broad, but the focus of enquiry was sometimes less sure, with a tendency to length and repetition. The strength of candidates' performance was their quality of language. Candidates wrote fluently and with confidence, demonstrating their ability to synthesise, express opinions, construct arguments and use a wide range of geographical terms accurately and effectively.

Performance at the grade E/N boundary

Candidates' performance at this grade boundary was characterised by patchy knowledge. Some understanding was demonstrated in topics which many would have covered at GCSE, for example population, hydrology, hazards, and leisure and tourism. However, candidates were unable to sustain the standard across different areas of geographical content or throughout a script. Case studies were covered in a basic or superficial way or lacked relevance. Candidates typically gained more marks in discursive answers than in answers to structured questions requiring focused understanding. The quality of language was erratic, with everyday language replacing geographical terminology on many occasions. Syllabuses with pre-release resources enabled candidates to approach challenges to some effect, writing with more confidence and using the resources to produce descriptive answers. Few could meet the demand of the word 'explain' or make accurate and effective connections.

Performance at grade A and grade E

Variability in performance between questions and examination papers was a characteristic of candidates' performance at both grades. While coursework for 2000 was not provided by all awarding bodies, there was evidence from the work available of some inconsistency of standards. In many instances, the personal fieldwork enquiry unit raised a candidate's overall performance above the threshold for the A or E grade by compensating for weaker performance in the written examinations. Candidates' performance was also usually better in examinations with pre-release material. This was particularly marked in the case of candidates at grade E.

Performance across awarding bodies

The standard of candidates' performance varied across the awarding bodies. In 2000, the performance of AQA/A and Edexcel candidates was judged to be just below the expected standard at both grades. Performance in OCR scripts was felt to be above that expected. The performance of OCR candidates was more even and consistent across all examination components than that of the candidates for the other awarding bodies.

Standards of performance over time

Although the limited evidence available made it difficult for reviewers to make confident judgements at any level of detail, the reviewers formed an overall judgement that, for the years before 2000, the standard of scripts at both the A/B and E/N grade boundaries was considered to be above and – in the case of WJEC at the E/N boundary – well above the standard expected in the performance descriptions.

Summary of review of performance

Overall, performance in 2000 at both grade boundaries did not quite match the performance descriptions.

Performance was better in coursework and in examinations that involved pre-release materials.

There was some variation in standards across the awarding bodies in 2000, with work from OCR generally more consistently matching the performance descriptions than that from the other awarding bodies.

There was little evidence from earlier years, but what there was showed that performance was at least as good as the performance descriptions.

Appendix A: Materials used in the syllabus review

	Type of material	Awarding bodies					Total received	
		AQA/A	CCEA	Edexcel		OCR		WJEC
				A	B			
1980	Syllabus	✓	✓	✓	n/a	✓	0	4
	Papers	✓	✓	✓	n/a	✓	0	4
	Mark scheme	0	0	0	n/a	0	0	0
	Examiners' report	✓	0	0	n/a	✓	0	2
1990	Syllabus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	0	5
	Papers	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	0	5
	Mark scheme	0	0	0	✓	0	0	1
	Examiners' report	✓	✓	0	✓	✓	0	4
1995	Syllabus	✓	✓	0	✓ (1996)	✓	0	4
	Papers	✓	✓	0	✓	✓	0	4
	Mark scheme	0	0	0	✓	✓	0	2
	Examiners' report	✓	✓	0	✓ (1994)	✓	0	3
2000	Syllabus	✓	✓	0	✓	✓	✓	5
	Papers	✓	✓	0	✓	✓	✓	5
	Mark scheme	✓	✓	0	✓	✓	✓	5
	Examiners' report	✓	✓	0	✓	✓	✓	5

✓ = material received

0 = no materials received

n/a = examination not available (commenced in 1982)

Appendix B: Scripts used in the script review

	Grade boundary	Awarding bodies					
		AQA/A	CCEA	Edexcel A	Edexcel B	OCR	WJEC
1980	A/B	0	0	0	0	0	0
	E/N	0	0	0	0	0	✓
1990	A/B	0	0	0	0	0	0
	E/N	0	0	0	0	0	✓
1995	A/B	✓	✓	0	0	0	0
	E/N	✓	✓	0	0	0	✓
2000	A/B	✓	✓	0	✓	✓	0
	E/N	✓	✓	0	✓	✓	0

Appendix C: Performance descriptors used in the script review

The following grade descriptions indicate the level of attainment characteristic of the given grade at A level. They give a general indication of the required learning outcomes at each specified grade. The descriptions should be interpreted in relation to the content outlined in the syllabus; they are not designed to define that content. The grade awarded will depend, in practice, upon the extent to which the candidate has met the assessment objectives overall. Shortcomings in some aspects of the examination may be balanced by better performance in others.

Grade A

Knowledge

Candidates show a comprehensive, in-depth knowledge of places, themes and environments required by the syllabus and of the physical and human processes which affect their development. They have a sound knowledge of the concepts, principles and theories relevant to the understanding and analysis of the syllabus content, and show a knowledge of a wide range of geographical terms.

Understanding

They show their understanding by appropriately applying their knowledge of syllabus content to both familiar and unfamiliar geographical contexts at a range of scales. They evaluate the potential and limitations of concepts and theories and their relevance to particular contexts. They show a well-developed understanding of the connections between the different aspects of geography represented in the syllabus.

Skills

Candidates display skill in interpreting a range of sources of geographical information, including spatial and temporal data at different scales. They show the ability to identify appropriate geographical questions in a range of contexts and to formulate and adopt effective approaches to enquiry. They collect evidence using an appropriate range of skills and techniques, including those used in fieldwork, from both primary and secondary sources. They use a variety of appropriate techniques to present and analyse evidence. They draw selectively on their knowledge of syllabus content to reach well-reasoned conclusions and evaluate both the effectiveness of their methodology and the validity of the outcomes, recognising the limitations of both.

Quality of written communication

They communicate their findings fluently in different formats, synthesising geographical information from a variety of sources, and presenting them within a logical and coherent structure which addresses closely the nature of the task. They use standard conventions of spelling, punctuation and grammar with a high level of accuracy and use geographical terminology with confidence.

Grade E

Knowledge

Candidates show a knowledge of some of the places, themes and environments required by the syllabus and of some of the main processes which affect their development. They are aware of the contribution that concepts, principles and theories

can make to the interpretation of geographical contexts. They have knowledge of some geographical terminology.

Understanding

They explain familiar contexts using basic ideas and concepts, and show some understanding of the connections between the different aspects of geography represented in the syllabus.

Skills

Candidates display skill in interpreting commonly encountered sources of geographical information. They identify relevant geographical questions when presented with familiar contexts and can suggest and adopt approaches to enquiry. They use basic techniques, including those used in fieldwork, for data collection from primary and secondary sources. They use a limited range of methods to present and analyse evidence. They use their knowledge of the syllabus content to reach simple conclusions, and identify the strengths and weaknesses of their enquiries.

Quality of written communication

They communicate their knowledge and understanding in different formats, largely in everyday language, by drawing upon a limited number of sources. They use standard conventions of spelling, punctuation and grammar with limited accuracy.

Appendix D: Descriptions of characteristic performance at each grade in 2000

The performance descriptions were amended by the reviewers so that they more accurately reflected the standards of the candidates' performance in 2000. Emboldened words show where the descriptions differ from the original versions.

Standards found at grade A

Knowledge

Candidates show **breadth and depth of knowledge** of places, themes and environments required by the syllabus and of the physical and human processes which affect their development. They have a sound knowledge of the concepts, principles and theories relevant to the understanding and analysis of the syllabus content, and show knowledge of a wide range of geographical terms.

Understanding

They show their understanding by appropriately applying their knowledge of syllabus content to both familiar and, **if appropriate**, unfamiliar geographical contexts at a range of scales. They evaluate the potential and limitations of concepts and theories and their relevance to particular contexts. They **show appropriate understanding** of the connections between the different aspects of geography represented in the syllabus.

Skills

Candidates display skill in interpreting a range of sources of geographical information, including spatial and temporal data at different scales. They **formulate geographical questions and identify and adopt effective approaches to enquiry**. They collect evidence using an appropriate range of skills and techniques, including those used in fieldwork, from both primary and secondary sources. They use a variety of appropriate techniques to present and analyse evidence. They draw selectively on their knowledge of syllabus content to reach well-reasoned conclusions and evaluate both the effectiveness of their methodology and the validity of the outcomes, recognising the limitations of both.

Quality of written communication

They communicate their findings fluently in different formats, synthesising geographical information from a variety of sources, and presenting them within a logical and coherent structure which addresses closely the nature of the task. They use standard conventions of spelling, punctuation and grammar with a high level of accuracy and use geographical terminology with confidence.

Standards found at grade E

Knowledge

Candidates show **some knowledge** of some of the places, themes and environments required by the syllabus and of some of the main processes which affect their development. They **have some awareness** of [. . .] concepts, principles and theories [. . .]. They have knowledge of some geographical terminology.

Understanding

They **describe and suggest reasons in familiar contexts** using basic ideas and concepts, and show some understanding of the connections between the different aspects of geography represented in the syllabus.

Skills

Candidates display skill in interpreting commonly encountered sources of geographical information. They identify [. . .] geographical questions when presented with familiar contexts and can suggest and adopt approaches to enquiry. They **use techniques in a basic way**, including those used in fieldwork, for data collection from primary and secondary sources. They **use and/or interpret** a limited range of methods to present and analyse evidence. They use their knowledge of the syllabus content to reach simple conclusions, and identify some strengths and weaknesses of their enquiries.

Quality of written communication

They communicate their knowledge and understanding in different formats, largely in everyday language, by drawing upon a limited number of sources. **Their responses usually employ a structure appropriate to the task.** They use standard conventions of spelling, punctuation and grammar with limited accuracy. **They use some geographical terminology.**