

# AS and A Level Subject Content

**Royal  
Geographical  
Society**  
with IBG

Advancing geography  
and geographical learning

## Consultation Response 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.

Dr Rita Gardner CBE  
Director  
Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)  
1 Kensington Gore  
London  
SW7 2AR  
Director@rgs.org  
020 7591 3010

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.

This consultation response is not confidential and an official response on behalf of the RGS-IBG.

Please do contact the Society if you would like any further details about our views and work.

## 1. Consultation Questions

- Is the revised A Level content in each of these subjects (geography) appropriate in view of the issues raised in ALCAB's reports? Please consider whether the content reflects what students need to know in order to progress to undergraduate study.

In summary, the Society is very happy with the direction of travel and the broad approach to 60% defined core content, split equally across human and physical geography and including geographical skills and fieldwork, and with an emphasis on the study of processes at scales that range from, and integrate, global and local study. We also agree with the four core content topics identified and the levels of both breadth and depth implicit in them. Further comments are given below. However, we have specific concerns on a few points of detail that we ask to be considered, and in which we note a strong preference for phrasing used in the ALCAB report rather than that adopted in the DfE recommendations.

- Is the revised AS qualification content in geography appropriate?

The Society is content that AS Level is seen as a subset of A Level content, including 60% of both core (one physical geography topic, one human geography topic and appropriate skills and fieldwork) and non-core units, with the choice of which core units should feature at AS level left to Awarding Bodies. The same comments on selected points of detail apply as for A Level.

## 2. General comments

The proposals for AS and A Level geography are a welcome and marked improvement on the draft proposals of summer 2013 and support the decision taken by the Secretary of State in February 2014 to refer geography to ALCAB for major review. The Society's Director, Dr Rita Gardner, was a member of the ALCAB geography review panel.

In our view, the specified 60% core content (which includes identified quantitative and qualitative skills, geo-spatial analysis and fieldwork) in the proposals is appropriately demanding, relevant, shows good progression from GCSE and introduces new areas of study for students. It should ensure that all students, regardless of the Awarding Organisation specification that they are studying, are introduced to a more sophisticated conceptual underpinning to this important subject. They will study new content and approaches, including geographical processes, systems and integrated approaches across spatial scales from local to global. It has a welcome focus on key concepts that will be new to students, which are appropriate to A Level and which will be embedded into the content; and a more (in comparison to GCSE) sophisticated treatment of place, scale and space.

It is the Society's view that, taken overall, the proposals provide the necessary criteria framework for specifications to be rigorous, suitably challenging and demanding for A Level students and which will provide teachers with new, relevant, contemporary and teachable content.

The Society considers the amount of content specified to be about right; we do not consider that there is too much content in the proposals for an AS or a full A Level course.

However, as identified in previous consultation responses, the Society continues not to support the separation of AS and A Level.

The core content offers appropriate preparation for those going on to study geography at university.

The Society notes that the study of A Level geography (or equivalents such as IB or Scottish Highers and Advance Higher) is not a requirement for entry to every undergraduate geography course. However, the reality is that almost all current geography undergraduate have studied an A Level in geography (or equivalent). We see no reason for this proportion to drop, which reinforces our view that there should be a common core of required content across all new geography specifications at A Levels to prepare A Level students more effectively for further study at university.

The content proposals also provide both rigour and interesting and relevant topics of study for those students who chose not to continue their geographical studies beyond A Level. As a Russell Group of universities 'facilitating subject' at A Level, geography will continue to support students' entry to a wide range of other undergraduate degree courses.

The draft criteria require a balance between in depth study of both human and physical geography processes, and good coverage of human/environment interactions across the course as a whole. The Society wholly supports this approach. The Society particularly welcomes the strengthening of coverage of physical processes within the proposal core units and the embedding of analytical (quantitative, qualitative and geo-spatial) and fieldwork skills with the common core.

In relation to how the four units have been exemplified in the proposals, there are very significant differences between the units. In particular the Changing Place unit includes extensive footnotes which provide an additional level of further guidance and detail. This level of detail is not provided for the other three units, which would, in our view, benefit from having exemplification in footnotes in order to provide guidance over demand and level. The Society recommends there should be a consistent approach to the provision, or not, of such additional commentary.

The Awarding Organisations are given a good degree of flexibility in determining the 40% non-core topics, enabling them to differentiate their offer. There is a clear framework of objectives, enabling them to create distinctive specifications while sustaining a consistent level of demand and progression, appropriate to A Level.

The Society is particularly pleased to see fieldwork, a fundamental learning and research method in the subject, recognised as a requirement for both AS and A Level geography. We also welcome the requirement for students to study, understand and apply both quantitative and qualitative field data collection and analysis methods, including geo-spatial methods.

We continue to support strongly the need for independent research through a fieldwork investigation for all students, within the Geography A Level, assessed by an internally marked and externally moderated independent study. We make more detailed comments about this in our accompanying consultation response to Ofqual about assessment in A Level geography.

**2. Comments on points of detail.** The Society has detailed comments on some aspects of the wording in the draft criteria. Specifically:

**Para 2.** The Society would prefer to see the wording amended to “*Students should grow as independent thinkers and as informed and engaged citizens, who understand the role and importance of geography as one of the key disciplines relevant to understanding the world’s changing peoples, places and environments.*”

We believe that citizens need to be as cognisant of local and national issues as they do of global issues, and that above all they need to be factually informed and engaged, hence the suggested change.

••• **Para 3.** The Society particularly welcomes the fifth bullet point of this section which reads:

“(AS and A Level specifications must enable students to): gain understanding of those specialised concepts relevant to the core and non-core content. These must include the concepts of causality, systems, inequality, representation, identity, globalisation, interdependence, mitigation and adaptation, sustainability, risk, resilience and thresholds”.

These specialised concepts provide greater clarity in relation to the level of conceptual demand for AS and A Level geography and it is right that they have been specifically highlighted. We agree with the specific concepts identified. However, we think they can be better reflected in the required core content descriptions as there is uneven coverage at present across the four units. Furthermore, it will be vitally important that the 40% non-core content embraces the concepts which are not specified within the core content units.

At present, the concepts of *adaptation, mitigation, risk, resilience* and *sustainability* are not referenced at all in the requirement for any of the core units. In our view the concepts of risk and resilience could usefully be included within the core physical geography units. Study of integrated human/physical topics (within the 40% non-core) would naturally lend themselves to concepts of adaptation, mitigation and sustainability, as well as to risk and resilience.

Thus, the Society requests that further consideration be given to explicit inclusion of the concepts across the four core units and that there is a better balance of concepts expressed across the units. Furthermore, clear requirements must exist to ensure the key concepts are reflected in the optional 40% content to be identified by the Awarding Organisations, such that all concepts are explicitly embedded in the specifications.

**Para 15.** The Society welcomes the strengthening of quantitative and qualitative skills within geography and the following recommendation:

While the relative balance of quantitative and qualitative methods and skills will differ between each of the core and non-core themes, students must be introduced to a roughly equal balance of quantitative and qualitative across the specification as a whole.

The Society believes there is a necessary and appropriate role for both and, as has been identified, their use should be relevant to the particular content and be broadly balanced across a specification as a whole. It is particularly important that the requirement for this balance is retained, irrespective of the particular choice of options selected within the core units

**Para 20.** The Society strongly welcomes the clear and unambiguous requirements that students must undertake fieldwork in relation to processes in both physical and human geography and undertake fieldwork in relation to both the core and non-core content.

However, the Society also notes that the Report of the ALCAB Panel on Geography (July 2014) identified the following (added emphasis):

“As a guide to an appropriate degree of field experience at this level we recommend a *minimum of four days of fieldwork as part of A level study and two days for AS level specifications* (note these are not additive for the A level) ... This represents time spent in the field and in addition there will be time required for project planning, practicing field techniques, write-up and analysis of field investigations. The panel recognises that many schools may wish to exceed the minimum guideline and have the capacity to do so.”

The Society recognises the difficulties of setting a fixed ‘statutory’ number of days of fieldwork. However, we feel that it would be beneficial for clear guidance to be provided for A Level geography courses in terms of a generally agreed minimum level of time ‘in the field’. We ask for the inclusion of ALCABs comments in relation to fieldwork in the final recommendations for AS and A Level geography.

**3. Specific comments on proposed core content.** The Society feels that the development of the human geography core units into the DfE consultation proposals, from the details given in the ALCAB report, has led to some unhelpful (and possibly unintended) changes. They are as follows:

### Global Systems and Global Governance

a. DfE consultation: “Inequalities of global systems and how they can result in unemployment, poverty and declining welfare standards for some people and localities, and advantages for other people and localities.” This focuses the reader’s attention largely towards negative economic impacts.

This wording sadly does not reflect the more balanced and nuanced wording provided by the ALCAB Geography panel in their report which reads as follows; ...*flows* (of people, money, ideas, technology) *and global systems, which can sometimes act to promote stability, growth and development, but which can also be the cause of inequalities, conflicts and injustice.*”

The Society believes the original ALCAB wording provides a basis for a more coherent, balanced and meaningful exploration of these issues and we would like to see it better reflected in the criteria.

b. Optional areas of study as per the DfE consultation, is stated as follows:

“Study must (include) one from the following list

- (i) International trade, including access to markets, inequality and ‘fair trade’
- (ii) Human development and life expectancy
- (iii) Population migration within and between countries”

The Society feels the wording of this section as set out in the ALCAB report should be used in preference, which is:

Select one of the following topics:

- Access to markets in the contemporary world

- Human development and life expectancy
- Population movements and immigration control

This is for the following reason. Fair trade is a commonly taught topic in KS3 and GCSE (particularly within the requirement for teaching about international development at KS3 and Global Economic Development issues at GCSE). If 'fair trade' is given the prominence as proposed it has the potential to be very repetitive. In addition, the Society feels a focus on access to markets in the contemporary world provides a more demanding and rigorous approach enabling students to explore significant geo-political structures (such as the WTO, NAFTA and the EU etc) and their influence on trade relations, open markets and tariffs. This in turn relates more fully to the global governance theme of the topic.

### Changing Place; Changing Places

a. The phrase '*continuity and change*' is included in the ALCAB report, but specific reference to continuity has been lost in the DfE consultation proposals. Change is properly a central concern in this unit of work. However, *continuity* is an important perspective and should be re-introduced into the DfE document. Continuity should be explored in order to understand how the geographical processes and circumstances can promote stability and mitigate against significant changes taking place in some locations. Further, an exploration of how communities draw on continuity within their localities is an important aspect in relation to how places are represented; for example the identification of places as a 'former-mining community'.

b. Optional areas of study. The DfE consultation states that study must (include) ... one from the list below which will allow investigation of the impact of relationships and connections on people and place; either:

- (i) Demographic characteristics and cultural differences; or
- (ii) Economic restructuring and its effects on place; or
- (iii) Food production, circulation and consumption

We believe there are benefits to changing both the second and third options, as stated.

- Economic restructuring and its effects on place

The Society asks that, in relation to the second optional area of study, the original ALCAB wording is used, that is, "Economic and social inequalities".

This is for the following reasons. The ALCAB wording explicitly requires the study of *both* the economic and social dimensions in relation to place; not just the economic as implied in the consultation proposals. The ALCAB wording places the focus on inequalities and not on economic restructuring; these are very different (although inequality can, in part, result from restructuring it can be the result of many other factors). In addition, the term 'economic restructuring' has the potential to be interpreted as being largely focused on the negative impact of economic change, rather than the broader overview implicit in the ALCAB wording. Finally, the ALCAB wording encourages study which uses quantitative data and statistics about the people who live in places whereas the DfE wording encourages study of the changes to physical fabric as much as to the people.

- Food production, circulation and consumption

The Society urges that the specified optional area of study "*food production, circulation and consumption*" is replaced with an alternative which can be applied more meaningfully to

study of a local area, and more fully embed quantitative skills and fieldwork. The Society suggests that, instead, an option focused on the study of the environmental quality of the local area, with an explicit focus on either water or air quality, would provide a welcome drawing in of relevant physical processes within this unit and would provide good opportunities for fieldwork.

In short, the Society would like to see the wording of this section of proposals changed to the following, taking account of the two points above.

“Students should select one of the following topics through which to address the concepts of relationship and connections as applied to place:

- Demography, and cultural difference and diversity;
- Economic and social inequalities;
- Environmental quality, focusing on either water or air quality”

c. While the Society recognises and values the importance of cultural perspectives and qualitative approaches within this unit, generally we feel that the opportunities for the use of quantitative and geo-spatial data (including Ordnance Survey and Census data sets) and skills have been underplayed and need strengthening. This is consistent with the emphasis being placed (e.g. through QSteps programme within Higher Education) on a strengthening/reintroduction of quantitative skills more generally into the social sciences and clear statements in relation to such skills in the revised QAA Benchmark Statement for Geography in Higher Education. The points made in (b) above would also help to address this.

d. As noted in the Society’s general comments the Changing Places unit has, in contrast to the other units, extensive footnotes and a common and consistent approach to further exemplification. This approach should either be consistently applied to all core units or applied to none, we prefer the former. Some of the footnotes in the Changing Places unit however have the potential to be overly prescriptive e.g. the representation of places ‘through graffiti’.

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

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