

The new AS/A level specifications

Which new A Level specification should you choose? **Viv Pointon** and **Phil Wood** summarise the essential characteristics of the new specifications and outline the key differences between them to take into account when making your choice.

As a component of the wider revision and subsequent development of 14–19 education, A level subject specifications have been rewritten to accommodate the reduction in examination time, the removal of coursework, and the introduction of ‘stretch and challenge’ and the new A* grade. For geographers this has afforded an opportunity to modernise the curriculum – which was largely overlooked in Curriculum 2000. Teaching the new specifications commences in September 2008 and all sixth-form geography departments should now be receiving copies of them.

Including that of the CCEA in Northern Ireland and the Welsh WJEC, there are now only five geography specifications, as the three English awarding bodies (ABs) have had to combine their dual offers. This has not reduced choice, however; there is a significant spectrum with regard to both content and assessment format. Figure 1 presents a summary of the new specifications but there are several questions that teachers should ask of them.

What will I be required to teach?

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) sets the subject criteria to which the ABs must adhere in drafting new specifications. The criteria offer a very light touch with regard to content: there is no prescribed core. Yet most of the new specifications have established a core which generally cov-

ers fluvial, climatic, demographic and settlement principles. Edexcel stands out as having abandoned fluvial geomorphology altogether (flooding is studied under extreme weather); this may be a wise decision where the topic is covered well at GCSE. Weather and climate feature much more highly than in Curriculum 2000: AQA, CCEA and OCR offer more traditional menus and leave climate change for A2, while Edexcel and WJEC cover it in AS. There are justifiable arguments for both approaches: should we offer a sixth-form geography that tackles headline issues up-front or is it wiser to hold back until students are more mature and better skilled to analyse such issues more objectively?

It has been suggested that students are inadequately prepared by A level for undergraduate and postgraduate study of physical geography (Keylock, 2006). As research now requires high-level mathematical skills, it is unlikely that A level geography could prepare young people for this work. Yet the new specifications are remarkably traditional in their approach to physical geography, excepting Edexcel. Overall there is greater coverage of cold (glacial and periglacial) environments and of hot environments with more emphasis on arid and semi-arid regions instead of the previous tight focus on tropical rainforest. Coasts continue to be a popular theme but the approach varies from meticulous geomorphological study (AQA, WJEC) to deep analysis of land use and management (Edexcel). Ecology is variably covered and generally thematic: CCEA focuses on temperate grasslands in AS and tropical forest in A2; AQA offers a choice of tropical biomes, and WJEC desert and tundra; OCR offers local rather than global ecosystems, and Edexcel a strikingly different angle via ‘Biodiversity under threat’.

Human geography sees some far more obvious changes – at least the triumvirate of population, settlement and economic geography is banished along with outdated nineteenth- and early

twentieth-century models. Cultural and political geographies are major components of many degree courses and now AQA and CCEA offer ‘Contemporary Conflicts and Challenges’ and ‘Issues in Ethnic Diversity’; Edexcel includes cultural diversity, superpower geographies and unequal spaces; WJEC addresses cultural and political issues under globalisation; and while OCR’s approach remains largely social and economic, there is a small window into a cultural approach via globalisation. Demography offers a wide range of opportunities; some specifications provide the traditional components of change, demographic transition and resources-balance approach (AQA, OCR), others recognise the importance of migration (WJEC, CCEA and Edexcel). Energy and tourism are popular themes and health has a growing presence (AQA).

Overall, OCR offers the most traditional human geography; there is effectively nothing that has not previously been covered at A level in this or in their physical geography specification. In sharp contrast, Edexcel offers a radical revision of geographical content and identity at A level; they consulted widely in this revision and the outcome is challenging and strikingly modern. The other three ABs arrange themselves variably between these two extremes.

How will my students be assessed?

At the time of writing, the specimen assessment materials are being reviewed by QCA and may be subject to change. The spectrum of AB responses to the subject criteria is mirrored in their development of assessment regimes (Figure 2). Given the draft assessment materials published by the ABs together with their relevant mark schemes, several patterns begin to emerge in the assessment styles chosen.

Edexcel have chosen a more innovative way of assessing their course. At AS level there is a variation in style of questioning, from a multiple choice section through to more extended responses in Unit 1. This shows a clear ‘ramping’ of challenge, from accessibility for all at the start of the paper to a greater level of stretch and challenge towards the end. Unit 2 attempts to integrate fully the assessment of field-work skills into the learning of the unit, with a critical approach to the assessment of these elements in the examination. There is then a clear progression to A2, with greater use of extended questions and critical, issues-based assessment.

WJEC, AQA and, to a more limited extent, CCEA have all attempted to

Specification		Content	Fieldwork	Assessment Structure (this may change following QCA review)
AQA	AS	Core: rivers, floods and management, global population change One from: cold environments, coastal environments, hot desert environments and their margins One from: food supply issues, energy issues, health issues	Application of knowledge & skills to unseen information & reference to own fieldwork	Unit 1: (70%/35%) Physical and Human Geography – structured shorter & extended questions, 2 hours Unit 2: (30%/15%) Applied Geography – structured skills & generic fieldwork questions, 1 hour
	A2	At least three of six options including one physical and one human topic: Physical: plate tectonics and associated hazards, weather and climate and associated hazards, challenges facing ecosystems Human: world cities – evolution or revolution?, development and globalisation, contemporary conflicts and challenges	For Unit 4A: preparatory investigative work in the field to produce fieldwork investigation folder	Unit 3: (30%) Contemporary Geographical Issues – structured shorter & extended questions & one essay, 2½ hours Unit 4A: (20%) Geography Fieldwork Investigation – structured short & extended questions based on candidates' own fieldwork investigation, 1½ hours OR Unit 4B: (20%) Geographical Issue Evaluation – structured short & extended questions based on an advanced information booklet, 1½ hours
CCEA	AS	Core: fluvial environments, ecosystems (temperate grasslands), atmospheric processes Core: population, rural & urban environments, development	Individual or small group work for Unit 1, summary and table taken into exam	Unit 1: (50%/25%) Physical Geography (including fieldwork skills), short and longer questions including data response and extended writing, 1½ hours Unit 2: (50%/25%) Human Geography (including skills and techniques), short and longer questions including data response and extended writing, 1½ hours
	A2	Two from: population change, ethnic diversity, planning for sustainable settlements One debate from: global warming, nuclear power, GM crops, ecotourism Two from: fluvial & coastal management, nature and sustainability of tropical ecosystems, dynamic earth (plate tectonics & hazards)	No fieldwork explicitly identified although some options could provide opportunity	Unit 3: (25%) Human Geography and Global Issues, shorter and longer essay-style questions with stimulus material, 1½ hours Unit 4: (25%) Physical Geography and Decision-Making (resources presented in examination), shorter and longer essay-style questions with stimulus material plus structured decision-making report, 2½ hours
Edexcel	AS	Core: global natural hazards, climate change, globalisation, population change & migration Either extreme weather or crowded coasts Either unequal spaces or rebranding places	For Unit 2: fieldwork, research and practical work are intrinsic and will be tested in exam	Unit 1: (60%/30%) Global Challenges, multiple choice, data response and short answer questions, longer/guided essay questions, 1½ hours Unit 2: (40%/20%) Geographical Investigations, extended writing questions, 1 hour
	A2	Core: energy security, water conflicts, biodiversity under threat, superpower geographies, bridging the development gap, the technological fix One from: tectonic activity and hazards, cold environments – landscapes and change, life on the margins – the food supply problem, the world of cultural diversity, pollution and human health at risk, consuming the rural landscape – leisure and tourism	No fieldwork explicitly identified	Unit 3: (30%) Contested Planet & Synoptic Investigation, extended writing, essay-style questions, some based upon issue analysis of pre-release information, 2½ hours Unit 4: (20%) Geographical Research, 1½ hours – one essay based on pre-released topic
OCR	AS	Either river environments or coastal environments Either cold environments or hot arid & semi-arid environments Either managing urban change or managing rural change Either the energy issue or the growth of tourism	Fieldwork is not explicitly required though it is enabled by the inclusion of rivers, coasts, rural and urban change	Unit 1: (50%/25%), Managing Physical Environments, shorter data response, extended & essay-style questions, 1½ hours Unit 2: (50%/25%), Managing Change in Human Environments, shorter data response, extended & essay-style questions, 1½ hours
	A2	At least three of six options including one environmental and one economic issue: Environmental: earth hazards, ecosystems and environments under threat, climatic hazards Economic: population & resources, globalisation, development & inequalities	For Unit 4: individual investigative work/research including fieldwork	Unit 3: (30%) Global Issues, short data response questions and extended essay questions, 2 hours Unit 4: (20%) Geographical Skills, extended questions on fieldwork, short & extended questions on statistical data, 1½ hours
WJEC	AS	Core: climate change, tectonic and hydrological change, population change, settlement change	Fieldwork individually or in small groups to be incorporated into teaching and learning programme	Unit 1: (50%/25%) Changing Physical Environments, structured data response with shorter and longer questions, 1½ hours Unit 2: (50%/25%) Changing Human Environments, structured data response with shorter and longer questions, 1½ hours
	A2	One of: extreme (desert & tundra) environments, landforms & management (glacial or coastal environments), climatic hazards One of: development, globalisation, emerging Asia (China or India) One of: crime, deprivation, disease, environmental psychology, leisure & recreation, microclimates, atmospheric & water pollution, retailing, rivers, small scale ecosystems Core: sustainable food supply, water supply, energy, cities	Personal research enquiry to include fieldwork	Unit 3: (30%) Contemporary Themes and Research in Geography, two essays (1½ hours) plus one two-part question on personal research enquiry (45 mins), 2¼ hours Unit 4: (20%) Sustainability, longer decision-making questions based upon pre-released resources plus one compulsory essay, 1¼ hours

Figure 1: Summary of the new A level geography specifications.

	AQA	CCEA	Edexcel	OCR	WJEC
Compulsory AS questions	Some	most	some	none	all
Compulsory A2 questions	Some	some	some	none	some
Multiple choice			✓		
Data response questions	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Short mark questions (1 or 2 marks)	Few	✓	✓	✓	
Longer mark questions (c. 10 marks)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Decision-making or issue analysis	✓	✓	✓		✓
Individual research – field based	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Individual research – secondary data		opp.	✓		✓
Number of essays (30 minutes or more) ¹	1	[report]	2 ²	4	4
Pre-release information	✓		✓		✓

opp. = opportunity for individual research work but not essential
¹ one question for which at least 30 minutes of examination time is allocated
² includes Unit 4 research essay lasting 90 minutes

Figure 2: An overview of assessment for the A level geography specifications.

include more interesting forms of assessment. This includes the use of well-defined synoptic features, in particular issues-based assessment. Again, clear progression occurs from AS to A2, from a more structured to a more open, extended prose style, which is fed by promoting research and independent learning. In all cases, the questions posed at A2 predominantly make use of higher-order command words and demonstrate an obvious attempt to extend the work of candidates, and also to deliver the stretch and challenge to support the work of the more able, although this is already a feature of WJEC at AS level which does not use short-answer questions earning less than five marks. As with Edexcel, teachers will need to plan carefully to support the work of the less able on more demanding sections.

The most traditional assessment framework is OCR's. There is the extensive use of shorter-answer, structured questions in AS, with opportunity for stretch and challenge being the result of the inclusion of some longer 'essay-style' questions. The assessment of fieldwork opportunities is very limited and at A2 appears to be very formulaic. There is a lack of more innovative assessment styles such as either decision-making/issues analysis or secondary-led individual research.

Different approaches are on offer. The well-trodden paths of decision-making and issues analysis papers are obvious routes but their execution differs. WJEC most closely follow the London 16–19 Project template; AQA's Geographical Issue Evaluation is too similar to their current written fieldwork examination and too heavily reliant on statistical interpretation to

qualify. Edexcel's DME/Issues Analysis now evolves to the Synoptic Investigation, with a pre-release information pack. CCEA offer the greatest challenge to students by not pre-releasing what may be a substantial amount of material for 30 minutes' reading time in examination. Synopticity is a difficult beast to capture; the ABs do so with variable success.

Nevertheless, there is a clear progression apparent in most cases when comparing the AS with the A2 assessments across the specifications. In general, this progression is reflected in the format of the questions used, with fewer, higher-mark questions requiring greater depth in response, and with command words which are calling on higher-order analytic and synoptic abilities.

How will the fieldwork component be assessed?

The greatest change for A level geography is the removal of coursework as an assessment tool. Yet QCA guidelines clearly state that fieldwork should be included in both AS and A2. Coursework and fieldwork are not the same thing, though they have tended to become so in the minds of practitioners. Breaking that bond has proved the greatest challenge to the ABs and

Reference

Keylock, C. (2006) 'Reforming AS/A2 Physical Geography to Enhance Geographic Scholarship', *Geography*, 91, 3, pp. 272–79.

Viv Poinon has taught geography at several sixth-form and FE colleges, and is now a freelance education consultant; she is Newsletter Editor for the GA Post-16 & HE Phase Committee (e-mail: vivpoinon@hotmail.com). Phil Wood is Secondary Geography PGCE Tutor at the University of Leicester and Chair of the GA Assessment and Examination Working Group (e-mail: pbw@le.ac.uk).

none has, at time of writing, completely solved the problem. Questions on fieldwork have featured in some examinations before and frequently attract rote-learned responses from candidates. There is a limited number of questions that can be asked, so they are inherently predictable. AQA and CCEA will require students to take information relating to their fieldwork into the examination; although this work will not be assessed, it is probably the most effective way of avoiding scripted answers.

Will this specification stretch and challenge my students?

All A levels from 2008 should offer stretch and challenge to candidates, thereby catering for the gifted and talented. A key test of the new specifications is whether they are fit for this purpose. OCR states that content is to be regarded as a minimum and not exclusive and 'centres are encouraged to go beyond this minimum to enable candidates to better meet the needs of stretch and challenge'. The responsibility is thus shifted onto the shoulders of the teacher. They do offer some effective sample questions, however. AQA and CCEA offer open-ended questions in A2 whereby more-able students should be able to demonstrate their ability; the use of command terms such as analyse, evaluate, discuss and compare should facilitate this. WJEC claim that the synoptic nature of A2 assessment provides opportunity for stretch and challenge, but synopticity is a QCA requirement. Much of the reshaping of content within Edexcel's syllabus makes it inherently synoptic.

The devil is in the detail and all geography teachers would be well advised to study these specifications in detail before making their choice. Brand new machines contain some nuts and bolts of previous models, while other traditional marques offer routes to new places. Test driving is not an option, so the glossy brochures should be read very carefully!

Full specifications and approved specimen assessment material can be found on the awarding bodies' websites: www.aqa.org.uk, www.ccea.org.uk, www.edexcel.org.uk, www.ocr.org.uk, www.wjec.co.uk. ■