

Choosing a new GCSE specification

There are new GCSE specifications from 2016. Bob examines the changes, gives an overview of the content of each draft specification and gives advice on the selection of which specification may be right for your school.

	Autumn 2015	Autumn 2016	2017	2018
Current specification	Last two-year GCSE intake	Last one-year GCSE intake	Final summer examinations	
2016 specification GCSE (9-1)	First teaching of three-year GCSE	First teaching of two-year GCSE	First teaching of one-year GCSE	First new GCSE examinations

Figure 1: The schedule for current and new GCSE specifications.

It's time for specification change! Geographers should not fear this; indeed, we should welcome it, to reflect a changing world. When current GCSEs were developed during 2007–8, China was the fifth largest economy in the world; now it is the second. While the economies of the world's wealthiest countries barely grew between 2007–11, the output of the 'emerging economies' increased by almost 20%, according to *The Economist* (2011). During the same period, the population of megacities in high-income countries (e.g. London) reversed the trend of five decades of population decline, such that London now ranks among the world's fastest growing urban areas. Time for change indeed!

However, the new GCSEs from 2016, officially known as GCSE (9-1), (Figure 1 and Figure 2) are driven by change of a different nature, for they are prompted by a political desire to define

subjects through content. Current GCSEs were developed on the basis of subject criteria set by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) (2007). The criteria consisted of general statements about, for example, the proportion of physical geography that should be included in a GCSE geography qualification, or a requirement that sustainability should form a core focus. The new requirements, published by the Department for Education (2014), specify actual subject content to be taught which the Awarding Bodies (ABs) will have to include.

Key changes in content

All ABs have to comply with the new subject content in order to gain approval from Ofqual. The content areas are:

1. geography of the UK
2. geomorphic processes and landscape
3. changing weather and climate
4. global ecosystems and biodiversity
5. resources and their management
6. cities and urban society
7. global economic development issues.

In addition, fieldwork must be carried out in two separate environments, and a range of geographical skills must be taught, including mathematical and data processing skills.

The content does not imply a specific geographical approach or sequence of study; ABs have been free to develop content in any way they consider appropriate (Figure 3). However, teachers comparing the seven specifications will see very similar topic headings (Figure 4). Broadly, two models have emerged in developing the new specifications, which very much reflect current GCSEs:

- A thematic approach, defining content by physical/human themes. Specifications adopting this approach are AQA (which has developed a single specification, unlike the other three which have developed two), Edexcel A, WJEC Eduqas A, and OCR B.

Three changes are worth noting:

- The new GCSEs discussed in this article apply to England. From 2016, Wales will have its own GCSE qualifications with different arrangements; for example, Welsh GCSE geography specifications are likely to retain controlled assessment. The brand name 'WJEC' now applies to Welsh schools only. English qualifications are being developed under a new brand, 'Eduqas'.
- From June 2016, no further account will be taken of Level 1/2 certificates in progress measures, and will no longer count in performance tables when new GCSEs become available. For geography, 2017 GCSE results will be the last ones to count and Level 1/2 certificates in geography are being withdrawn.
- Similarly, international GCSEs (iGCSEs) will continue to be offered for independent schools, but will not count in performance tables or attract funding.

Figure 2: Do the new GCSEs apply to me?

AQA



The AQA specification covers familiar themes and topics from current GCSE courses, providing sound progression from key stage 3 to Post-16. There is a balanced coverage of physical, human and environmental geography, and a thematic approach, with an emphasis on contemporary issues and future changes. It encompasses a wide range of locations, places, environments and processes, and provides the basis for a broad understanding of geography. There is a choice of content in selected themes, including landscapes, ecosystems and resources, allowing teachers to select specific content and learning experiences. The specification requires the use of a range of investigative skills and approaches, including maths, statistics and modern information technologies. An issue evaluation and decision-making exercise based on pre-released resource contributes a problem-solving element to assessment. There are a variety of assessment techniques, including multiple choice questions, short structured and stimulus/data response questions, and extended writing opportunities.

Edexcel



Pearson have developed two specifications based on their current courses. Specification A takes a thematic approach organised by physical and human environments, including a third paper investigating fieldwork and people-environment challenges faced by the UK. Specification B offers an issues-based approach organized by UK and global geography, including a third decision-making paper investigating people-environment issues at a global scale. Both specifications build on concepts taught at key stage 3 and prepare students for AS and A level study. Prescribed fieldwork environments link to the specification content and remain the same every year. Content requirements are fully exemplified with geographical overview and geographical depth signposted so it is clear what to teach. Geographical skills, fieldwork and synoptic links are also integrated within the course content. Command word definitions are published within the specifications and are used consistently in combination with mark tariffs and mark schemes in extended writing questions.

WJEC Eduqas



Each WJEC Eduqas GCSE geography specification takes an enquiry approach to geographical information, issues and concepts, based on the principle that geographical education should enable learners to become critical and reflective thinkers by engaging them actively in the enquiry process. Content is organised around enquiry questions and learners should be encouraged to pose geographical questions of their own. Fieldwork is emphasised in each of the specifications. The shift from controlled assessment is viewed as an opportunity to move beyond simple tasks of measurement, recording and presentation to a concept-driven task designed to raise awareness of the true nature of geographical fieldwork. Methods and concepts that must be studied within each cycle will be released to examination centres at least two years before the year 11 examination. This structure has been designed to allow teachers complete flexibility in choosing contexts and appropriate locations for their fieldwork. The assessment will challenge learners to apply what they have learned through specific fieldwork in local contexts to the wider context of UK geography. WJEC Eduqas Geography A is derived from the current WJEC Geography A specification and retains an element of choice so that examination centres can provide additional breadth and depth to the core geography provided in the subject content. WJEC Eduqas Geography B is derived from the current WJEC Geography B specification and retains its focus on issues, values and attitudes, and problem solving.

OCR



The two new OCR GCSE specifications have contemporary topics to engage students and take a holistic approach to fieldwork and geographical skills by embedding them within study and assessments. OCR Geography A (Geographical Themes) takes a thematic approach, giving opportunities to study the geography of the UK and compare and contrast this with content on a global scale. OCR Geography B (Geography for Enquiring Minds) follows an enquiry approach to learning, with a decision making element to the assessment to hone students' problem solving skills. Both specifications are clearly worded with no hidden content to support all learners. Both qualifications have more minutes than marks to help support the loss of tiering. Assessments are clear and concise, with a range of question styles from multiple choice, to short structured and extended response. Fieldwork requirements are outlined to give teachers flexibility over the location and context most suitable for their school and students.

Figure 4: Comparison of draft new geography GCSE specifications. Further changes may be required before accreditation. A more detailed version is available to download from the GA website. (Thanks to Graeme Eyre for compiling this table)

AQA	Edexcel A	Edexcel B	WJEC Eduqas A	WJEC Eduqas B	OCR A	OCR B
<p>Paper 1: Living with the Physical Environment (1 hr 30 mins) 35%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenge of Natural Hazards • Physical Landscapes in the UK • Living World <p>Paper 2: Challenges in the Human Environment (1 hr 30 mins) 35%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Urban Issues and Challenges • Changing Economic World • Resource Management <p>Paper 3: Geographical Applications (1 hr 30%)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issue Evaluation (from pre-release) • Fieldwork (human and physical including interaction) 	<p>Paper 1: The Physical Environment (1 hr 30 mins) 37.5%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Changing Landscapes of the UK • Weather Hazards and Climate Change • Ecosystems, Biodiversity and Management. <p>Paper 2: The Human Environment (1 hr 30 mins) 37.5%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changing Cities • Global Development • Resource Management <p>Paper 3: Geographical Investigations: Fieldwork and UK Challenges (1 hr 30 mins) 25%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical Fieldwork • Human Fieldwork • UK Challenges 	<p>Paper 1: Global Geographical Issues (1 hr 30 mins) 37.5%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hazardous Earth • Development Dynamics • Challenges of an Urbanising World. <p>Paper 2: UK Geographical Issues (1 hr 30 mins) 37.5%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The UK's evolving Physical Landscape of the UK • The UK's Evolving Human Landscape • Fieldwork in a physical and human environment <p>Paper 3: People and Environment – Making Decisions (1 hr 30 mins) 25%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People and the Biosphere • Forests Under Threat • Consuming Energy Resources • Making Geographical Decisions 	<p>Paper 1: Changing Physical & Human Landscapes (1 hr 30 mins) 35%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Landscapes and Physical Processes • Rural-Urban Links • Tourism or Hazardous Landscapes <p>Paper 2: Environment & Development Issues (1 hr 30 mins) 35%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weather, Climate and Ecosystems • Economic Development Issues • Social Development Issues or Environmental Changes <p>Paper 3: Applied Fieldwork Enquiry (1 hr 15 mins) 30%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approaches to Fieldwork Methods • Fieldwork Enquiry • Application to UK contexts <p>WJEC Eduqas will select one fieldwork method and one concept for two contrasting investigations</p>	<p>Paper 1: Investigating Geographical Issues (1 hr 45 mins) 40%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changing Places – Changing Economies • Changing Environments • Environmental Challenges <p>Paper 2: Problem Solving Geography (1 hr 30 mins) 30%</p> <p>A problem-solving paper in three parts assessing the content from across the three themes described in Paper 1.</p> <p>Paper 3: Applied Fieldwork Enquiry (1 hr 15 mins) 30%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approaches to Fieldwork Methods • Fieldwork Enquiry • Application to UK contexts <p>WJEC Eduqas will select one fieldwork method and one concept for two contrasting investigations</p>	<p>Paper 1: Living in the UK Today (1 hr) 30%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Landscapes of the UK • People of the UK • UK Environmental Challenges <p>Paper 2: The World Around Us (1 hr) 30%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ecosystems of the Planet • People of the Planet • Environmental threats to the planet <p>Paper 3: Geographical Skills (1 hr 30 mins) 40%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geographical Skills • Fieldwork Assessment (should carry out fieldwork in two different environments, human and physical) 	<p>Paper 1: Our Natural World (1 hr 15 mins) 35%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global Hazards • Changing Climate • Distinctive Landscapes • Sustaining Ecosystems • Fieldwork • Geographical Skills <p>Paper 2: People & Society (1 hr 15 mins) 35%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Urban Futures • Dynamic Development • UK in the 21st Century • Resource Resilience • Fieldwork • Geographical Skills <p>Paper 3: Geographical Exploration (1 hr 30 mins) 30%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geographical Skills • Decision Making Exercise <p>Fieldwork must be one human/one physical, in contrasting locations</p>

- An issues-based approach, which defines content largely by its topicality and which is embedded in a people-environment approach. Specifications adopting this approach are Edexcel B, WJEC Eduqas B and OCR A. These specifications have a place-basis for their examinations, for example Edexcel B has a global focus for Component One and a UK focus for Component Two.

Both models include a clear requirement for fieldwork skills, including map and statistical skills, plus fieldwork skills that go beyond those developed for Controlled Assessment.

That said, there are variations:

- OCR B – a specification which has traditionally adopted an issues-based approach – has developed an issues-based approach but within a thematic framework.
- In addition, tectonic hazards, which is omitted from the compulsory content (as well as at key stage 3), has been included in new specifications from AQA, Edexcel B, WJEC Eduqas A and OCR B.

Key changes in assessment

From 2016, all GCSE specifications will be assessed:

- by linear terminal examination. No further modular or unitised examinations will exist
- by un-tiered papers, for the first time since 1994
- using the new grading system from 1 to 9 (Figure 4). The bottom of grade 4 will equate to the bottom of the current grade C (essential in maintaining consistency in data dashboards in schools), and the bottom of grade 7 will equate to the current grade A boundary. Grade 9 will be determined statistically, representing the top 20% of those awarded grade 7 or above.

Changes to examinations

The new un-tiered examinations are very different from the GCSE geography examinations teachers and students are used to.

- ABs will now have to set papers which will reliably assess all ten grades (1 to 9, plus ungraded). That means most specifications have longer papers and more marks. Where there are options within a topic (for example, in Edexcel A where there is a choice of two from rivers, coasts, or glacial landscapes), exam papers will be longer and candidates will have to navigate their way through.
- With four new Assessment Objectives (AOs) and their weightings (Figure 5), examinations will be tougher. 35% of examination marks will be for AO3 Application – arguably the toughest of the four AOs. It has been clear that command words should be used from AO3 which will stretch the most able. All assessments will require candidates to be able to respond to tougher command words, such as ‘analyse’, ‘evaluate’, ‘assess’, or ‘discuss’. Students already confront ‘comment’ and ‘examine’, and they already evaluate in Controlled Assessment (albeit with some guidance), but the new exams will undoubtedly be more demanding.
- The examination experience for many average- or below average-ability candidates is likely to be different. Currently, Foundation Tier candidates who achieve a grade C have a positive exam experience. They sit an examination paper in which approximately two-thirds of marks will deliver a grade C. This means that they face papers where they are probably able to access all questions. In the new examinations, this is less likely:
 - the new grade 4 boundary will have three grades below it and six above. This means that it is likely to be awarded at about one third of the marks – say 30 on a 90-mark paper. Current C grade candidates are therefore likely to find examinations tougher.
 - Similarly, the new grade 7 is likely to be awarded at about two-thirds of the marks.

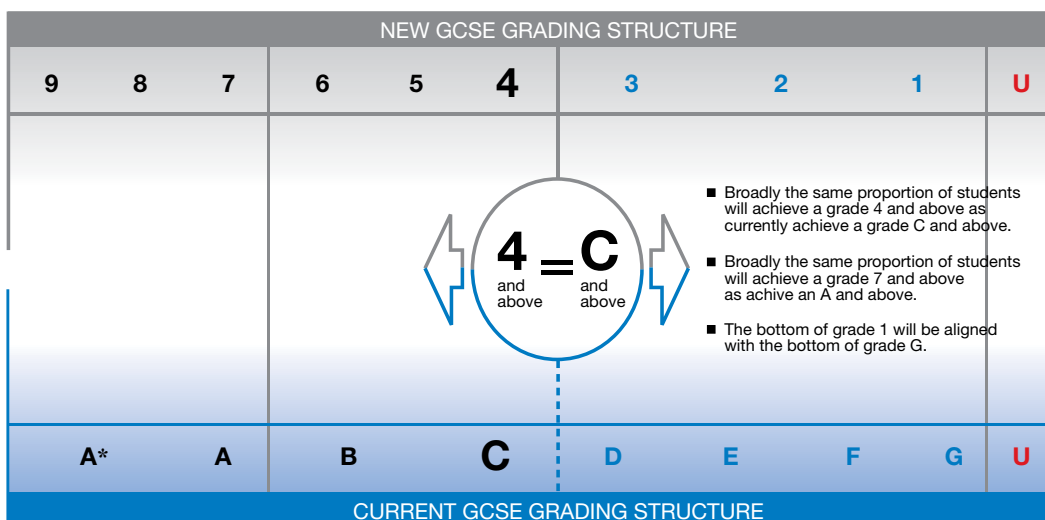


Figure 5: The new GCSE grading system and its equivalence to current GCSE grades.

Figure 6: The revised Assessment Objectives. Note the weighting given to AO3, and the high-order skills of analysis and evaluation.

AO1	Demonstrate knowledge of locations, places, processes, environments and different scales.	15 %
AO2	Demonstrate geographical understanding of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • concepts and how they are used in relation to places, environments and processes; • the interrelationships between places, environments and processes. 	25 %
AO3	Apply knowledge and understanding to interpret, analyse and evaluate geographical information and issues and to make judgements .	35 %
AO4	Select, adapt and use a variety of skills and techniques to investigate questions and issues and communicate findings.	25 %

Key changes in fieldwork

With the removal of Controlled Assessment, fieldwork is now only assessed within terminal examinations. However, the requirement for fieldwork has been strengthened, with two days' fieldwork specified within the subject content, and all ABs have to ensure that these are carried out as part of an investigative process in two contrasting environments. These might be physical or human, urban or rural. Headteachers will be required to sign a statement affirming that fieldwork investigations have been carried out in accordance with these requirements.

Six stages in the enquiry process are stated within the subject content. These are to form the basis of assessment. The stages are:

- understanding of the kinds of question capable of being investigated through fieldwork and an understanding of the geographical enquiry processes appropriate to investigate these
- understanding of the range of techniques and methods used in fieldwork, including observation and different kinds of measurement
- processing and presenting fieldwork data in various ways including maps, graphs and diagrams
- analysing and explaining data collected in the field using knowledge of relevant geographical case studies and theories
- drawing evidenced conclusions and summaries from fieldwork transcripts and data
- reflecting critically on fieldwork data, methods used, conclusions drawn and knowledge gained (DfE, 2014).

Done properly, these stages may offer a broader fieldwork experience than the rather limiting requirements for Controlled Assessment, where

Examiners' Reports have commented upon routine tasks performed by candidates, rather than developing any sense of enquiry.

Specifications vary in their approach:

- Edexcel have identified environments in which to carry out fieldwork. These are linked to the specification content.
- WJEC Eduqas have framed their requirements based on one fieldwork methodology and one geographical concept.
- AQA and OCR leave teachers free to choose topics and locations from within the specification content.

How should I choose a specification?

- Do you prefer a thematic approach (split by physical/human) or an issues-based approach (split by scale or place, e.g. global vs UK)?
- Do you have particular favourite physical or human topics? With so little variation between the specifications, there may seem to be little to differentiate them. However, tectonic hazards have been omitted from required subject content. In spite of this, AQA, Edexcel B, Eduqas A and OCR B have included it.
- For fieldwork, do you prefer a specified content approach (Edexcel), a skills and concepts approach (WJEC Eduqas) or do you prefer to be free to choose whichever fieldwork topics you like from within the specification content (AQA and OCR)?
- Do you want a specification with a decision-making exercise? If so, Edexcel B, Eduqas B and OCR B have included one, and AQA has an 'Issue Evaluation'. | **TG**

Online resources

The GCSE 2016 pages will keep you up to date on the GA's support for the teaching and resourcing of the new GCSEs. Go to www.geography.org.uk/news/gcsereform where you will find a more detailed version of Figure 4.



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Note

This article, written in July 2015, refers to the draft specifications which may change during the review by the regulations.

References

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