

The geography curriculum 5–19: What does it all mean?

Eleanor draws on her experience as the DfE's Lead Geography Consultant and Writer in the most recent curricular review to guide readers through the content requirements and progression across key stages 1–5.



Accompanying online materials

The period 2010 to 2014 has seen a rapid succession of changes to the national curriculum, GCSE and AS/A level, all part of the educational reforms for schools in England brought in by the Coalition Government. New requirements for the Geography National Curriculum were published in September 2013 for a 2014 start (DfE, 2013), new geography GCSE Criteria were published in April 2014 for a 2016 start (DfE, 2014a) and new geography A/AS-level Criteria were published in December 2014 for a 2016 start (DfE, 2014b). Within the space of three years, teachers have been presented with a completely new set of content requirements.

In *Geography* (Rawling, 2015) I examined how centralised the process of curriculum change has now become; here I aim to highlight what this new content framework means for secondary teachers and to trace the opportunities for progression in teaching and learning across the whole 5–19 age range.

Figure 1 summarises the subject content frameworks that now exist at each level in the secondary curriculum. The national curriculum and GCSE both outline the full range of what is to be covered, whereas the AS and A-level Criteria provide a core (60%) of subject content, and guidance for the selection of 40% non-core content. Looking across the guidelines as a whole, it is clear that there is a focus on subject knowledge and a detailed listing of particular topics and themes to be covered. There is also a stronger emphasis than in previous versions on physical geography and it is apparent that the AS/A-level Criteria introduce some human geography content that may be considered new to schools.

One of the main tensions arising during the process of developing these subject guidelines (Rawling, 2015) was whether the documents were setting out a list of requirements to be 'delivered'

or a curriculum framework needing professional interpretation and development. My contention is that, despite the apparent high level of detail, at every key stage these documents should still be viewed as curriculum frameworks for further development by awarding bodies and ultimately teachers. The signals for seeing the situation in this way will be highlighted in the remainder of this article.

National guidelines as a curriculum framework

One of the main areas of discussion amongst the subject professionals involved in the national curriculum, GCSE and AS/A-level development exercises was how to set out the subject content required at each key stage in a way that clarified the conceptual structure and coherence of the subject, rather than just outlining a random list of topics. Accordingly, the statements of aims and purposes for each key stage highlight the big organising ideas of geography – place, space, environment, process and scale. Inevitably, some concepts are given greater prominence at the higher key stages (e.g. process receives more attention at GCSE and AS/A level); also greater complexity and more subtle emphases are gradually introduced to refine these apparently simple ideas of place and space (e.g. interaction, interdependence and change through time feature strongly at GCSE and AS/A level). So the message from the aims and purpose statements is that the specific and detailed knowledge of locations, places, processes and environments listed at all scales from local to global is not just 'stuff' to be learned: it is a basis for developing greater understanding of these big ideas of geography which students will build up throughout the key stages.

In order to clarify how the geographical knowledge and understanding changes and signals progress from one key stage to the

Figure 1: National frameworks for geography 11–19.

National Curriculum 11–14 years	GCSE 14–16 years 14–16 years	AS/A level 16–19 years 16–19 years
Knowledge-led, emphasis on locational knowledge, a regional study in Africa and one in Asia, coverage of traditional physical and human topics, including rocks, weathering, weather/climate, population, urban development, economic activity, resources. Brief key stage paragraphs identify some aspects of progression. Not all aspects of geography present (e.g. people-environment). No mention of enquiry.	Detailed subject knowledge via headings: locational knowledge; place; human geography; people-environment; physical geography; maps, fieldwork, geographical skills (including enquiry). 'Place' includes 'Geography of UK' in overview and in some depth. Fieldwork strengthened – in two contrasting environments. Full statement about progression from key stage 3. Terminal examinations only.	Subject knowledge framed within clear rationale and structure (from A level Content Advisory Board [ALCAB] report). Core (60%) content includes two human and two physical themes for A level (1 each for AS). Updated content especially in human geography – place meaning, identity, representation; and in physical geography – water/carbon cycles. Progression from GCSE stated. Independent learning and research stressed (student investigation 20%).

	Key stage 1	Key stage 2	Key stage 3	GCSE (key stage 4)	AS/A level (key stage 5)
Locational knowledge	<p>Naming and locating</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> world continents, oceans UK, the four countries, key characteristics and capital cities 	<p>Naming and locating</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the world's countries, focus on Europe and North/South America including environmental, physical and human characteristics the United Kingdom, geographical regions, human/physical features 	<p>Extending locational knowledge and spatial awareness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> of the world's countries, focusing on Africa, Russia, Asia (including China and India), and the Middle East, including environmental, physical and human characteristics 	<p>Locational knowledge and contextual knowledge</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> of the world's continents, countries, regions, and their physical, environmental and human features full range of scales; important inter-relationships; contextual knowledge for case studies. 	<p>Build on knowledge of contexts, locations, places and environments by extending</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> range of physical, social, economic, cultural and political contexts; the depth of conceptual understanding required; range of spatial and temporal scales included.
Place knowledge	<p>Understand geographical similarities and differences through studying the human and physical geography of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Key stage 1 – a small area of the United Kingdom, and of a contrasting non-European country Key stage 2 – the human and physical geography of a region of the United Kingdom, a region in a European country, and a region within North or South America Key stage 3 – the human and physical geography of a region within Africa and a region within Asia 			<p>Place: processes and relationships</p> <p>Geography of the UK, in overview and some in-depth study including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> physical, human and environmental aspects; changing economy and society; and relationships with Europe and the wider world. 	<p>Changing place; changing places</p> <p>Study of the way places are constantly shaped and changed by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> relationships and connections between people, the economy, society and the environment; and meanings and representations attached to places.

next, the final documents use (with some small variations) the same broad headings of subject content. These are locational knowledge, place, physical geography, human geography, people-environment geography and geographical skills and fieldwork. These headings appear implicitly in key stages 2 and 3 and explicitly (in some form) in GCSE and AS/A level, although for AS/A level, people-environment topics are left, outside the core, for awarding bodies to select.

Figures 2 and 3 clarify what is intended at each key stage and highlight the depth and challenge required by comparing the requirements across the 5–19 age range.

Understanding place

Misunderstandings about the term 'place' and its significance in geography have dogged discussions about national curriculum guidelines since the original Geography Working Group in 1989–90 (Rawling, 2001, chapter 4). In his book *Place: A short introduction*, Cresswell (2015) refers to several different ways in which the term is used, including:

- (i) place as location
- (ii) place as locale or community – somewhere that has meaning for people and evokes a sense of place
- (iii) place as landscape
- (iv) place as an idea or way of understanding the world.

In *Geography* (Rawling, 2015) I noted that since the late 1990s the interpretation of place as mainly locational knowledge (definition (i) above) seems to have taken hold in GCSE examination

specifications almost by default, leading to the situation in which particular places were mainly studied as exemplars for systematic geography. The pre-2014 national curriculum guidelines introduced a stronger emphasis on knowing about the character of places (definition (ii) above) although perhaps not exploring the idea of sense of place very fully. At A level, before the current changes, place knowledge was also seen as mainly a low-level adjunct to studying thematic areas of geography. What is distinctive about the geography 5–19 guidelines we now have is that all approaches to the study of place appear (see Figure 2). In order to realise the potential of this development awarding bodies and teachers need to understand the different definitions of place and the progression in place ideas from national curriculum to A level.

The first point to note on Figure 2 is that locational knowledge and place are outlined separately. For locational knowledge, quite specific details of what should be learned are given for key stages 1 and 2 (name and locate certain required continents, oceans, countries etc.) whereas for GCSE there is a broad statement about extending the locational knowledge and contextual knowledge built up at key stages 1–3, and by AS/A level there is no specific requirement but a suggestion that, at this level, study will build on locational and contextual knowledge developed at GCSE. The requirements for place show that at key stages 1–3 the emphasis is on exploring localities and understanding similarities and differences between places, so developing understanding of place as locale and beginning to appreciate what the sense of place might include. At GCSE, the guidelines require a focus on 'the geography of the UK' as a means of developing

Figure 2: Locational knowledge and place in the 5–19 frameworks (a full version of this table is available to download).

	Key stage 1	Key stage 2	Key stage 3	GCSE (key stage 4)	AS/A level (key stage 5)
Physical geography	<p>Geographical vocabulary about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • key physical features e.g. beach, cliff, coast, forest, hill, weather • Seasonal and daily weather patterns in UK and the • Location of hot and cold areas of the world 	<p>Describe and understand key aspects of physical geography, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • rivers, mountains, volcanoes, earthquakes, the water cycle <p>Overview of climate zones, biomes and vegetation belts</p>	<p>Understand the key processes in physical geography through the use of detailed place-based exemplars at different scales, including geology, soils, glaciation, hydrology, coasts</p> <p>Weather and climate, including the change in climate from the Ice Age to the present</p>	<p>Geomorphic processes and distinctive physical landscapes of the UK</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • including study of at least two different and distinctive physical landscapes in the UK <p>Processes affecting changing weather, climate and weather hazards</p>	<p>Landscape systems</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • integrated study of Earth surface processes, landforms and resultant landscapes for either drylands or coastal landscapes or glaciated landscapes <p>Water and carbon cycles</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • physical processes which control the cycling of both water and carbon between land, oceans and atmosphere. • through study of both the carbon cycle and the water cycle
Human geography	<p>Geographical vocabulary about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • key human features e.g. city, town, village, factory, farm, house, office, port 	<p>Describe and understand key aspects of:</p> <p>human geography, including settlement, land use, economic activity, natural resources including energy, food, minerals and water</p>	<p>Understand the key processes in human geography through the use of detailed place-based exemplars at different scales, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • population, international development, economic activity, urbanisation, the use of natural resources 	<p>Cities and urban society</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • overview of rapid urbanisation and contrasting urban trends <p>Global economic development issues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • causes and consequences of uneven development at global level 	<p>Global systems</p> <p>How they shape relationships between individuals, states and environments including either international trade/markets; or human development/life expectancy; or global population migration.</p> <p>Global governance</p> <p>Ways of regulating the consequences of globalisation including either: the global commons or human rights and the geopolitics of intervention; or sovereignty and territorial integrity.</p>

Figure 3: Physical and human geography in the 5–19 frameworks (a full version of this table is available to download).

a more mature understanding of processes and relationships within and between places. This cannot be studied as an adjunct to thematic work; it requires the study of the geography of the UK in its own right and it will begin to draw out deeper understanding of the sense of place, of the complex geography of landscapes, and of the social, cultural and political relationships that create a place like the UK. In this sense, the GCSE requirements are drawing on all the meanings of place identified above. At AS/A level, the requirements for place study are more detailed still, focusing explicitly on the idea of place and the meanings and representations of place that shape how we see the world. To study this fully, students are required to revisit the idea of the local place (first encountered in key stage 1) in a way that involves ‘moving out from the local place to encompass regional, national, international and global scales in order to understand the dynamics of place’. Some of the material in the AS/A level requirements draws on the exciting developments now taking place in academic research in the field of cultural geography (see Cresswell, 2015).

Subject content for geography 5–19

Figure 3 is a simplified version of the national frameworks, designed to reveal the broad outline of progression within physical and human geography.

It redirects attention, away from the lists of topics and towards the sequence of big ideas and approaches to teaching and learning. So at key stage 1, pupils should be involved in learning simple geographical vocabulary (e.g. beach, river, town village, port) and in recognising straightforward characteristics and patterns (e.g. seasons, weather, houses, land use). Key stage 2 develops into description of features in physical and human geography (e.g. rivers, volcanoes, population settlement) and the beginnings of explanations about the relationship of these to each other (e.g. resources, economic activity). Key stage 3 begins to draw out the processes that lie behind the patterns, places and environments recognised, and to introduce depth of study (city study, country study) as well as breadth. GCSE is characterised by a focus on more complex processes and interactions at all scales. So physical processes, landscapes and climate (especially in the UK) on the one hand, and socio-economic processes, urban change and economic development (national, international and global scale) on the other hand, are seen as dynamic and continuously evolving. In both physical and human geography at AS/A level, students are involved in studying the more complex physical systems and cycles underlying life on Earth, at all scales, and made aware of the increasingly globalised and politicised nature of the processes that affect individuals, states and environments.

The people-environment strand is not explicitly mentioned in key stages 1, 2 and 3 although there is a clear intention within the topics and aims/purposes of the subject to draw out the interactions between people and their environments. By GCSE and AS/A level, there is a more explicit focus on appreciating the crucial significance of environmental understanding to sustaining life on earth (GCSE topics of Global Systems and Biodiversity, and Resources and their Management). One of the strongest statements about the importance of people-environment interactions is given in the AS/A-level Criteria, although here the actual choice of issues and questions for AS/A-level study is left to the awarding bodies. The statement is 'ensure emphasis on deep understanding of both physical and human processes, and on applying this understanding to interrogate people-environment interactions and people-place connections at all scales from local to global' (AS/A Criteria, p.4). It could be suggested that this principle, of understanding key human and physical geography processes before applying them to real issues and questions, underlies the complete 5–19 sequence. This does not imply that such issues should not be addressed at key stages 1–4 but that simplistic explanations should be avoided until the requisite processes have been addressed.

'Geographical skills, maps and fieldwork' appears as a consistent strand throughout the 5–19 frameworks and it is possible to see a clear progression from using maps and atlases and practising simple observational and data gathering skills (key stages 1–3), to presenting, using and interrogating a range of data including digital sources (GCSE), to handling and managing a range of materials, data and sources with greater independence (AS/A level). In *Geography* (Rawling, 2015) I explained that during our review discussions the term 'enquiry' was considered controversial, perhaps because it suggested to ministers a skills-based rather than a knowledge-based curriculum. Accordingly, 'enquiry' is not mentioned as such in the National Curriculum, but the basis for an investigative and enquiring geography is still there in phrases like analyse, explain, interpret, communicate. At key stage 4 there is a strong statement, under the heading 'Formulating enquiry and argument', that students should be required to develop and demonstrate 'the ability to identify questions and sequences of enquiry, to write descriptively,

analytically and critically, to communicate their ideas effectively, to develop an extended written argument, and to draw well-evidenced and informed conclusions about geographical questions and issues'. Significantly, although the AS/A criteria do not mention 'enquiry' either, the implied sequence in this GCSE statement is precisely mirrored in the A-level requirements for an independent student investigation. It should also be noted that, with strong subject community representation, the need for students to undertake an independent, research-based investigation and for this to be teacher assessed, was recognised and incorporated in the A-level Criteria.

During the preparation of the GCSE and AS/A Criteria one discussion focused on whether we should include, over and above the content Criteria themselves, any indication of progression from one key stage to the next. Ofqual did not see this as necessary in regulatory documents, but the subject community was mindful of the task of awarding bodies, and eventually teachers, in interpreting the bald statements of content, so progression statements do now appear in GCSE and AS/A Criteria (identified as such for GCSE but included under aims and objectives for AS/A level). One way to obtain an overview of the progression in knowledge, understanding and intellectual challenge intended from age 5 to 19 is to look at the key stage introductory paragraphs and the GCSE and AS/A progression statements.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this analysis is that national guidelines are not statements of exactly what to teach. The requirements for key stage 3 do not imply a race through the detail of geology, soils, glaciation, population, international development etc.; nor do GCSE and AS/A Criteria intend that every GCSE specification should contain the topics, exactly as listed, parcelled up for the time available. In each case, they are guidelines for professional development and expansion. They require, firstly, recognition and application of the broad principles of progression in geography subject knowledge as discussed in this article, and secondly, creative development by awarding bodies (for GCSE and AS/A) and ultimately by teachers. The opportunities are all yours. | **TG**

References

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Online resources

Full versions of the tables in Figures 2 and 3 are available to download. Go to www.geography.org.uk/tg and click Spring 2016.

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