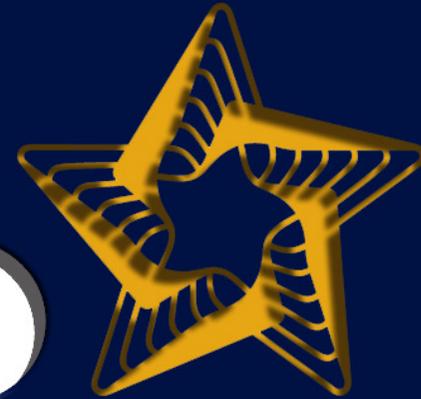


OCR



RECOGNISING ACHIEVEMENT

The changing landscape of A level Geography

**Implications for subject knowledge and the academic skills of new
undergraduates**

The changing landscape

A level Geography in the past

Physical;

Regional;

Human;

Techniques (Map reading, graphs, diagrams, etc).

Many syllabuses to choose from offered by 6 or 7 exam boards

Assessment – examinations:

Essay papers and sometimes a practical paper; often 3 hours each

The changing landscape

A level Geography changes

A more systematic approach with case studies

Less regional geography

Links between physical and human geography

Increased focus on skills including fieldwork, using statistics and decision making.

Only 4 exam boards offering A level specifications

Assessment – most exams 2.5 hours or less; structured questions (short answer/data response etc); some essay questions/papers; some pre-release materials; coursework until 2008.

The changing landscape A levels today

4 specifications for schools and colleges in England to choose from, one from each of the exam boards below.

AQA

http://web.aqa.org.uk/qual/gce/humanities/geography_materials.php

Edexcel

<http://www.edexcel.com/quals/gce/gce08/geography/Pages/default.aspx>

OCR

<http://www.ocr.org.uk/qualifications/by-subject/geography/>

WJEC

<http://www.wjec.co.uk/index.php?subject=56&level=21>



Topics covered:

AQA

Physical and Human Geography, Geographical Skills, Contemporary Geographical Issues, Geography Fieldwork Investigation or Geographical Issue Evaluation

Edexcel

Global challenges (World at Risk, Going Global), Geographical Investigations (Extreme Weather, Crowded Coasts, Unequal Spaces, Rebranding Places), Contested Planet (Energy Security, Water Conflicts, Biodiversity Under Threat, Superpower Geographies, Bridging the Development Gap, The Technological Fix?), Geographical Research

OCR

Managing Physical Environments, Managing Change in Human Environments, Global Issues, Geographical Skills

WJEC

Changing Physical Environments, Changing Human Environments, Contemporary Themes and Research in Geography, Sustainability



Exam results drive many schools and colleges so for some teaching there has been a change of focus from:

The subject

To

The syllabus

To

The test

Implications for subject knowledge and the academic skills of new undergraduates, with reference to Geography

A level Geography specifications all conform to subject criteria set by the government through the regulator (now Ofqual).

So all A level study is based on these common criteria (stated in each specification) which means that in theory every A level student has a similar understanding of the subject.

Other factors contribute to the subject knowledge and academic skills that universities will see in their first year undergraduates such as:

- Style of teaching at the school/college;
- How much of the specification was taught;
- The weighting of particular skills or topics in the specification;
- Choice of options.

Implications for subject knowledge and the academic skills of new undergraduates

OCR has been involved in Higher Education Engagement Research

Three projects are nearing completion with findings emerging related to

1. HE 1st year tutors' views on core academic abilities and pedagogical approaches;
2. Pedagogical differences between Levels 3 & 4;
3. 'Design of A levels' roadshows (46 participants - lecturers and other HE representatives from a range of disciplines).

Some of the findings:

- In general, how well prepared do you think new 1st year undergraduates are for degree level study in your subject?

Over 50% of lecturers think undergraduates are underprepared

- In your opinion, which of the following are **strengths** of typical undergraduates when they begin degree level study in your subject?

ICT, teamwork, and presentation skills are those most likely to be considered strengths

- In your opinion, which of the following are **weaknesses** of typical undergraduates when they begin degree level study in your subject?

Academic writing, self-directed study, independent inquiry, & critical thinking skills are often considered weaknesses

Roadshow findings on underpreparedness New undergraduates are **least prepared** in:

1. Critical / higher order thinking skills
 - Skill ~ ability to evaluate information;
 - Attitude ~ confidence to make evaluative judgements.
2. Academic writing skills

Spelling, punctuation and grammar; structuring essays; referencing and citing; building arguments; using language creatively and constructively.
3. Independent inquiry / research skills
 - Inability to conduct research & lack of understanding of what research means.



Roadshow findings on the depth of subject knowledge

Several participants felt that students lacked depth of knowledge.

Others (especially from science departments) felt it was not problematic.

Literature study of Pedagogical differences between Levels 3 and 4

- Examined the pedagogical approaches used at L3 (A levels) and L4 (university), in schools, sixth-form colleges and universities in England;
- Reviewed 10 major studies, generally employing self-report methods, conducted from 2001 to 2010;
- Academic subjects covered: English, History, Geography, Psychology, and Business Studies;
- Studies covered multiple viewpoints: L4 teacher, L4 student, L3 teacher, L3 student.

Related findings from literature review (1)

Level 3	Level 4
Main aim: impart the curriculum and ensure good grades	Main aim: encourage autonomy, self-confidence, problem-solving abilities and subject enthusiasm
Teachers have strong teaching backgrounds and undertake continual professional development	Tutors have strong research backgrounds but little formal teacher training and professional development
Teaching effectiveness is measured by position in league tables	Relatively little formal monitoring of teaching effectiveness
Teachers maintain personal and frequent interaction with students	Tutors adopt a more 'hands-off' approach
Students seen as receptive learners. Teachers impart all the info required.	Tutors provide only the basic info

Related findings from literature review (2)

Level 3	Level 4
Function of essays: to regurgitate facts and figures	Function of essays: to illustrate original and critical thinking
Students are thoroughly prepared for assessment and provided with all info needed	L4 students are expected to gather most of the assessment info they need for themselves
Assessment feedback is personalised and provided regularly in timely way	Feedback is non-specific and not timely
Teachers have few strategies to aid transition and do not have enough time to promote university level skills	Tutors must promote the skills required for degree-level study

Future changes

Ofqual consulted on A level reforms and found that there is support for:

- The engagement of HE in A level design (though not the need for HE to endorse each A level);
- Assessment at the end of both first and second years of study;
- The removal of January exams and reduction of resit opportunities;
- An increase in synoptic assessment;
- A reduction in internal assessment;
- A review of the weighting of AS and A2 with a 40:60 weighting being favoured.

Before Christmas we were told that **January 2013 is the last opportunity for A level students to take exams**. In future all exams will be in June.

The DfE published their latest decisions in a letter to Ofqual on 23 January, responding to consultation outcomes.

Further changes will include

- Changes to the A-level structure and the role of AS;
- How HE will be involved;
- Content changes to specifications;
- A timeline for redevelopment.

Geography will be in the first tranche of development according to previous statements

Websites

DfE <http://www.education.gov.uk/>

Ofqual <http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/>



Questions?