

future careers.

This project has indicated that a lot more work needs to be done to enhance school children's understanding of the relevance and usefulness of the GEES disciplines. Subject choice is an evolving process that begins well before A-level and even GCSE. Outreach activities must start early in the school curriculum and be sustained through to HE.

There are many examples of pockets of outreach activity in GEES but these mostly occur in each of the disciplines separately. It is the author's belief that it is timely for the overall GEES community to come together to develop a more strategic approach. By increasing the overall number of children interested in studying planet Earth and its people, each discipline will be drawing from a larger pool.

Perhaps fully fledged 'GEES' academics find it difficult to remember a time when they didn't know about the disciplines. So, school children themselves should be involved in developing outreach activities, to ensure that they are being communicated with in their own language and assumptions are not being made about what they already know or don't know.

So, what activities might the GEES community pursue?

- Further research is certainly required in order to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of the disciplines.
- To follow up this project, it would be interesting to get the school students to study and illustrate the usefulness and relevance of the GEES disciplines, for example through running a poster competition.
- Other ideas? Please contact the author.

Helen King

Helen@helenkingconsultancy.co.uk

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Changes in A-level Geography & their implications for HE

Viv Pointon

Education consultant, VFT Education and The Geographical Association

Abstract

From September 2008, new A-level specifications will be taught in schools and colleges.¹ Sixth-form geography teachers have a difficult choice to make, as the content of the five new specifications on offer differs significantly from very conventional to highly innovative. There will no longer be a core curriculum, thus Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) will not be able to assume a commonality of prior learning. Assessment formats are also changing; most significantly, coursework is being removed and, despite imaginative efforts by some awarding bodies (ABs), this may diminish students' preparedness for independent research in HE. This article, based on a presentation to the GEES Subject Centre Conference 2007, examines some of the changes in A-level geography and suggests how they may affect the induction of students onto geography degree courses. It may be useful for HEIs to differentiate applicants according to the A-level specification they have studied.

Changes in A-levels: the framework

Four significant changes to A-levels have been initiated by the Government:

- The number of assessment units is being cut from six to four to reduce examination time; this has little impact on AS, which had already been restricted to a maximum of three hours, but has reduced A2 examination time to a maximum of four hours.
- Coursework is no longer allowed, in response to cross-curriculum accusations of plagiarism and lack of authenticity.
- An A* grade is being introduced to differentiate the most able students (27.3% of A-level geographers gained an A grade in June 2007).
- The introduction of the concept of 'stretch and challenge', requiring the ABs to ensure that there is sufficient flexibility within assessment to enable more able candidates to demonstrate fully their ability.

In addition, the QCA (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority) criteria for A-level geography were revised in 2005-2006. Much of the previous repetition and prescription was removed, the intention being to enable the ABs to draft new specifications without restraint on content. There is now no core content in A-level geography. This means that HEIs can no longer assume that their new undergraduates will have a fully comprehensive basic knowledge of the subject. QCA suggests only general themes on ideas, processes, concepts, scales, skills, applications, and synopticity: thus the ABs have produced specifications that are significantly different in content, structure and approach.

The five ABs (AQA, Edexcel, OCR, WJEC, and CCEA) submitted their revised specifications for approval, with specimen questions and mark schemes, to QCA in Spring 2007. The number of geography specifications has been reduced from eight to five; currently AQA, Edexcel and OCR offer two routes – the A specifications are traditional in structure and substance, and the B specifications contain more innovative content and assessment structures. Each of these ABs has been obliged to combine their A and B courses. In September 2007, the new specifications were sent to schools and colleges, and teachers will make their choice. Teaching on AS courses commences in September 2008, and the A2 courses in September 2009. Thus, the students on these courses will be entering HEIs from September 2010.

Changes in A-level geography: course content

The content of some of the new specifications (and they are specifications not syllabuses) is very traditional, covering rivers, coasts, population, and urban change, much as they have done for the last decade at least. From the HE perspective, this may be advantageous, ensuring students have a good grounding in basic concepts and processes prior to undergraduate study.

¹ In fact, the entire geographical journey through school is changing: at Key Stage 3 and AS/A-level from September 2008, and at GCSE from September 2009. New forms of qualification are also being introduced: vocational diplomas (which include Environment and Land-based Studies, Travel and Tourism, and others with some essentially geographical content), international, English and Welsh baccalaureates, and the Cambridge Pre-U Diploma will considerably extend choice for sixth-formers.

However, there are drawbacks. Some of this content, or the materials that teachers will continue to use, may be out-of-date and incorrect (Knight, 2007). Also, the overwhelming majority of students will have already studied these traditional topics for GCSE and Key Stage 3 and probably at earlier Key Stages.² Selling A-levels to youngsters will be harder to do when we can only offer more of the same.

It is necessary to present issues that are topical and relevant to recruit students to the sixth-form. Thus, the new themes introduced in the more innovative specifications, such as a much greater emphasis on poverty and social inequality, contemporary conflicts, and emerging Asia, will be very welcome. In human geography there is a significant reduction in theoretical approaches, and a focus on the more topical themes of globalisation, development, health, and migration. These will enable teachers to draw from news media and to relate learning more closely to the student experience. Overall, human geography content has made a greater step forward than physical geography, and is starting to address aspects of cultural and social geography more effectively. This will help to overcome the contrast between A-level and degree geography (Marriott, 2007).

In physical geography there will be much greater emphasis on climate change; some ABs tackle it immediately in AS, while others leave it for A2 when students may approach the topic with greater maturity. The risk is that there is a lot of mis- and dis-information available; HE academics could help teachers to convey an accurate message, and A-level students should begin to appreciate both complexity and uncertainty (Hall, 2006). Extreme weather and tectonic hazards are also attractive and exciting subjects for 16-18 year-old students, and are covered well within the new specifications. Geomorphology is approached through options on coasts, glacial/periglacial, and hot/arid environments. HEIs will regret the reduction in geomorphology in one of the more popular specifications. Keylock (2006) has suggested that students may wrongly believe it possible to go up for a physical geography BSc degree without engaging with real science. The

new specifications will not remedy this inadequacy; such students will arguably continue to need mathematics, physics and chemistry A-levels, or thorough supplementary science education.

HE Academics could help teachers to convey an accurate message.

Changes in A-level geography: assessment issues

The most significant assessment issue is the loss of coursework. Timed examinations are the only form of assessment allowed and, though there are fewer examinations, they are generally longer. Within them, essays are required, but the time allowed to write them varies from 30 to 90 minutes, depending on specification. The loss of coursework will hinder the development of many students' independent learning skills; this will impact on research, analysis, and reporting. Many students will need to be taught how to research, write up, and reference their work as they commence HE.

One of the most controversial features of the new Geography A-level affects fieldwork assessment. In the past, there has been a tendency to connect coursework to fieldwork and now there is a fear that fieldwork may suffer. While the QCA subject criteria explicitly require fieldwork in both AS and A2, fieldwork skills are to be tested via a limited series of rather predictable examination questions. However, it should be noted that the ABs have been set an impossible task by the DfES and QCA. Two of the ABs will allow candidates to take primary data, collected in the field, into the examination and to analyse it in timed conditions; the others set highly predictable questions for which some students will doubtless learn set answers.

Thus, the development of research skills will be extremely variable, with the exception of those students taking the Edexcel course. In this course, the Global Futures examination is reborn as 'Unit 4: Geographical Research' and candidates do preparatory research for a 90-minute exam, in

which they write one essay. This challenging test may prepare these students better for HE than any other in the new A-level geography specifications.

The ABs are required to enable 'stretch and challenge' in A2 assessment, to differentiate effectively the more able candidates. The extent to which this may be achieved by the new specifications and their assessment is variable. Clearly, an examination requiring an essay to be written in 30 minutes does not challenge as much as one requiring 45 minutes of assessment time. Further, there is variation in the complexity of the questions set and in the structure of mark schemes. The new A* grade will, however, distinguish those who are at the lower end of the A grade band from those at the upper end.

Other curricula developments

HEIs should not see many prospective geography candidates with the new 14-19 diplomas until at least 2011. The Environmental and Land-based Studies diploma, which will be introduced in 2009, is largely agricultural, but contains a significant amount that is geographical. The following year, teaching of the Travel and Tourism diploma will commence. There are also elements of geography in many of the other diplomas, but it is unlikely that their students will progress to HE geography courses. These diplomas are essentially vocational in outlook.

However, Cambridge International Examinations has developed a different type of diploma, the Cambridge Pre-U, in consultation with mainly public schools and subject associations. This is being launched at the same time as the new A-levels and its students will enter HE in 2010. At the time of writing, this qualification is only available to independent schools as it awaits QCA accreditation and, thus, cannot yet attract funding for teaching in the state sector.

The Pre-U is intended to be a more academically-rigorous alternative to A-levels. The diploma has a linear structure, though, with a half-way assessment option for students who want to opt out of a subject at the end of the lower sixth. Students will choose three or four subjects from an initial choice of twenty-six in their first year; in addition, they will compile a Global Perspectives portfolio (which is inevitably quite geographical) and an independent research report. The geography option is content-heavy with fairly traditional physical geography, based on hazards and environments, and a more up-to-date human geography with options on social

inequality, housing, and crime. It also contains an independent research project involving an oral presentation and use of presentation media. The Cambridge Pre-U diploma is not unlike the International Baccalaureate (IB) in structure, but does not restrict choice of subjects. The IB is also being extended across schools and colleges, with additional funding from the government. Thus, by 2010, HEIs will receive an increase in applications from candidates with the IB. The WJEC (the Welsh AB) is also enabling its candidates to group A-level, GCSE and vocational qualifications alongside a key skills core, language skills, work placement and PSE for the Welsh Bacc. Also, the AQA Bacc is in preparation, comprising A-levels, an extended project, personal development and AS General Studies, Critical Thinking, or Citizenship.

Summary

From 2008, A-levels will comprise fewer examinations, but no coursework. There are significant differences between the demands placed upon students by the ABs in terms of both subject content and in the development of skills. Consequently, the extent of 'stretch and challenge' within them is variable. Applications for undergraduate courses will also come from candidates with diplomas or baccalaureates, thus, there will be a wider range of entry qualifications from English, Welsh and Northern Irish schools and colleges. Many new undergraduates will have a narrower knowledge base, but some will be more familiar with 21st Century geographical themes. Their research skills and experience may be completely absent. Fewer applicants will have studied A-levels, as more will come via the IB or Pre-U or through vocationally-based diplomas. Consequently, from 2010, HEIs will have to look more closely at their students' entry qualifications and tailor their induction courses more precisely to students' needs.

Viv Pointon vivpointon@hotmail.com

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² The revision of Key Stage Three, announced 11 July 2007, will mean that from September 2008, the content of school geography will be significantly different. There will be a much greater emphasis on sustainable development, environmental interaction, cultural understanding, and climate change, and rather less on physical processes although some such as "geological activity" will come under science. GCSEs are also now being revised, and teaching of these new specifications will commence in September 2009. Thus, it is possible that students beginning A-level courses in September 2013 may not have studied some conventional themes (rivers, coasts, ecosystems, population, settlement, economic activity), in which case, the more traditional A-levels will seem to them remarkably novel. But, assuming curriculum change to be a continuing process, we may be introducing another set of new A-level specifications by then!