

A level reform - Frequently asked questions

When are the changes taking place?

The reformed A level geography is now for first teaching in England from September 2016. The GA expects awarding organisations to receive approval for their specifications from Ofqual during 2015, and to make these available to teachers by autumn 2015. Go to our 'Choosing your new A level' section for details and to help you make the best choice for your students.

Will I need to teach new content?

Some teachers may teach aspects they haven't previously covered at this level, such as landscape systems. There are also aspects of human geography – notably the inclusion of place as a concept, through place meanings and representations – which have not been extensively covered before at A level. Look carefully at each specification to see how the content requirements have been met. The GA provides support for each content area, through its publications, journals, website and CPD.

Is fieldwork compulsory?

There is now a requirement for specifications to include at least two days fieldwork for AS level students, and four days for A level students (i.e. four days over the course of two years). How you arrange for students to be given this experience is down to you and your school. It may be, for example, that you provide for two days in the first year of A level, for skills development and to support the learning of core content in that year. This would leave a minimum of two days in the second year in support of independent investigations. At the end of the course, the head teacher of each centre is required to confirm, in writing, that all students have fulfilled the fieldwork requirement (i.e. two or four days).

How will fieldwork be assessed?

Although AS geography will be assessed entirely through terminal examination (as now), the range of fieldwork-related knowledge and skills to be assessed is broad:

-) physical and human geography
-) field research questions
-) observe and record phenomena
-) devise and justify practical approaches
-) apply existing knowledge and concepts to the field
-) coherent analysis of findings.

For A level, 20% of the assessment will be the new independent investigation. This report, of 3-4000 words, will incorporate both primary data through fieldwork and secondary research data. The independent investigation will be assessed by teachers and moderated by awarding organisations.

The focus can be on any aspect of geography. It will include:

-) a question or issue defined and developed by the student
-) data collected individually or in groups
-) student's own research and/or secondary data
-) student's independently contextualised conclusions drawn from their analysis.

Will A level be co-teachable with AS?

Theoretically, there is little in terms of the common content requirements to prevent AS and A level students sharing a classroom in the first year of their studies. Remember however that the standard expected and the mode of assessment is different for AS and A level, and that AS examinations cut short the amount of time for study during the third term. In practice, many schools will need to decide whether they offer AS level geography alongside A level. This is why the GA has consistently opposed, and continues to oppose, the policy to de-couple AS from A level geography, as it is likely to lead to restriction of student choices post-16. We note with interest that Cambridge University has written to schools and sixth forms urging them to continue to enter students for AS examinations.

Is A level geography being made more demanding?

Unlike GCSE, the grading system and the overall level of demand will remain the same from 2016.

Won't all A levels now be the same?

When the final content criteria were published, the Association welcomed the attempt to build a coherent core into geography A level. Many of the teachers we spoke to felt that whilst A level should allow for variety and in particular for the specialist knowledge of the teachers in different schools, it should also be consistent in its demands, no matter which specification is studied. Although the GA regards the 60% figure for core content as at the 'upper limit' of tolerance, teachers will be presented with some choice and variety in selecting a specification. Look carefully at each of the specifications to see how core requirements have been met (go to the *Choosing your new A level* section for details and to help you make the best choice for your students).

Where can I get more help?

The GA fully agrees with the call, made by ALCAB in its geography panel report, for the DfE to make substantial resources available to schools for professional development ahead of these changes. With both A level and GCSE undergoing significant change from 2016, there is an urgent need for all teachers of the new specifications to work together and receive support in preparing new qualifications.

In the absence of such support, look out for GA journal articles, publications, CPD events, website materials and activities through your local GA Branch or Quality Mark Centre of Excellence. The GA's Post-16 and HE Phase Committee are also a good source of support.