

The assessment of GCSE fieldwork and enquiry

Discussion

Following QCA's recent decisions to abandon coursework assessment, in future geography will be fully externally assessed at both GCSE and A level. The GA has always maintained that fieldwork assessed through coursework is the richest, most reliable, 'real world' assessment available, as well as an important means of improving the validity of the examination as a whole. In contrast to other subjects such as history, and in spite of sustained pressure from the GA, geography has lost the battle for coursework that is independently produced and internally assessed. This is in part because the historical community was able to present a united front, whereas geographers (but not the GA) were publicly divided. In view of this outcome the GA strongly believes that Awarding Bodies should continue to assess enquiry skills, especially fieldwork, in all GCSE specifications in a way that maintains these strengths.

The rationale for QCA's decision has its origins in a public agenda that is about improving the reliability of these qualifications, in the face of concerns about plagiarism by students and about over-preparation by teachers (and parents). However, there is a clear trade-off between reliability and validity, so the increased reliability gained by assessing solely through traditional examinations may be at the expense of the reduced validity by not assessing the full range of objectives or of students' attainments. The GA believes that the solution for all future specifications lies in developing the role of controlled assessment for those aspects currently assessed through coursework.

At GCSE, QCA has commissioned work on what assessing work under controlled conditions might mean in a range of subjects, including geography¹. Extending the definition of controlled conditions beyond 'exam conditions' gives the best opportunities for assessment solutions that support enquiry and fieldwork, the GA's key issue.

The GA's priorities and advice

QCA has required Awarding Bodies to work with Subject Associations as part of their discussions with stakeholders about new specifications: this paper forms part of that dialogue.

The GA's priorities are:

- To maintain/strengthen students' interest, enjoyment and motivation in following geography courses
- To maintain a breadth of means of assessment, in order to maximise validity: this comes from improving the match between assessment objectives and relevant forms of assessment, as well as from increasing the range of opportunities for students to show what they know, understand and are able to do
- To maintain and strengthen fieldwork by ensuring it is assessed effectively, and to ensure that students
 - Are not assessed in a way that enables them to learn fieldwork theoretically (i.e. through reductive examination questions)
 - Have to collect quality data for themselves
 - Cannot be over-prepped/coached

The GA also recognises a number of opportunities in recasting assessment, for example to:

- Improve progression in enquiry and fieldwork, by being clearer about the demand at GCSE/AS/A2, but without reducing the demand at GCSE
- Maintain existing high expectations and standards in fieldwork, and to engage in fresh thinking about what that might involve

¹ *Controlled Assessments*, QCA June 2007

- Improve wider geographical skills, including decision-making and GIS, for example by making skills questions less predictable,
- Build in a stronger ICT focus, perhaps with pre-release or online assignments
- Learn from the experience of other practical subjects, e.g. Design Technology and MFL to find effective solutions.

The GA would also like ABs to use the move to controlled assessments to promote improvements in the quality of investigative work at GCSE. David Holmes (EdExcel)'s work² supports the general impression that much current fieldwork is predictable and unadventurous – strongly teacher-led, often quantitative and focused on a limited range of locations, (urban CBD, rivers, etc.). Recasting assessment should be an opportunity to encourage more student-led enquiries, more qualitative work, and a much wider range of locations/contexts more in tune with 21st century geographies, for example by building on the work of OCR's Pilot GCSE course.

The GA wishes to work constructively with Awarding Bodies to improve validity and to raise standards in fieldwork. As a starting point we offer for discussion a variety of possible solutions, based on QCA's initial work on options for controlled assessments at GCSE.

These are:

Category	Task set by	Conditions	Task marked by	Level of externality
5	teacher	controlled	teacher	
6	teacher	controlled	Awarding body	'controlled assignments'
7	Awarding body	controlled	teacher	
8	Awarding body	controlled	Awarding body	external

Some models for assessing fieldwork and general enquiry skills under controlled conditions

Category	Task set by	Conditions	Task marked by	Focus
5	teacher	controlled	teacher	
6	teacher	controlled	Awarding body	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The centre defines a project and data is collected but the assessment is under controlled conditions. There could be a variety of presentation possibilities, such as interview or recorded presentation, perhaps with additional validation (5 or 6) • Students produce a project plan under controlled conditions; they then collect the data. Students write their report under controlled conditions: teacher or AB assesses (5 or 6) • Variant: teacher assesses some fieldwork skills during the fieldwork (5) • Students complete fieldwork under teacher supervision and then produce a recorded interview or viva showing their understanding of the process and their results; a sample is moderated externally (as in MFL, music). The question/assessment focus could be defined by teacher or AB (e.g. released on a set day) (5 or 7). 				Fieldwork

² Presentation to GA 2007 annual conference:
http://www.geography.org.uk/download/GA_Conf07Holmes.ppt

Category	Task set by	Conditions	Task marked by	Focus
7	Awarding body	controlled	teacher	
8	Awarding body	controlled	Awarding body	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Awarding body provides some data and a focus; students respond, based on their own fieldwork experience: at best this should be a longer timed assignment. (7 or 8) Students collect fieldwork data, bring their fieldwork notebook into the centre and produce their report under controlled conditions, or use their data to respond to tasks set by the awarding body; the task could be set on one section of the enquiry to encourage depth response, perhaps also in rotation around a variety of themes to ensure it doesn't become formulaic. Perhaps opportunities for students to bring reference materials (OS maps, statistical manuals etc) into the exam. (7 or 8) Students produce a portfolio which provides evidence of the whole enquiry process: under controlled conditions they produce a report or presentation about one part of it, assessed by the teacher or Awarding Body (7 or 8) Students plan and undertake the fieldwork, then under controlled conditions choose from a set menu of questions to match to the work (8) 				Fieldwork
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessments based on pre-release material: students work on the materials as part of their normal work, then are assessed under controlled conditions (options to bring research notes to the assessment). There are a variety of models with good experience at GCSE (e.g. OCR C – Bristol Project) and A level, (e.g. EdExcel B synoptic paper) especially with a decision-making/issues focus. There are opportunities to bring the whole range of skills into this style of assessment, and to develop this approach further for synoptic assessment. It is also a good opportunity for stretching pupils – e.g. by using real-world, messy data: this also offers opportunities to assess students' ability to ask further questions at the top end. The GCSE history pilot uses a similar approach – a four-hour timed research assignment. (7 or 8) There are possibilities for ICT/GIS solutions on these lines, for example virtual tasks using ICT: awarding body provides context and data; students design a hypothesis, enquiry route, tentative conclusions (7 or 8) 				General enquiry skills, including GIS

John Hopkin for Education Committee 16/12/06, revised 9/8/07.