

GTIP Think Piece –Thinking about GCSE (Phil Wood)

In this Think Piece, Phil Wood (Lecturer in Geography Education at the School of Education, University of Leicester) considers some of the issues surrounding GCSE, including the structure of the GCSEs and the changes that are occurring due to the introduction of new specifications.

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The activities in the following download will be referred to throughout this Think Piece.

[Suggested activities for PGCE students](#)

(http://geography.org.uk/download/GA_PRGTIPGCSEPGCEActivities.pdf)

Introduction - getting to know the GCSE

In September 2009, GCSEs are set to change as part of an ongoing and wide-ranging revision of the secondary school curriculum, which has already seen sweeping changes at both Key Stage 3 and A-level. This revision of the curriculum led to the redefining of the Subject Criteria for Geography at GCSE. This is a document which outlines for all Awarding Bodies the criteria by which they must abide in developing a GCSE course, and hence is the starting point for the design of any new specification. You may download this document from the [QCA website](#).

The revision of the curriculum at secondary level has given rise to an opportunity for the Awarding Bodies to reassess and develop new approaches to geography as a subject. There has been a range of reactions to this opportunity with Awarding Bodies retaining specifications which have characteristics similar to those already available; these have tended to be their most popular specifications. Alternative approaches have also been developed which have taken on a different character, often incorporating new content and perhaps suggesting more innovative approaches to learning.

As part of the revision of the GCSE, the criteria for assessment have also been considered and changed. Until the present revision, specifications included an element of coursework, together with formal examinations. The examinations were predominantly 'traditional' examination papers, acting as a summary assessment of an area of the content covered during the course, with each paper covering the knowledge and understanding of a single module of the specification. Some specifications had the addition of a decision making exercise as one of the examinations offered, essentially acting as a way of including a critical thinking / problem solving element to the assessment regime.

However, the new subject criteria do not allow for a traditional coursework format to be followed, and have instead introduced 'controlled assessments'. (Download this [document](#) on the QCA site, pages 44 - 48 cover geography). This new form of assessment is similar in style to coursework, but has a series of restrictions which are explained in QCA regulations (see the section on controlled

assessments below).

[Now do Activity 1: What does a GCSE specification include?](#)

http://geography.org.uk/download/GA_PRGTIPGCSEPGCEActivities.pdf

The Awarding Bodies have used the official guidelines, their own expert knowledge and understanding, and beliefs about what constitutes a worthwhile educational experience within geography at this level to decide what their specifications should include in terms of subject knowledge and understanding and skills development. Allied to these curricular and philosophical considerations, are those which relate more pragmatically to the 'market'. The Awarding Bodies are obviously in competition for candidates, and in developing new specifications there will have been consideration about who the 'audience' is, including the need to retain centres who already take particular specifications, as well as making them attractive to new centres.

Because Geography as a subject is so diverse, there are many different ways in which the content of each specification can be developed. Some appear to have retained a fairly 'traditional' approach, continuing to include a large proportion of areas of the subject which have been a feature of 14-16 geography education for over 30 years. A small number of the specifications have taken a more 'radical' view of the content they wish to include, perhaps being conscious of changes in the subject at degree level and developments in curriculum projects such as the Pilot GCSE. Hence, there is a spectrum of approaches to the subject criteria, and this has led to a wide choice of specifications from which subject areas can choose.

[Now do Activity 2: Comparing the content of GCSE specifications](#)

http://geography.org.uk/download/GA_PRGTIPGCSEPGCEActivities.pdf

How is GCSE assessed?

The subject criteria for the new GCSEs in Geography state that 75% of the assessment regime must be by 'external examination', i.e. by formal examination. However, unlike the majority of pre-existing GCSEs, the specifications will be modular. This means that a proportion of the examinations can be taken at points during the course as opposed to at the end of the course (normally at the end of Year 11). In addition there is the inclusion of the controlled assessment (25%).

All of the examinations will be examined through the use of 'tiered papers'. This means that students will not sit a single examination paper regardless of ability, but instead can be entered for either a Higher Tier paper or a Foundation Tier paper. The papers are differentiated in their difficulty, with the result that students taking the Higher Tier examinations can gain a grade between A* and D (if they fall below a D grade they automatically get a U), and those taking the Foundation Tier examinations can gain a grade between C and U.

The purpose of a tiered paper is to give all students a greater opportunity to engage with the questions asked. However, it poses a dilemma for some students, for if they are expected to gain a C grade should they be entered for the Foundation paper in an attempt to ensure their grade, or should they be entered for a Higher paper in the hope that they might do well enough to gain a B?

[Now do Activity 3: Analysing GCSE papers](#)

http://geography.org.uk/download/GA_PRGTIPGCSEPGCEActivities.pdf

What is a Controlled Assessment?

As suggested above, the controlled assessment is one of the greatest changes to the format of the new GCSE specifications. It replaces the coursework element of the present specifications, but in many respects mimics it, mainly tightening control in its management. The controlled assessment framework highlights the requirement to test particular skills through the use of fieldwork. The skills are tested through the use of a three stage assessment regime, each stage of which is controlled to a higher or lower degree. The three stages are:

-) *Task setting* (highly controlled). The task or tasks are set by the Awarding Body, and must be replaced each year.
-) *Task taking* (various levels of control). This is the most complex of the three stages, involving lower levels of control during the data collection phase, with some elements defined by the Awarding Body, others by the school. For example, the Awarding Body has to clearly explain the permissible level of teacher support and appropriate research methodologies which can be provided, whilst the school has a level of determination in the supply of resources. In the stage where results are analysed and evaluated, there is a higher level of control with work completed under formal supervision, time limits set for the completion of work, clear limits to teacher support, and the requirement for individual, independent work by students.
-) *Task marking* (medium control). Teachers are responsible for the marking of the controlled assessment once complete, the Awarding Bodies moderating a sample to ensure consistency between schools.

This is perhaps the largest change in the way that GCSE will be taught and examined, and subject areas will perhaps need to change their teaching styles in this area of the new specifications more than elsewhere.

[Now do Activity 4: Awarding Body controlled assessments](http://www.geography.org.uk/download/GA_PRGTIPGCSEPGCEActivities.pdf)

(http://www.geography.org.uk/download/GA_PRGTIPGCSEPGCEActivities.pdf)

How can we plan for progression?

It should be remembered that the changes to GCSE are part of a wider overhaul of the Secondary National Curriculum. The new GCSEs will be taught from September 2009, following a new Key Stage 3 Programme of Study, and new A-level courses, both of which have recently started (in September 2008). Given these changes, one issue which will be in the forefront of the minds of many geography subject leaders is how a new GCSE will fit between the new Key Stage 3 and A-level. The new A-level specifications, whilst fewer in number than before, are perhaps more diverse in their content and approaches than previously. Similarly, the freeing up of the Key Stage 3 Programme of Study, to one based on concepts as opposed to subject content, give subject areas a wide choice of foci.

[Now do Activity 5: GCSE and progression](http://www.geography.org.uk/download/GA_PRGTIPGCSEPGCEActivities.pdf)

(http://www.geography.org.uk/download/GA_PRGTIPGCSEPGCEActivities.pdf)

Conclusions

The new GCSEs bring both continuity and change when compared to the pre-existing specifications. It is important that you are aware of the changes which are occurring, and that you can understand the issues and processes which are important in planning for and developing new learning experiences. You may be fortunate enough to be involved in departmental discussions concerning planning for the new GCSEs, you may even be involved in planning for the introduction of the controlled assessment. What is certain is that by discussing the issues and being involved in

developmental work you will begin to gain a deeper, critical understanding of the issues and possible approaches.

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