



Geographical Association curriculum consultation

FEEDBACK REPORT

December 2012

Find the GA's curriculum proposals at
www.geography.org.uk/getinvolved/nccconsultation

Section 1: Executive summary

The GA's curriculum proposals

The GA's curriculum proposals are the Association's attempt to identify the core knowledge and understanding that all pupils should be expected to acquire in the course of their schooling.

Analysis of results

The GA's 2012 curriculum consultation attracted 195 responses.

- 93.6% agreed that "the aims and outcomes statements for each key stage support planning and make the rationale for geography clear";
- 79.5% agreed that "the content and guiding questions for each key stage provide coverage appropriate for the core of a student's geographical education";
- 84% agreed that "the level of detail of the curriculum proposals is appropriate for a national curriculum";
- 95.1% agreed that the paper 'Thinking Geographically' "shows how essential content can be used to develop students' conceptual understanding of geography";
- 88.2% agreed that "the assessment descriptors for each content exemplar provide appropriate standards and outcomes in a way which will support assessment";
- overall, 86.5% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the GA's proposals.

Key findings

1. A national curriculum needs clear aims and outcomes statements to support planning and make the rationale for geography clear.

Many respondents welcomed the way in which curriculum aims expressed the purpose(s) of studying the subject. The overall sense of expected progress conveyed by the key stage statements also attracted widespread support.

2. Content can be identified for each key stage which provides coverage appropriate for the core of a student's geographical education.

Expressing the curriculum as core content was welcomed by most respondents, and the addition of enquiry questions to each content selection to provide a 'steer' to teachers attracted universal support. Familiar curriculum debates included the balance between prescription and freedom; between knowledge, understanding and skills; balancing content of wider significance with that of local relevance; drawing on the subject discipline as well as pupils' own experiences; and allowing pupils to re-examine key content whilst avoiding repetition.

3. A concise document can provide an appropriate level of detail for a national curriculum.

The majority of responses praised the balance which had been struck in terms of curriculum detail and concluded that this would ensure consistency whilst allowing flexibility.

4. Demonstrating how essential content can be used to develop students' conceptual understanding of geography is valuable to teachers.

The paper 'Thinking Geographically' received overwhelming support for its attempt to link geographical concepts with core knowledge. Many regarded it as a strong and succinct rationale for the subject in schools, as well as the basis for curriculum planning.

5. Assessment descriptors for items of content can indicate appropriate standards and outcomes in a way which supports assessment.

Most feedback acknowledged that the assessment descriptors described age-appropriate pupil outcomes in sufficient detail for assessment purposes. As with the 2011 consultation, the identification of three areas of knowledge (contextual, conceptual and procedural) was welcomed. Further work is required to establish a complete picture of standards.

6. The GA's proposals for the national curriculum enjoy overwhelming support.

A document containing subject content alongside clear statements of aims, rationale and outcomes provides a powerful guide for planning, teaching and assessing. Overall, three aspects of the proposals received particular praise:

- the precise identification of core content;
- the balance struck between prescription and freedom;
- the staged or structured approach to curriculum content.

7. Teachers and schools will require considerable support in order to implement a new national curriculum.

Respondents made clear that schools and teachers would be in great need of exemplification, assessment frameworks and advice. The needs of non-specialists were raised and the Association was urged to play an active role in providing advice, guidance, training and teaching resources in support of a slimmer curriculum.

Note

A number of responses included detailed suggestions for rewording and reworking specific parts of the proposals. Whilst these have not been detailed in this report, these recommendations have been forwarded to the GA's national curriculum review group.

Section 2: The GA's curriculum proposals

When it published its manifesto *A Different View* in 2009, the Geographical Association (GA) established the foundations for planning a new national curriculum for geography. In early 2012, the GA's National Curriculum Review Group (Appendix B) was tasked with writing a set of coherent proposals, based on the thinking established by the GA's 2011 curriculum proposals and rationale, the subsequent public consultation and the published report (www.geography.org.uk/getinvolved/geographycurriculumconsultation2011).

The proposals were drawn up and consulted upon in order to:

- establish a robust professional view of the geography curriculum 11-16;
- test the validity of the Association's ideas with its members and the wider public;
- create a coherent set of documents for communicating ideas with third parties, including central government, during a period of curriculum reform.

The consultation documents (www.geography.org.uk/getinvolved/ncconsultation) consisted of:



A paper on 'Thinking Geographically' intended to promote discussion and help teachers reflect on what it means to 'think geographically' and why this is important;



Aims and key stage 'outcomes statements' showing how students progress through the key stages as they develop their ability to think geographically;

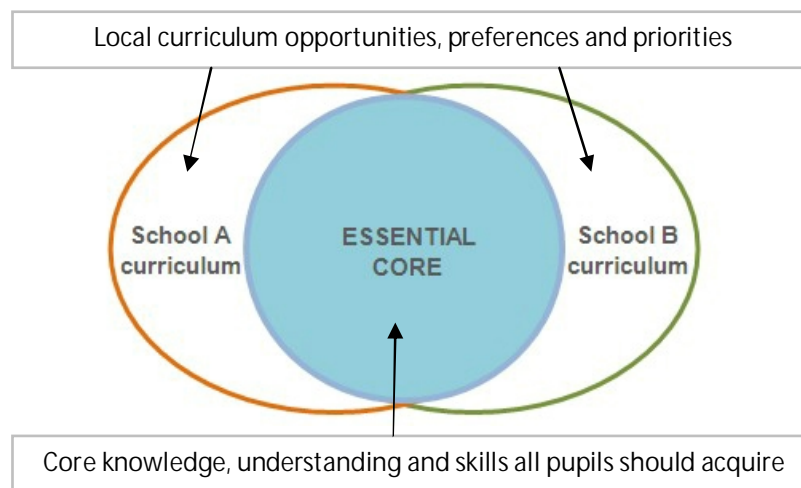


Key stage content and guiding questions for each key stage, showing the core requirement. This was intended to be read like a course 'specification', and form the basis for a school's schemes of work;



content exemplars providing a broad description of the content and associated assessment indicators.

The proposals were the GA's response to the 2010 White Paper *The Importance of Teaching*, which stated that 'The National Curriculum should set out clearly the core knowledge and understanding that all children should be expected to acquire in the course of their schooling' (para. 4.7). However, the Association made clear that the essential core is not all that pupils should be taught. This diagram shows the relationship between the core and overall curriculum taught in two different schools:



The GA invited responses in several ways. An online survey allowed visitors to the GA website to indicate their level of agreement with six statements relating to the proposals. In addition, the web pages allowed both members and non-members to contribute written responses via an online forum. Some individuals and organisation chose instead to write directly to the GA with their considered positions.

Whilst the proposals are certainly the most recent attempt by the Association to provide guidance to its members on the relationship between knowledge, skills and understanding in geography, they are by no means the first:

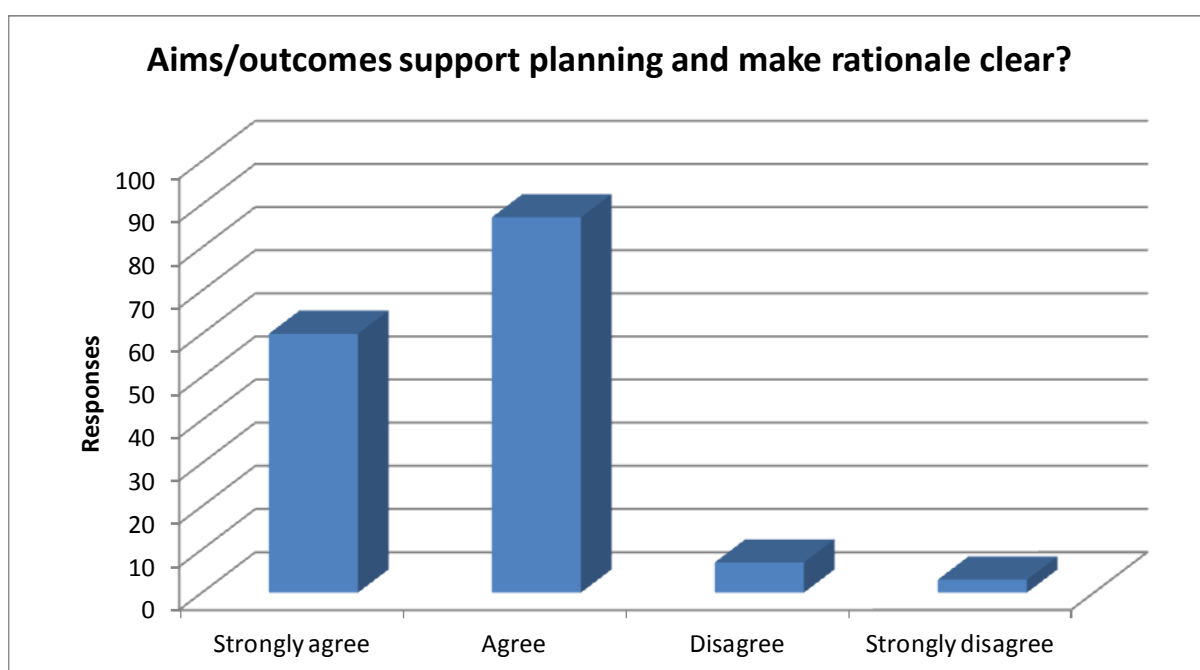
"It has been felt for some years by many teachers and examiners that the modern teaching of geography has not always succeeded in fixing in the memories of pupils a definite knowledge of facts, and that in the tendency to insist primarily on the exercise and development of the power of reasoning, we were in danger of forgetting that exact reasoning is of little value unless it is based on accurate knowledge of fact."

Fawcett, C. (1927) 'Report on the results of an experimental test paper in elementary geographical fact' in *Geography* 14 (1) pp. 50-2

Section 3: Analysis of responses

Between September and October 2012, the online curriculum proposals received 3889 page views. The Key Stage Content was downloaded 1009 times; the paper Thinking Geographically 930 times; the Aims/Outcomes 802 times and the Content exemplars 749 times. There were 157 responses to the online questionnaire – many of these contained detailed written comments in addition to the questionnaire. The online forum received 30 written submissions and eight extended written contributions were received. In total, therefore, the consultation attracted 195 responses.

Proposition 1: The aims and outcomes statements for each key stage support planning and make the rationale for geography clear.



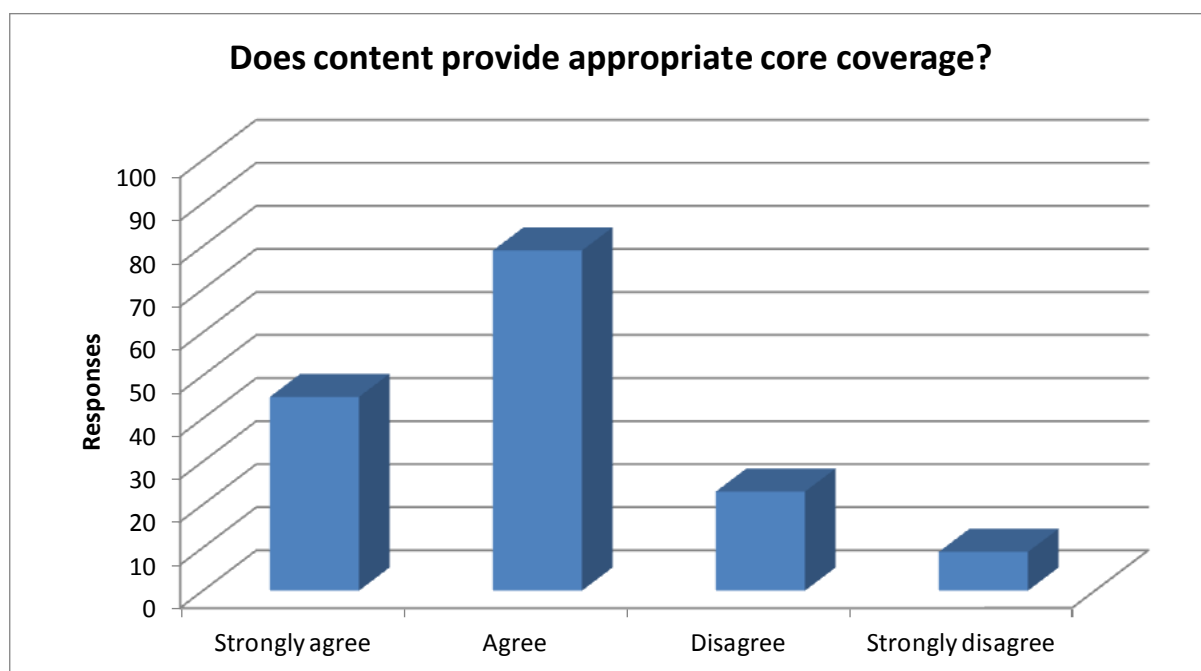
Of the 157 online 'questionnaire' respondents, 93.6% either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Many respondents welcomed the way in which the aims expressed the purpose(s) of studying the subject, creating "a fantastic rationale for Geography." The overall sense of expected progress conveyed by the key stage statements also attracted widespread support. The outcomes were said to "demonstrate a clear development arc" and "would allow more effective 'building' from one key stage to the next." One primary practitioner commented: "I believe that these outcome statements for KS1, KS2a and KS2b reflect the huge potential for geographical understanding that our pupils have, which is so often underestimated."

A large number of comments praised the balance which was struck in this section between setting overall direction and prescribing what teachers should do: "... clear

enough that teachers understand what is expected to be learned by the end of each key stage ... not too rigid and can be adapted to what may suit particular schools."

A handful of respondents questioned the practical value of the aims and outcomes. One characterised them as "suitably vague as to allow almost anything you want to teach". Others queried the absence of specific concepts, themes or skills, such as sustainability, fieldwork or physical geography. Whilst the majority did recognise the value of explicit aims, an even clearer relationship between curriculum aims and content might have served to demonstrate the contribution of aims and broad outcome statements towards planning, teaching and assessing.

Proposition 2: The content and guiding questions for each key stage provide coverage appropriate for the core of a student's geographical education.



This proposition received 156 questionnaire responses, of which 79.5% indicated agreement or strong agreement. Expressing the curriculum as core content was a welcome move for most respondents:

- "These content units seem to balance learning about places, and both human and physical geography. They avoid the mistake of the past when each key stage seemed to demand teaching the whole of geography. The GA's curriculum appears to sample from geography instead - and suggests a sensible core."
- "a great starting point for the curriculum planning process, and facilitates the creative engagement with the subject. They really get you Thinking Geographically".

The addition of enquiry questions to each content selection to 'pitch' the content and provide a 'steer' to teachers attracted universal support: "These questions should definitely

provide a basis for the core, but their openness allows teaching of the subject to be tailored, welcomes student enquiry, and gives plenty of room for differentiation."

Criticisms of the proposed content fell into a number of categories. Some felt that the curriculum summary documents should convey excitement and specify pedagogical opportunities. One wrote, "...this outline seems joyless and has removed most of the vibrancy recent curriculum developments introduced". A small number felt that the content implied a particular approach to teaching, and that it seemed "about imparting knowledge rather than allowing scope for the children to construct their understanding". Comments of this nature challenged the value of distinguishing core content from the creative processes at work in classrooms, and regarded the content as representing an 'authoritative' take on the subject. Since previous iterations of the statutory national curriculum made wide-ranging statements about geography teaching (such as the need to build on students' experiences and embrace current issues), it should come as no surprise to find that some teachers expected to find similar statements in the GA's latest proposals. Another small group of respondents mistook the core for the entire curriculum and did not perceive that freedom would be provided to extend or adapt core content, add locally-selected content, or make decisions on framing and sequencing (detailed planning): "It ... ignores the flexibility needed to cover world events - following the Boxing Day tsunami I scrap[p]ed the planned topic for that term".

There was also feedback on the nature of the content selected. In terms of overall tone, most were "glad to see real geography back on the agenda" and one welcomed "a shift away from the postmodern push of making geog 'cool' by teaching what is more sociological than geographical". A minority felt that it would not be possible to engage pupils using the selected content. They tended to read the proposals as a step back towards 'traditional' geography. Interestingly, a similar number felt the proposals should express greater subject rigour, for example by making physical geography content more prominent and exacting. This returns us perhaps to the notion of curriculum making (rather than curriculum writing), in which the subject discipline and the interests and experiences of pupils are both used as resources by the teacher, rather than being seen in conflict. This concept has previously been used to help steer teachers away from a false debate in which the 'subject' is equated with sterile tradition and inert knowledge whilst 'pupil interests' are seen as the sole source of engagement, albeit transient and lacking in substance.

A related debate focused on the balance between skills and knowledge within the curriculum. Again, comments supporting more emphasis on geographical (and generic) skills were balanced by those that felt a re-calibration of knowledge and skills was overdue ("what is the point of learning about favelas if the children do not know where they exist?"). For one respondent, the content represented "a very welcome advance as the previous geography curriculum ... was essentially hijacked by a skills based approach - not by teachers of geography but [by] school leadership teams".

A number of respondents suggested adding content. Many of these supported the explicit inclusion of the term 'sustainability' or 'sustainable development' throughout the core curriculum (rather than only in KS4). They argued that this concept should be considered as essential to a pupils' geographical education. Similar arguments were advanced for human-environmental themes, such as climate change and degradation of the biosphere. Other suggestions tended only to emphasise the interest pupils had in specific topics, such as crime (which would of course be at the discretion of the teacher) rather than the role they played in developing the essential knowledge and understanding required for future progress. One item of content – 'moving ice' in KS3 – was singled out by several respondents for removal. Once again, the argument was that pupils would not relate to this aspect of study.

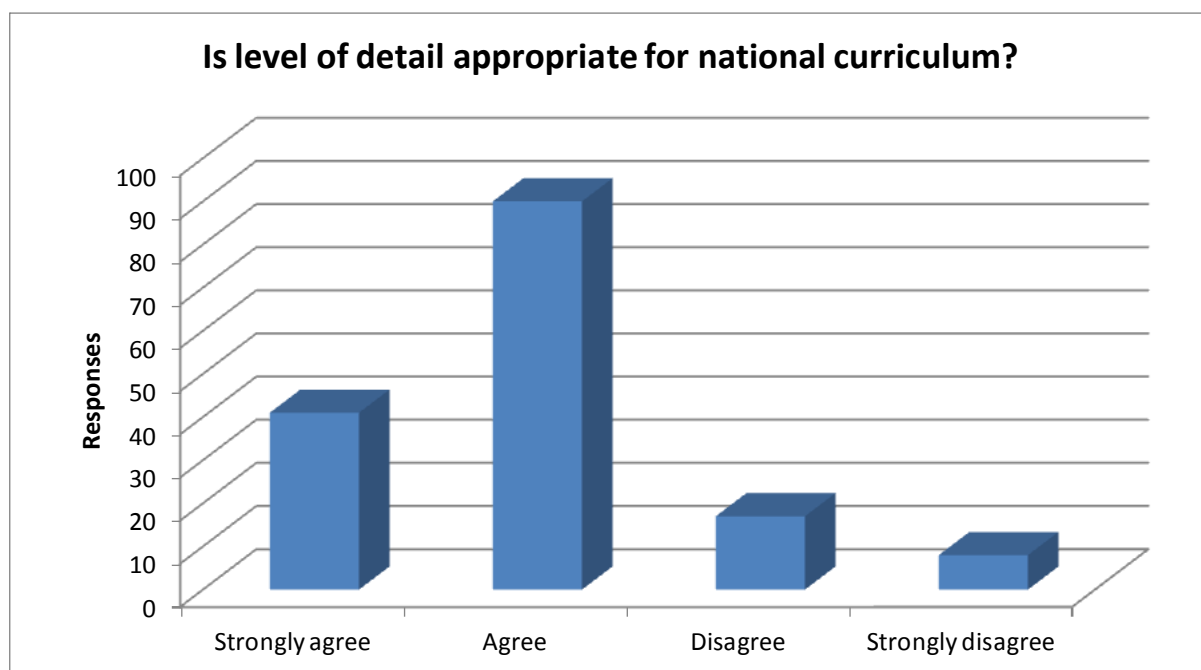
A significant minority opposed prescribing places or assigning specific places to each key stage. Arguments against this approach centred on its lack of flexibility and the apparently arbitrary nature of the selections. One felt that, if a country or continent was included in another key stage, this would restrict them from studying these places with their own pupils, even where they had a particular interest or connection. Relatively few respondents recognised this approach as a means of building a 'world jigsaw' across the key stages in order to promote secure knowledge of places and locations.

The level of challenge implicit in the content sequencing was also commented upon. Some agreed with the comment about recognising the potential of KS2 pupils (p.6) and one expert submission called for raising expectations still further. A few felt the proposed content would be too challenging for this age group. Reservations were also expressed about primary practitioners' ability to teach the content selected for key stage 2a and b. Some secondary teachers questioned the level of depth that pupils would be equipped with and feared that this content would need to be covered again at KS3. A certain mismatch was evident between the optimism of primary experts and the pessimism of some secondary practitioners.

A handful of comments were received about linear and a spiral approaches to the curriculum, with opinions expressed in support of both. The "enormous challenge" of teaching about places was cited by one as an argument for including the same places more than once: "a few case studies [from Africa] will not really challenge stereotypes fostered at a young age".

Finally, one or two comments were received questioning how the individual items of core content would 'cumulate' so that pupils could develop and demonstrate synoptic knowledge from across the core, recalling the point above (p.8) about the limited role of a core curriculum in providing guidance on teaching.

Proposition 3: The level of detail of the curriculum proposals is appropriate for a national curriculum.

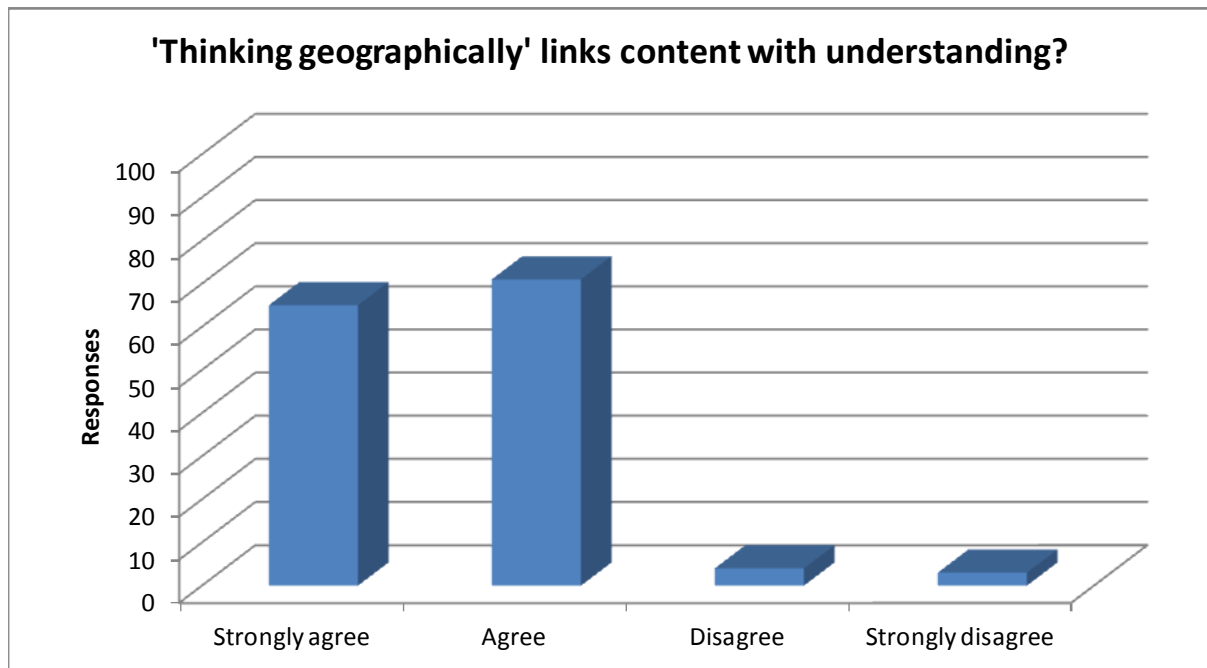


Of the 156 respondents to this proposition, 84% either agreed or strongly agreed. The majority praised the balance which had been struck between freedom and prescription and felt this would "ensure consistency in approach but flexibility in delivery" and "enable differentiation at different levels of learning".

One or two fears were expressed that school leaders would mis-read or abuse a slimmed-down curriculum and reduce the time allocated to geography, since the content statements "are deceptively concise ... which could make the curriculum look smaller than it is." More curriculum detail was requested on the development of skills - particularly fieldwork skills - through the key stage content in case the "lack of any specific mention of fieldwork will give senior managers in schools an excuse to deny permission for fieldwork activities to occur."

Respondents made clear that schools and teachers would be in great need of exemplification, assessment frameworks and advice. The needs of non-specialists were raised and the Association was urged to play an active role in providing advice, guidance, training and teaching resources in support of a slimmer curriculum. For some, feelings on this issue ran high: "Yet again geography teachers are being presented with the bones of an idea and being left to flesh it out ourselves with limited time and resources"

Proposition 4: The paper on 'Thinking Geographically' shows how essential content can be used to develop students' conceptual understanding of geography.

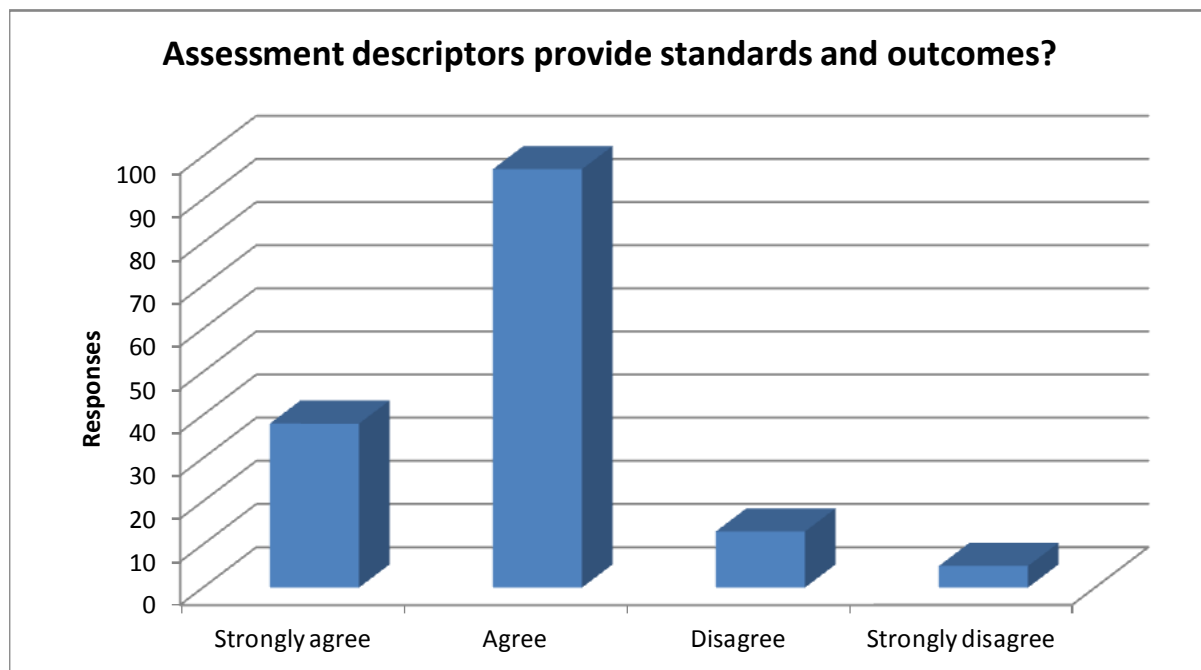


Of the 143 questionnaire respondents, 95.1% either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. In its attempt to link geographical concepts with core knowledge, the paper was praised by one respondent for giving "appropriate emphasis ... to understanding, both independently and in combination with knowledge". Another wished that "all clear thinking GA ideas were also adopted by exam boards and Ofqual".

Aside from tackling the question of knowledge within the geography curriculum, a range of purposes or potential uses for the paper were identified by respondents. Some saw it as a rallying cry for the subject: "... one of the strongest, most succinct rationales for teaching geography in schools I have seen. It provides a very robust platform and a framework for what we are trying to achieve with young people." Others saw it as helping directly in planning and teaching. Appendix 1 in particular was described as "a useful planning tool". The assertion within the paper that place, space and environment formed the three main organising concepts of geography met with widespread support, giving "a much more focused idea of the discipline which we can use with the children and with non-specialists". A few, however, felt that scale deserved 'equal billing' with these three concepts.

The claim that geographical thinking is distinct from everyday thinking was challenged, with calls for students' everyday experience and thinking about place, space and environment to be related to what they study at school. Others felt there was "no obvious link between the 'Thinking Geographically' paper and the list of content at each key stage" (references to impacts of people and sustainability were cited as examples) or wondered "where the 'progression' resides in this document". One or two commentators suggested that teachers would need more help in understanding the paper and applying it to their planning, teaching or assessing: "it requires confidence to pick your own through the document and apply it real situations".

Proposition 5: The assessment descriptors for each content exemplar provide appropriate standards and outcomes in a way which will support assessment.



This proposition attracted 153 online responses, of which 88.2% indicated agreement or strong agreement. Most feedback acknowledged that the assessment descriptors described age-appropriate pupil outcomes sufficient detail for assessment purposes. As with the 2011 consultation, the identification of three areas of knowledge (contextual, conceptual and procedural) was welcomed. Respondents praised the balance struck between prescription and freedom and suggested that the assessment statements would provide flexibility in designing methods of assessment: "I think these are great as they give a lot of scope for how assessment will take place but at the same time they say exactly what students must be able to do".

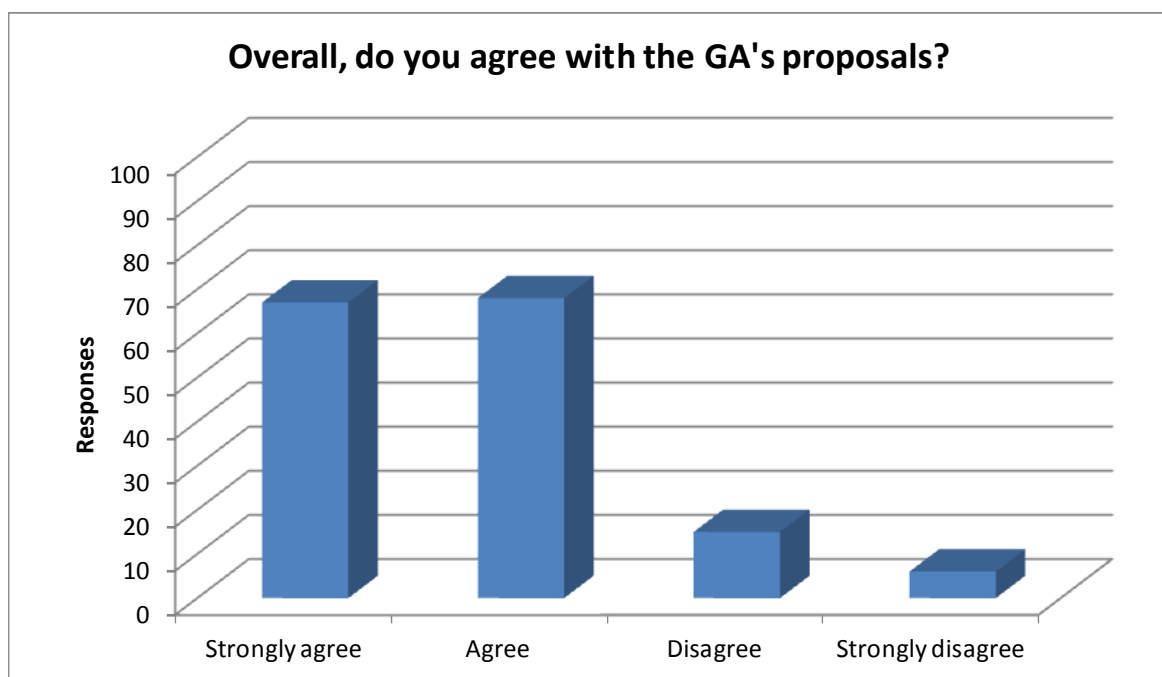
Some felt that the descriptors were too restrictive or narrow or there needed to be greater recognition of skills, including fieldwork, map skills and GIS, as well as generic skills (echoing this aspect of the debate over content selection). A very small number held the opposite view – that the descriptors were too open.

Since only 6 out of 24 content items were exemplified in the proposals, it should come as no surprise that a significant number of comments requested further exemplification. Many of these also mentioned other forms of guidance, including pupil exemplars and 'pupil-friendly' versions of the descriptors. The position of non-specialists was raised several times, where it was suggested that the flexibility afforded by the descriptors would create uncertainty and lead to inaccurate assessment. One or two requests were made to specify the mode of assessment (e.g. tests, presentations), as well as the pupil outcome.

Once again, the range of comments on this matter illustrates the tension between setting standards, providing guidance and restricting professional freedom.

The issue of measuring and recording progress was also highlighted in some of the feedback. Some respondents questioned how effectively the notion of progression had been captured across the range of exemplars. One claimed that "if you took away the headings it would actually be hard to identify the progressive nature of the topics" whilst another pointed out how difficult it was to deal with progression in understanding in a concise way. Others stressed the dominant role of reporting and accountability within schools. They wanted to know how assessment would 'work' using these proposals and how attainment would be recorded. In particular, queries were raised about the fate of national curriculum levels. One respondent asked, with passion, "How do we assess mastery and degrees of mastery? Is it going to be all or nothing? Pass or fail?"

Proposition 6: In general, and all things considered, I support the GA's proposals for the national curriculum.



The final and overall statement attracted 156 online responses. Of these, 86.5% were in agreement or strong agreement. Some respondents took this opportunity to sum up why they supported the proposals and which aspects they felt most positive about. Three aspects received particular praise:

- the precise articulation of the requirements ("provide[s] teachers with a much more detailed understanding of the subject and the expectations, on which to base their planning") including the identification of core knowledge ("the pegs on to which I've placed subsequent learning");

- the balance struck between prescription and freedom ("scope for teachers, students and schools to find what interests them and work it into their own curriculum while following the national curriculum at the same time");
- the staged or structured approach to curriculum content ("I like the idea of each key stage looking at different aspects of Geography as this will avoid repetition").

Support was not unqualified. Some generally supportive respondents lamented what they perceived would be an increase in prescription – particularly over the places they would study. Others wanted more detail - for example showing precisely where aspects of space, place and environment were expressed within the curriculum – or repeated earlier requests for more support and guidance. Those in overall disagreement with the proposals expressed strikingly similar concerns: that content knowledge would be taught at the expense of teacher freedom, student engagement and the development of skills. One argument was put forward that the proposals neglected the ethical dimension of geography and failed to acknowledge different perspectives.

Section 4: Key findings

1. A national curriculum needs clear aims and outcomes statements to support planning and make the rationale for geography clear.

The aims and outcome statements as set out by the GA carry considerable support for their clarity and as representations of the subject's essential features. Outcome statements for each key stage give the core content its proper geographical context and help to convey an expectation of standards and progress for the purposes of planning and assessing.

2. Content can be identified for each key stage which provides coverage appropriate for the core of a student's geographical education.

Prescribing specific places, themes and skills across key stages allows appropriate content coverage and balance between different aspects of the subject. Identifying geographical questions as foci for study brings greater precision to a 'slimmed down' curriculum.

The core content proposed by the GA is supported by the great majority. For content selections to be seen as justified rather than arbitrary, the links between overall aims and content must be clear and opportunities be provided to explore the contentious nature of 'facts'. Content needs to be selective, leaving scope for additions that take account of each school's context. Fieldwork should be identified as core aspect of geographical study. The curriculum should also provide opportunities to adopt a synoptic approach so that the holistic nature of geographical thinking can be developed. The notion of curriculum making might help steer teachers away from equating the 'subject' with inert knowledge and 'pupil interests' as the sole source of engagement.

3. A concise document can provide an appropriate level of detail for a national curriculum.

A concisely-written core curriculum must capture the essence of what should be taught, without prescribing approaches to planning or teaching, and yet also include statements that allow content to be assessed against consistent standards. Support and guidance will be required through professional networks in order to achieve consistency.

4. Demonstrating how essential content can be used to develop students' conceptual understanding of geography is valuable to teachers.

The paper 'Thinking Geographically' identifies the core characteristics of geography, helps to define its range as an academic discipline and enjoys overwhelming support. Its message is valued by teachers for providing the rationale that underpins the subject content. Clear ideas about progression in conceptual understanding are key to the coherence of the subject across its many and varied themes and places.

5. Assessment descriptors for items of content can indicate appropriate standards and outcomes in a way which supports assessment.

Defining different types and characteristics of core geographical knowledge, such as knowledge of facts, concepts and processes, is a useful approach. Linking subject content to outcomes for the purpose of assessment is difficult to achieve without narrowly prescribing core content. Attempts by the GA to do this enjoy overall approval but further work is needed to establish a complete picture of expected standards. Exemplification of standards is greatly needed.

6. The GA's proposals for the national curriculum enjoy overwhelming support.

A document containing subject content alongside clear statements of aims, rationale and outcomes provides a powerful guide for planning, teaching and assessing. It is essential that a document that sets out what is to be taught should also state that the methods used to organise content, teach it and assess it are matters to be determined by teachers. Whilst some welcome concise statements of content, others prefer to take responsibility for choosing subject content, adhering only to broad guidelines of subject characteristics.

7. Teachers and schools will require considerable support in order to implement a new national curriculum.

Advice, guidance, training, exemplification and teaching resources will be required to support a slimmer curriculum. Particular attention needs to be paid to the needs of non-specialist teachers of geography. The Association has a key role to play.

Written by Alan Kinder

APPENDIX A: ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
1. The aims and outcomes statements for each key stage support planning and make the rationale for geography clear.	60	87	7	3	157
2. The content and guiding questions for each key stage provide coverage appropriate for the core of a student's geographical education.	45	79	23	9	156
3. The level of detail of the curriculum proposals is appropriate for a national curriculum.	41	90	17	8	156
4. The paper on 'Thinking Geographically' shows how essential content can be used to develop students' conceptual understanding of geography.	65	71	4	3	143
5. The assessment descriptors for each content exemplar provide appropriate standards and outcomes in a way which will support assessment.	38	97	13	5	153
6. In general, and all things considered, I support the GA's proposals for the national curriculum.	67	68	15	6	156

APPENDIX B: GEOGRAPHICAL ASSOCIATION NATIONAL CURRICULUM REVIEW GROUP

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