

The reinstatement of fieldwork requirements for geography GCSE and A level qualifications in 2023

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department for Education (DfE) and the exams regulator, Ofqual, temporarily suspended the fieldwork requirements for GCSE and A level geography. While schools and colleges were still encouraged to engage with fieldwork wherever possible, GCSE candidates were not required to study two contrasting environments. Similarly, AS and A level candidates were not required to undertake two or four days of fieldwork (respectively). For A level candidates, this meant the non-exam assessment (NEA) could be completed without analysing data gathered in the field. We, the undersigned organisations, wholeheartedly welcome the announcement by the DfE and Ofqual that expectations for fieldwork at GCSE and A level have been reinstated from 2022–23 onwards.¹ However, the professional and educational landscape for school fieldwork has changed significantly. Concerted work is now needed to ensure that it regains the levels of support and participation it merits.

Geography fieldwork involves leaving the classroom in order to learn through first-hand experience, by observing and asking questions of and in the real world. The wide benefits of fieldwork are well recognised by students, parents, geography teachers, educational researchers, employers and policymakers. They include the inspiration that comes through memorable school experiences, the opportunities for developing practical skills and working within a team, as well as increased independence, confidence and the ability to deal with risk and uncertainty. Just as importantly, well-designed geography fieldwork provides a unique opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge to the particular circumstances of a real-world location, whether a distant and unfamiliar one or somewhere closer to home. The rich process of learning which takes place before, during and after high-quality fieldwork invites students to:

- develop their investigative skills in distinctive and important ways
- observe phenomena in context and begin to make sense of complexity, initially through careful observation and primary data collection
- appreciate that geographical knowledge, while constructed with rigour and care, can never be a complete or uncontested account of the world.²

Fieldwork is therefore one of the ways in which geographers create valuable knowledge about the world and one of the means by which we teach young people to *become* geographers, rather than just teaching them *about* the subject.

We do not underestimate the challenge of re-energising fieldwork across all schools in the country. The obstacles to providing plentiful, high-quality and accessible fieldwork for all students are also well-known and well-researched. They include the cost of field visits relative to constrained school and household budgets and variations amongst teachers in the level of professional knowledge and confidence to plan and run fieldwork. The support of school senior

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/subject-content-and-assessment-arrangements-2022-to-2023>

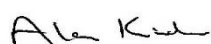
² Kinder, A. (2018) 'Acquiring geographical knowledge and understanding through fieldwork', *Teaching Geography* 43,3, pp.109-112.

leaders is pivotal, as fieldwork needs to be included throughout the curriculum and not merely as a response to qualification requirements. As a recent Ofsted research report into geography put it: ‘fieldwork experiences need to be more than tokenistic events to satisfy the minimum expectation set out in the specification for a qualification.’³

The impacts of the pandemic on fieldwork provision have not and will not disappear following the announcement from the DfE and Ofqual. Further work is now needed to remake the case for fieldwork and to identify opportunities for low-cost, local and inclusive fieldwork in addition to opportunities to travel further afield. Above all, we acknowledge the need for a national response to the professional development needs of teachers in respect of fieldwork design and provision. In particular, new entrants to teaching, many of whom had their own fieldwork experiences as undergraduates and pre-service teachers impacted by COVID-19, will need targeted support and encouragement. We also acknowledge the need for guidance on the growing use of technology to support and complement (but not replace) first-hand experience in the field.

We therefore wish to restate our commitment to working with one another, with the DfE and with Ofqual to ensure that school and college senior leaders are aware of the reinstatement of fieldwork requirements from 2023. For the growing number of young people choosing geography as an option post-14, seeking to better understand the natural, social, economic and political processes at work in their localities and on the global stage, the significance of educational fieldwork activities towards their personal and intellectual development is greater now than ever. We are therefore confirming our commitment to supporting teachers of geography, to help them provide inspiring, challenging and inclusive fieldwork experiences for the children and young people in their care.

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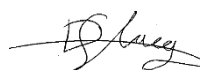
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³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-review-series-geography/research-review-series-geography>