

## **Ofsted comments on geography assessment**

(Source: *Good assessment practice in geography*, HMI 1474, Ofsted, 2003)

Assessment in geography is most effective where opportunities are clearly identified and integrated into the scheme of work. These should provide clear progression in geographical skills, knowledge and understanding across each key stage. Good practice involves giving students feedback that they can use to enable them to become involved more effectively in their own learning. This is especially necessary where students are completing an extended piece of work such as a fieldwork enquiry. This formative assessment places a greater emphasis on teacher feedback rather than a grade or percentage. It involves students much more in their learning, allows them to refine and improve their work and has a beneficial impact on outcomes.

### **Marking and providing students with feedback**

Marking is most effective when it is clearly planned for and provides students with clear guidance on achievement and how to improve. Such focused marking can provide quality feedback, as highlighted in this example:

*The department identified key pieces of work that could be used to assess students' progress and provide a focus for detailed formative feedback. Clear assessment criteria were identified, agreed and standardised within the department. These criteria were used to provide detailed feedback for the students who were expected to use this to identify where improvements could be made. Other 'preparatory work' was completed in a 'working' file. Students were aware that this work would be monitored and checked, but not to the same depth as the key assessments. This reduced the burden of marking on the teachers and allowed them to focus on constructive and focused feedback that was both relevant and useful for the students.*

As in other subjects, marking of students' work usually reflects school policy with grades frequently being awarded for both attainment and effort. Students are often unable to explain what this reflects other than a general 'doing well' or 'doing badly'. This is of little value to students in identifying specific areas of geographical learning for improvement. However, where students are clear about grading criteria, for example through a sheet attached to the inside cover of their exercise book, they are more able to gauge their progress against these grades during the course of the year.

### **Planning for assessment**

Assessment is most effective where specific assessment tasks are an integral part of the normal teaching programme and the students' outcomes are used as assessment opportunities. Thus, a piece of classwork or homework can be used to assess geographical understanding or a particular skill. For example, in one school:

*Assessment opportunities lasting between one and three weeks in duration were identified and linked into the teaching programme in each year group. Five key assessments, each year, cover the full range of geographical experience including geographical enquiry and skills as well as knowledge and understanding of places, patterns, processes, sustainable development and environmental change. These, cumulatively, build up a profile of student progress against criteria identified within the level descriptors. Since the assessments are built into the normal teaching programme, they are managed within the curriculum time available. Summative assessment in the department is only used to prepare students for public examinations.*

### **Using assessment to inform teaching and learning**

Assessment is most effective in raising standards when it is based on good curriculum planning and delivery. Assessment in the majority of schools still tends to be summative and is usually dominated by end of module tests. As a consequence, teaching often concentrates on covering curriculum content in readiness for tests and broader geographical skills are neglected. In the most effective practice, assessment is linked to a broad range of learning rather than just the recall of information. This requires careful planning as in the following example:

*Common assessments were completed at the end of each unit at Key Stage 3. They varied in style in order to examine a range of geographical skills. These end of unit assessments were supplemented by coursework tasks that were also linked to specific assessment criteria. This combination gave students access to attain the higher levels by the end of the key stage. Both types of assessments were marked using a common mark scheme to ensure consistency across the department and enable them to be used in the evaluation of teaching approaches.*

### **Using assessment to monitor progress and set targets**

Frequently, students from different partner primary schools have different geographical experiences. Assessment early in Key Stage 3 is most important when geography departments attempt to provide a baseline for students so that they are able to measure individual progress against clear geographical criteria. This enables them to plan teaching more effectively and support individual learning more purposefully. In view of the large range of geographical experiences, an assessment focusing on specific geographical skills such as interpretation of maps or the ability to use geographical resources often provides a relevant baseline against which to measure future progress.

Some schools use imaginative diagnostic approaches to monitor progress of students and identify underachievement at an early stage. This enables additional remedial work or support to be provided to ensure that most students reach their full potential. In one school for example:

*A colour spreadsheet was used for easy visual recognition of progress. All students were given a target grade before the onset of coursework. They recorded this grade on the record sheet and continued to record marks given by the teacher on a weekly basis. If they were ahead of their target, this was highlighted in green. If they are below, this was highlighted in red. Students were*

*required to be at or above their target grade in order to make progress to the next stage. This raised the expectations of both teachers and students.*

Students are often aware of their overall achievement, but cannot relate this to specific geographical strengths or weaknesses and, more crucially, how they could improve. However, through a combination of effective monitoring and sharing of assessment criteria, students can understand how they are achieving in specific areas and set targets for improvement. For example:

*A Year 7 student was aware he was attaining well in terms of skills, especially map work and the ability to use an atlas for research. He also recognised he was less secure on evaluation and analysis. He could describe micro-climates but was unable to make connections to explain processes. His personal target was to improve and develop analytical skills and expand reasons. The work in his book showed he was striving to meet these targets.*

### **Using external criteria to assess coursework**

The assessment of coursework at Key Stage 3 is most effective when common assessment tasks are used for each unit taught and these are related to national curriculum level descriptions. Some of the best practice uses the exemplification guidance provided by Qualifications and Curriculum Authority to help judge the progress made by individual students. A portfolio of work matched to the level descriptions greatly helps teachers monitor quality and standards in geography and also make consistent judgements through a shared understanding of the criteria. For example:

*The department re-designed the core assessment tasks to move away from an over-reliance on tests towards assessments that evaluated a wide range of skills including decision-making, geographical enquiry and problem solving exercises. National curriculum descriptions are used to assess these core tasks. The department is putting together portfolios of students' work from levels 2 to 8 to aid moderation of standards.*

In the best practice end of Key Stage 3 teacher assessment also takes good account of the level criteria and does not simply rely on arbitrary allocation of levels to test marks. A combination of assessment techniques is used to assess the full range of geographical skills not just the recall of geographical information.

Coursework assessment is most effective where opportunities are identified regularly across the curriculum in order that students can develop fieldwork skills, for example, and show progression. This particularly benefits fieldwork at Key Stage 4, as students become used to the processes and develop collection, retrieval, classification and analytical skills. This on-going approach also enables weaknesses in coursework to be identified and addressed. For example:

*In order to prepare for their fieldwork assignment students completed a mock study based on tourism in the Malham area. As they completed this trial run prior to their real course work assignment, the students were able to gain familiarity with the fieldwork assessment criteria. They learned to analyse outcomes and so identify strengths and weaknesses in their methodology. This valuable formative exercise resulted in improved course work standards.*