GCE A LEVEL EXAMINERS' REPORTS

GEOGRAPHY
A LEVEL

SUMMER 2018

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COMPONENT 4: INDIVIDUAL INVESTIGATION

General Observations

It was pleasing to note that the majority of centres submitted a series of interesting and appropriate investigations in 2018, which were appropriately linked to the specification. Most samples arrived on time with the moderator and the centre administration was often exemplary.

The success of the Non Examination Assessment (NEA) depends very much upon careful planning and preparation, and allowing candidates ownership of their work. It was pleasing to note that in the majority of cases this happened, however, it was noted that a significant number of candidates attempted investigations that were insufficiently focussed and that a number of centres still very much controlled the fieldwork experience, trying to shoehorn their standard fieldwork into the new requirements of the specification.

While candidates are required to choose their titles independently, if candidates are going to display the skills necessary for attainment at the highest levels, centres have a responsibility to guide their candidates towards appropriate research areas and establish the fieldwork process. Although it is permissible to provide a theme for a class or larger group, deciding for example, that all candidates will investigate sand dunes or deprivation is by its very nature limiting. Candidates must structure their investigations in a thoughtful manner and have appropriate sub-questions/aims that are related to their investigation. These then drive the necessary data collection and analysis and allow meaningful conclusions to be reached. It is recommended that candidates have no more than three or four sub-questions.

Centres are required to submit three pieces of paperwork with each investigation. First, Section 1 Candidate/Teacher Authentication which must be signed by both the student and teacher. It was noted that in some instances these forms were not submitted with the work. Secondly, Section 2, Candidate Proposal Form should be submitted with each investigation. Once again in a number of instances these were not present and sometimes unsigned by the teacher. It is vital to spend an appropriate amount of time working through this form with candidates, as it is an opportunity to give some guidance and support to ensure that they are on a clear and appropriate path BEFORE they embark on their data collection phase. On the proposal form, clear reference should be made to focus points in the specification, for example 1.1.4 Factors affecting coastal processes and landforms, rather than just 'Coastal Landscapes'. Applying their ideas to specific parts of the specification will assist the candidate to focus appropriately on material within the specification, material that will ultimately support their knowledge and understanding as they prepare for the examinations. It was worrying to note that many proposal forms were poorly completed, often with minimal information. Would centres please ensure that they use the downloadable forms, which are available on the Eduqas public website. Please do not photocopy forms directly from the specification.

Centres are also reminded that Eduqas offer a Title Advice Service for tutors to submit candidate proposals for further advice if they wish to do so. This service is not compulsory but offers teachers the chance to gain input from our senior moderators on the suitability of particular candidate proposals. If you wish to take advantage of this service, please complete the NEA Title Advice Form which is available on the public website. For your reference, there is also a guide to developing titles and completing the proposal form available. This document contains numerous exemplars of completed proposal forms and aims to clarify what form of guidance teachers can and should be giving to their students.

It was noted that many investigations were significantly longer than the recommended word guidance, with some being over 15000 words. Centres must advise candidates of the guidance and remind them of the impacts of producing work that fails to meet the assessment criteria. The guidance of 3-4,000 words was introduced by all Boards to give candidates a clear indication of the length and nature of the report required for the NEA. A concisely written, well-directed and focused investigation will meet the Band 5 criteria for Analysis and Interpretation, Conclusions and Presentation Requirements and Evaluation whereas a rambling, repetitive one will not. Securing manageable and focussed investigation titles for each candidate, through detailed discussion at the outset could greatly assist this process.

It was pleasing to note that the majority of candidates had been well briefed and followed the prescribed structure for the investigation (detailed in the specification), however, some did not, having no page numbers, candidate and centre number and ignoring the font size and line spacing requirements. Please encourage your students to follow the prescribed structure and format for the investigation and use a formal system, such as Harvard when referencing sources. This was often poorly done with many candidates having little idea of how to proceed with referencing.

Highlighting each candidate mark sheet in each section to note the appropriate criteria where marks were awarded would greatly facilitate the moderation process and annotation in the body of the work would also assist the moderator to understand where and why the centre marks were given. Annotation of the work varied, from none to quite detailed comments. Where annotation was present it was often helpful and objective, with the strengths and weaknesses of each investigation clearly identified. It should be noted that in some cases comments did not always match the criteria and the marks awarded for a particular level. Some centres did not submit marking grids, while some grids had more than one mark. Where internal standardisation has taken place centres must make it clear which is the final mark for the moderator's consideration. A number of centres made errors in addition and transference of marks onto IAMIS and care needs to be taken in this respect next year.

The following refers to specific areas of the Independent Investigation mark scheme and its application:

Context

It was reassuring to see candidates clearly discussing the context of their investigations at the outset, linking to theory and creating appropriate sub-questions. This gave the investigations a clear framework. Care should be given when choosing a suitable title for the investigation.

Although most were achievable and well linked to the specification, some were unwieldy, having a weak focus on place and the specification. It was good to see many including links to appropriate theory but sometimes this was broached but not followed through, perhaps showing a lack of understanding of its relevance to the investigation. A worrying factor was that a number of centres allowed candidates to pursue investigations based upon theory that does not support the specification content, such as Bradshaw or Burgess. The specification content on water and carbon cycles gives clear emphasis to basin hydrology and temporal variations. Studies of changes in channel characteristics or shape and size of bedload do not support this material. Investigations focusing solely on Bradshaw's model are not permissible so please advise your students accordingly.

It was good to see most candidates discussing risk although often it was generic and not well linked to their investigation. There was little understanding of ethics shown, with many ignoring it. This is something that needs to be addressed in the future, as it could be a limiting factor. Support from literature was often patchy and often not well applied with many just listing sources in their appendix. Candidates had some secure locational context, which was often well justified, although at times this was lengthy, historical and not well linked to the investigation.

Methods of field investigation

This assessment criterion was frequently one where the marks awarded by centres were on the generous side. To achieve Band 5 candidates must show strong evidence of wide ranging and good quality data collection methods, both quantitative and/or qualitative that are relevant to the research question. These methods should be justified and group and/or individual contributions clearly identified. Often, where group work had been undertaken, this was not the case.

Knowledge and understanding of sampling strategies was very variable, in some cases it was well understood and applied, while at times it was totally ignored or just listed, e.g. "I did random sampling", without any explanation or justification. Weaker students perceived sampling as a method of data collection rather than a method of predetermining how the data might be collected.

Methods of data collection were varied with the strongest candidates having a wide range of approaches, which were usually well described and justified and clearly linked to the sub-questions. However, many candidates used a limited range that did not always collect data that was relevant to the task in hand, while some centres allowed candidates to use a range of common methods regardless of what the task was, this was not conducive to independence. A good description of a method is one that can be replicated by the reader; this was often not the case.

Many candidates adopted the approach of using a table to present their methods, this allowed them to link their methods to sub-questions, describe methods, evaluate and discuss strengths and weaknesses. Good descriptions also made use of annotated photographs and diagrams to illustrate methods.

Investigations are required to present/analyse data and information from both primary and secondary sources. Some investigations showed minimal evidence of primary data collection and offered little explanation of how secondary sources were used.

Sample sizes of questionnaires were often inappropriate with many thinking small is beautiful. If using a questionnaire, it would be helpful to see a copy, most probably in the appendix. It could be annotated to show expected outcomes and to justify choices. Better candidates modified their questionnaires as the result of completing a pilot study. It is not necessary to include all the copies showing the raw data, this can be summarised in a table if needed.

Data presentation and findings

Again this was an assessment criterion where centres often were generous with the marks awarded. To achieve Band 5 candidates must use a wide range of methods of data presentation, which are accurate, appropriate and well applied. The use of cartographical techniques was very disappointing with many candidates clearly having little understanding of the value of maps.

Location maps were often very poor and of postage stamp size. While it is important to show where a location is, in terms of the investigation it is much more important to show where the data was collected. It was pleasing to note that some candidates used maps in a more sophisticated way, for example, locating graphs or photographs on the map or presenting isoline or flow maps. To be considered accurate maps must have a clear heading, scale, north point and where appropriate a key. If they are from a secondary source this should be credited. Many candidates did not fulfil these criteria.

Candidates used a range of different graphs to present their data. To be accurate they must have a clear heading and axes should be clearly labelled with the appropriate units. It is also imperative that the correct type of graph is used for the data, e.g. line graphs can be used to compare changes over time for more than one group. Pie charts are best to use when trying to compare parts of a whole. They do not show change over time. Bar graphs are used to compare things between different groups or to track changes over time. It was clear that some candidates did not understand the relevance of this. Scatter graphs should ideally have a line of best fit drawn on them. Some candidates used graphs indiscriminately, for example one candidate had twenty-two pages of pie charts!

Many candidates made use of photographs, although not always to the best advantage. The best were clearly titled, located and well annotated, the worst were small postage stamp sized photos placed on a page with nothing else. To be valuable annotation must be meaningful, rather than just labels. Other presentation methods used included field sketches, Wordle diagrams, pictograms data tables, box plots, and land use maps.

Analysis and Interpretation of findings

To attain Band 5 candidates are required to give a sophisticated analysis and interpretation of findings, clearly showing why they were appropriate and relevant to the research question. Ideally they should show some individuality and/or links between the study and other aspects of Geography, in a word, synopticity. It was pleasing to note that many candidates did.

Ideally it would be best to integrate this section with the data presentation, as direct reference could be made to the data as presented, this was done with varying degrees of success, weaker investigations separated the two and hence often found it hard to produce a sophisticated analysis.

Most investigations were straightforward in their analysis, with candidates describing their data, with stronger investigations making specific reference to figure numbers. Some candidates did apply their findings back to the original question and some applied their knowledge and understanding to the models to which their data was being applied. Links to other aspects of Geography were largely incidental.

There was some use of statistical techniques, this was very much on a centre-by-centre basis, and with the most common technique being use of a Spearman's rank correlation coefficient. Candidates should be made aware that they need at least ten sets of data for this process to offer any reliability. There was often little understanding of significance and many had difficulty relating the results of their analysis to their investigation.

Conclusions and Presentation requirements

To achieve Band 5 candidates must have a sophisticated and confident summary that draws thorough conclusions which address the research question and is underpinned by relevant theory, while at the same time they must present a well-structured, concise and logical report that accurately references secondary information.

Conclusions were best done when linked directly, through sub-headings or sub-sections to the stated question or hypothesis, which were generally quite concise with good reference to data and trends. The best were followed by a summary conclusion drawing the individual conclusions back to the title. The most effective used the full range of data, which was discussed in some detail, and it was pleasing to read the perceptive comments in the best work.

Weaker investigations limited themselves to simplistic statements of the obvious based upon limited data sets. These tended to be straightforward and very descriptive, and in many cases were simply a repeat of the analysis.

Presentation was generally good across the majority of candidates, although the sections were not always clearly delineated. Too many candidates included all their raw data and some put all their graphs, maps and photographs in the appendix. It was obvious that some centres had not briefed their candidates about the necessary structure, particularly in relation to pagination and page labelling.

It would be appreciated if centres could refrain from using plastic wallets/polypockets, simple treasury tag or a light plastic folder will suffice. Several centres sent the work of all candidates, loose leaf, which in one instance resulted in the work of several candidates getting mixed up. It would be desirable to foster some pride in the work that is presented by candidates. Some work displayed serious SPAG errors that could easily have been sorted by the use of spell checking.

Evaluation

This section of the investigation is worth twenty percent of the total mark and should be given due consideration, but not to the extent that it becomes overlong, wordy and ceases to be concise.

To achieve Band 5 candidates must show highly effective evaluation of the knowledge and understanding gained from field observation. They must have a perceptive evaluation of each stage of the fieldwork investigation including the ethical dimensions of the field research; have perceptive and well-considered reflections of further research and extension of their geographical understanding.

It is worth noting that the criteria relate very much to the fieldwork experience, and where candidates show little evidence of primary data collection and effective and independent planning, a good evaluation becomes very difficult to achieve.

The best candidates evaluated each stage of their investigation using sub-headings; but many struggled to make sensible suggestions for further investigation. These suggestions were often very basic such as do more, collect more data, and go on another occasion. There was a real lack of evaluation relating to the knowledge and understanding (of their research area) gained during the process of conducting their investigation. Few questioned the validity of their initial aims.

Many students were reticent to question the theory that underpinned their investigation, with many limiting their evaluation to the methods of data collection.

Discussion of the ethical dimensions was mostly absent and it was also very worrying to note that many candidates only spent a day or less collecting data for their investigation making it very difficult to introduce a temporal aspect to the work.

Please note that the sample submission date for 2019 will be Friday, March 29th.

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