

Principal Assessor Report 2002

Assessment Panel:

Geography

Qualification area

**Subject(s) and Level(s)
included in this report**

Advanced Higher – Geography

Statistical information: update

Number of entries in 2001	
Pre appeal	287
Post appeal	313

Number of entries in 2002	
Pre appeal	750
Post appeal	

General comments re entry numbers

There is a significant and gratifying increase in the number of entries. If SYS Geography entries for 2001 (c. 330) are aggregated with the 2001 entry for AH in that year, this year's total AH Geography entry is about 50% greater than in 2001. There are several reasons for this. The status of AH in schools (for example UCAS parity of esteem with A level) is undoubtedly higher than that of SYS. It was notable that some centres presented large numbers of candidates. This is related to the realistic provision of teaching resources allocated by some schools – but by no means all - to AH Geography. The syllabus of AH Geography is challenging and exciting. In my school visits this year I received favourable comment on this from both teachers and candidates. By no means all candidates taking AH Geography intended to study that subject at University, and it was commented on by both students and teachers that the work undertaken in the AH Geography programme provided valuable experience of the level of work expected in first year at University. In particular the large component of externally assessed work which was based on in depth student projects was valued. Similar comments on the status of the AH programme were made by colleagues in my University Department.

Overall, the AH Geography programme has a good status and reputation in schools. I hope and expect that the trend in entry will continue upwards, if less steeply than between 2001 and 2002. As with much teaching of Geography in Scottish schools, the AH programme has benefited by enthusiastic and exciting teaching from dedicated professional staff. This in turn has been well received by able, committed and appreciative students.

General comments

As in 2001 there was evidence of much good quality work seen this year. The proportion of Upper A awards was smaller, though the actual number similar, and the proportion and number of all A awards was a little higher than in 2001. At the lower grades there was a discernible improvement in quality. The attraction of the qualification may have played a part in raising the number of well based presentations. However I think that the main reason for the above improvement has been better informed and directed teaching in schools. Very considerable efforts have been made by the qualifications team to improve understanding of standards and required qualities in the elements of presentation. The improvement in standards at the lower grades of award are, I believe largely due to this. Further efforts will be made this year, through communications with schools, exemplary material and school visits to increase teachers' understanding of the requirements of and resources available for successful presentations in AH Geography.

Grade boundaries at C, B and A for each subject area included in the report

Grade	Lowest mark (out of 200)
A	146
B	123
C	100

General commentary on grade boundaries

Notional percentage cut-offs for each grade

Question papers and their associated marking schemes are designed to be of the required standard and to meet the assessment specification for the subject/level concerned.

For National courses the examination paper(s) are set in order that a score of approximately 50% of the total marks for all components merits a grade C (based on the grade descriptions for that grade), and similarly a score of 70 % for a grade A. The lowest mark for a grade B is set by the computer software as half way between the C and A grade boundaries.

Comments on grade boundaries for each subject area

In the discipline of geography using these modes of assessment and applying standards which are appropriate to the standards of candidates, scores of more than 190/200 will be very uncommon. The highest total mark awarded this year was a little less than 190. The grade boundaries for A and B are a little higher than the nominal values (+3% and +1.5%) respectively. This relates to the two elements of assessed work for which there is an assessment criterion for presentation. These elements are prepared in the candidates own time, and whilst a high standard of presentation is mandatory, a good standard can be achieved by all diligent candidates. Thus the base level marks have been adjusted slightly. The actual pass mark is identical with the nominal pass mark (50%).

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

The improvement in candidates' work has been commented on above. This is most welcome. In general most presentations reached a standard of work which was satisfactory or better. There remains significant differences between centres, across a spectrum of ability of candidates, indicating that some centres are not yet fully appreciating the requirements of all of the elements of presentation in the AH geography programme. The externally assessed work is demanding in terms of effort and intellectual application. Communication of the requirements of the programme, and of best practise in submitted work is being addressed continuously by SQA, the examining team, schools and relevant support agencies and I am confident that there will be continued improvement in standards of externally assessed work in future. The standard of the best candidates is excellent, and very few submissions were seen which could be regarded as "token" or wholly inadequate.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates performed well

There was no single element of work in which candidates performed better than in any other. Presentation of work was generally satisfactory. There was a discernible improvement overall in the quality of the critical evaluation essays for the Geographical Issues assessment. This included better use of appropriate figures in the text of these essays. Most Geographical Studies were also well presented, and a significant number were at a very high standard. Some Geographical Studies reflected very high quality and thoughtful work carried in data collection and analysis. Well prepared candidates obtained very high marks in Paper 1 (written examination) including gaining full marks or nearly so for the statistics question.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates had difficulty

The following comments apply to some candidates, but in all cases there were examples of first class treatment of these issues.

- ◆ In paper 1 (written paper) some candidates did not show their working for statistical tests, even though a work sheet was provided in the Supplementary Items. If an arithmetical error was made and working was shown either in the exam book or on the supplementary item, some credit for work done could have been given.
- ◆ Many critical evaluation essays in the Geographical Issues component made little or no *explicit* comment on the quality of the data and analyses in the sources used. This is essential if a high mark is to be awarded. Some essays made poor direct use of their sources, and were rather descriptive. A few essays had poor bibliographies/lists of sources. Choice of topic reflecting both the availability of good sources and the suitability of the topic in providing material which could be effectively evaluated at this level and in this format, was in a number of cases problematic. Very broad general themes (eg "global warming") are difficult to evaluate in a 1500 word essay at AH level.
- ◆ Some Geographical Studies had weak data bases, because little work appeared to have been carried out. This group and a few others were generally weak in analysis. Purely descriptive studies are unacceptable at this level of work.

Areas of common misunderstanding

The following issues were noted as being areas where there appeared to be some common misunderstanding. It is noteworthy however that these comments do not apply to the majority of candidates' work.

- ◆ Map content: some candidates made simple errors in the analysis of the map sheet extract use in questions 1 & 2 of the Written Paper. Candidates should be familiar with the content and key information of Explorer 1/25,000 scale map series before sitting the examination.
- ◆ Some candidates were penalised for over-length submissions. The prescriptions for maximum word and page length must be adhered to strictly. There are no penalties for submissions which are less than the full allowance, but candidates are encouraged to use the full format available. To ensure compliance with regulations take careful note the AH Geography rubric in Conditions and Arrangements, and note carefully information from SQA. If in doubt centres should contact SQA for clarification.
- ◆ There remains some lack of clarity in understanding what is required in the Critical Evaluation essays for the Geographical Issues. Each of the two essays must analyse different viewpoints based on at least 3 sources. There do not have to be 3 quite different viewpoints. For example in the evaluation of a development (eg housing or commercial development) 2 viewpoints may be generally against the development (eg local residents, local businesses, environmental pressure groups) and one generally for the development (eg developer, development agency, local government agency). The actual critical evaluation should examine the arguments put forward in these sources, and the candidate should conclude with her/his own review of the arguments put forward in the sources. Scholarly viewpoints (books and journal articles) may be useful in evaluation of the sources. Evaluation should be clearly and explicitly directed to the data used in the sources, the analysis of this data, the quality of argument advanced in the source and partiality or bias in the sources. To assist candidates and centres, more exemplary material should be available this year. Centres are encouraged to discuss problems relating to the Critical Evaluations/Geographical Issues with the P.A.
- ◆ Themes for the Critical Evaluation essays must be drawn from H level "applications" themes, one physical and one human. Essays which do not conform to this will be penalised. It is helpful to specify the relevant theme on the title page of each essay.

Recommendations

Feedback to centres

Centres and their candidates should pay careful attention to the rubric for externally assessed work, and to additional information sent out by SQA.

In all parts of the externally assessed submission, candidates should be aware that analysis rather than description is most important.

Efficient management of time is an important part in successful submissions. Both the Critical Evaluation essays and the Geographical Study are demanding pieces of work, which need sustained efforts from candidates to achieve the high standards.