

17 December 2008

To: Head of centres

Cc: SQA Co-ordinator
Secondary schools and colleges
Education Authorities
HMIE

Action by Recipient
Response required
✓ Note and pass on
Note — update/information only

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Dear Colleague

NQ Geography

This briefing note is intended to offer practical advice and support on the issues being raised by centre staff with SQA, and should be distributed to those staff responsible for Geography. It contains information about the following:

1. Internal and External Assessment reports
2. New support materials for Geography
3. Terminology used in exams
4. Advice on folio topics for Advanced Higher
5. Advice on appeals evidence
6. Changed Arrangements for Higher and Advanced Higher — reminder

1. Internal and External Assessment reports

The above reports are now available on the NQ Geography pages of SQA's website (www.sqa.org.uk). It is recommended that those involved in the delivery of Geography Units and Courses take time to read through these reports as they contain useful feedback on the 2008 diet. This includes information about areas in which candidates performed well together with advice to centres about areas in which they found difficulties. Several of these reports comment on the ongoing issues of lifting information directly from diagrams, using very brief bullet point answers, and misreading questions. For further details, centres are strongly advised to read the reports in full.

2. New support materials for Geography

Additional support materials for Advanced Higher are currently being finalised and will shortly be available on the Understanding Standards website. (www.understandingstandards.org.uk). These will cover:

- ◆ Geographical Study Internal Assessment
- ◆ Geographical Folio External Assessment (materials will be provided for both the Study and the Issues Essay)

Both of these sets of materials have been produced as a result of feedback received from delegates at the Understanding Standards event held in May 2008.

3. Terminology used in exams

Most years SQA asks a random selection of centres to provide feedback on some of the exams. This covers the perceived level of challenge of the papers, Course coverage and accessibility of the question paper. In light of comments received from this and other feedback, Geography exams will re-introduce the terms 'developed' and 'developing' when distinguishing between the differing levels of the economic and social development of countries. This conforms with language frequently used in the media when describing economically more and less developed countries. The use of the word 'reference' in the titles of diagrams will be discontinued. Both of these changes will be introduced in the 2010 exams.

4. Advice on folio topics for Advanced Higher

Each year candidates submit a wide variety of topics for their Study and Issues Essays for the Geographical Folio. Many of these deal with current issues and work of this type is often seen to produce some high quality and imaginative pieces of work. This is more commonly observed in human based topics. Physical Geography topics also continue to be the basis of many excellent pieces of work. There is, however, a greater tendency to adopt a more formulaic approach to physical topics and Markers have reported that a similar format is used by candidates from the same centre in successive years. For weaker candidates there may be good reason to adopt such an approach but it does mean that more able candidates could be disadvantaged by adopting a set approach to a piece of work. The External Assessment report advises against the use of formulaic approaches. It also reminds centres that the use of secondary data is as legitimate as data obtained from primary sources. Where the former is used it must be acknowledged. The appendix at the end of this letter lists some of the topics for which work was submitted in 2008. It is hoped that the inclusion of this list will help both centres and their candidates realise the diverse range of topics which are covered in folio work.

5. Advice on appeals evidence

The subject-specific advice for Estimates, Absentees and External Assessment Appeals is contained within the guidance notes which can be accessed from the

NQ subject pages of SQA's website. One of the key parts of this advice, which is vital for centres to consider, is the level of demand made on their candidates when evidence is being generated. There are often large discrepancies between prelim performance and the final exam mark. It is not unusual for there to be a difference of well over 10 marks between these. This is most frequently found in centres which submit large numbers of appeals. In these cases it may be that the cut off scores set may not truly reflect the degree of challenge of the prelim. Prelim papers may cover all topics and be well constructed but where the teaching programme at the time of the prelim has only covered part of the Course content candidates should be very well prepared and therefore should be very successful in such an assessment. The level of demand of the final exam is much greater. A candidate who scores 75% in such a prelim may not have shown a performance equivalent to an 'A' grade. Very few, if any, prelim exams can replicate the demand of the final exam and the cut off scores applied by centres when compiling estimates should clearly reflect this. In these, or similar circumstances, the cut off scores used should be raised significantly above the 70/60/50 notional boundaries. It is not possible to give specific guidance on the cut offs which should be applied as every centre's circumstances and prelim is unique, but it is vital that estimates accurately reflect the demands made on candidates. Where there is a significant difference in the level of demand between evidence provided and the final exam, the raising of the cut off score by *at least* one band may be appropriate. For Standard Grade an equivalent adjustment may be necessary in cut off scores.

6. Changed Arrangements for Higher and Advanced Higher — reminder

Previous update letters have described the changes for session 2008/09 in Higher and Advanced Higher arrangements.

- a. There are changes to the 'Atmosphere' and 'Hydrosphere' sections and to the choice element in paper 2.

There was some coverage of these changes in the national press earlier in the session and this may have led to some confusion/expectations about the format/content of paper 1. Centres can be reassured that there is no intention to change this paper.

- b. The word count has been removed from the Folios at Advance Higher, the choice of topics for Study and essay in the Folio has been loosened up, and the exam is now out of 60 marks.

Any centre which is unclear about the detail of these changes should ensure that it is using the current Course Arrangements document which can be downloaded from SQA's website. All centres are advised to replace any paper copies of these Arrangements documents they may hold with the revised versions.

I trust that this information is of use to you. Should you wish any further advice about the content of this letter please contact me as indicated above.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Keith H Wright". The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent horizontal stroke at the end.

Keith H Wright
Qualifications Manager Social Subjects
Enc

Appendix

Exemplar Geographical Study Topics

- ◆ Analysis of the relationships between stream velocity and sediment size in five different sections of a small stream.
- ◆ Analysis of changes in the amount and nature of soil organic matter along three transects over a sand dune system
- ◆ A comparative analysis of daily temperature and rainfall records for three months taken at school with corresponding records from the nearest meteorological station
- ◆ Evaluation of relative water quality at a number of locations along a river based on simple water chemistry (measured by pH, conductivity and using SEPA records if available) and simple biological indicators (measured by key species present, total number of species present).
- ◆ An analysis of the patterns of customer use of different retail outlets in a large shopping development and commentary on the causes of these use patterns.
- ◆ The impact on a local community of a major road building/improvement scheme (eg M74C, M77 extension, A725 orbital, A92 dual carriageway, Aberdeen Western By-pass, Forth Road Bridge access roads).
- ◆ The relationships between community health and built environmental quality in two contrasting small urban areas.
- ◆ An analysis of the changing pattern of retailing in the central business district of a large urban centre between 1900 and the present day, eg Perth, Paisley, Kilmarnock, Galashiels, Elgin, Arbroath.

Exemplar Geographical Issues Essay Topics

- ◆ The case for and against building a new crossing of the River Forth near the current Forth Road Bridge.
- ◆ Arguments for and against any specific proposed wind farm development.
- ◆ Analysis of arguments for and against any large scale sports development or relocation, eg Balmedie Golf Course, Aberdeen swimming pools, any large professional football ground redevelopment or relocation.
- ◆ National strategies for addressing the AIDS problem in three selected countries (in this type of essay it is important that the quality of argument in the sources used is critically assessed. Countries in Sub-Saharan Africa or South America would be appropriate given sound sources).
- ◆ Should personal watercraft (PWCs, jetskiis) be allowed to use Loch Lomond?
- ◆ An analysis of three different tropical rain forest management schemes in Amazonia. (In this type of essay it is important that the quality of argument in the sources used is critically assessed and that the sources are chosen carefully.)
- ◆ Analysis of the arguments for and against closure/resiting any significant local facility, eg hospital A & E, school(s), post offices.

- ◆ Arguments for and against any recent large-scale river basin management scheme in a Less Economically Developed Country (LEDC), eg Narmada, Aswan High Dam.