Course Report 2016

Subject	Geography
Level	National 5

Section 1: Comments on the Assessment

Component 1: Question Paper

The National 5 Geography question paper is marked out of 60 and consists of three sections, each worth 20 marks. These are Physical Environments, Human Environments and Global Issues.

In 2016 there was a choice of topic in section A (Physical Environments) where candidates opted for either Question 1 (glaciation) or Question 2 (limestone). There were significantly more answers about upland glaciated landscapes (70% of candidates) than about limestone landscapes (30% of candidates). In the knowledge questions for these landscape types, candidates' answers to Question 1(b) (U-shaped valleys) were significantly better than those to Question 2(b) (limestone caves). On average, candidates who answered Question 1 (b) scored one mark more than candidates who answered Question 2 (b).

In Section C (Global Issues), where candidates are required to choose two of six possible questions, only a very small number attempted more than two, with just a few candidates attempting all of them. This was an improvement on the 2015 exam. In cases where candidates attempted more than two questions in Section C, markers were instructed to mark all responses but to credit only the two highest scoring answers.

The most popular topics in Section C were Question 11 (Environmental Hazards) (64% of candidates) and Question 14 (Health) (57% of candidates). Next in terms of popularity were Question 9 (Climate Change) (40% of candidates) and Question 10 (Human Impact on Natural Environments) (27% of candidates), while Question 13 (Tourism) (10% of candidates) and Question 12 (Trade & Globalisation) (3% of candidates) were the least popular topics.

Component 2: Assignment

The National 5 Geography Coursework Assignment is marked out of 20 and consists of a report written up under exam conditions which is externally marked. Candidates are able to prepare, in advance, two A4 sheets of processed information to assist them during their write-up. The processed information sheets are not marked but must be submitted along with the coursework report. Candidates who do not submit their processed information sheets are not able to access all of the marks for the assignment.

It is important that the aim of their research is clearly stated by candidates at the start of the write-up.

In Section A, candidates are expected to describe two research methods used in collecting information for their assignment. This section is marked out of six, according to the level of detail and the appropriateness of the research methods used. Up to four marks can be gained by describing any one research method.

In Section B, candidates must both describe and explain their findings with reference to their processed information, and also make any concluding remarks about their topic or issue. In this section marks are awarded for description and explanation as well as for valid conclusions. Of the 14 marks available, up to 4 marks were awarded for a candidate's

description of their findings. This was a change from the 2015 assignment, where up to 7 marks could be gained for description. The remaining 10 marks were awarded for explanation and conclusions. A good candidate may, however, be able to gain all 14 marks by making valid explanatory points. It is important that candidates expand on the information shown on their processed information sheets and do not directly copy from them

Section 2: Comments on candidate performance

Areas in which candidates performed well

Component 1: Question paper
Overall, the quality of candidate responses this year was good, with many showing sound geographical knowledge and referring to details from case studies about which they had learned. Only a relatively small number of candidates did not complete the paper within the allocated time of 1 hour 45 minutes.

Many candidates showed good knowledge of the formation of U-shaped valleys in their responses to Question 1 (b). Candidates again did exceptionally well in handling two Ordnance Survey map extracts, with very little evidence of candidates confusing them.

The quality of answers on map skills questions was also good, with candidates coping well with the matching questions where they were required to identify either glacial landforms in Question 1(a), or limestone landforms in Question 2(a).

Question 4, where candidates were required to assess the suitability of the area shown on the Brecon Beacons map extract for various land uses, was also well answered.

Of particular note was the good performance in Question 3 and in Question 6(b), where candidates were asked to interpret a cross-section and aerial photograph respectively.

Many candidates were able to show their good depth of geographical knowledge in some of the six mark questions, for example, modern factors affecting farming in the developed world (Questions 8). It was also pleasing to note that most candidates answered this question with reference to the developed world and did not confuse it with the developing world.

In the Global Issues section, candidate responses to Question 11(b) (the impact of a volcanic eruption) and Question 14(b) (causes of disease in developed world countries) were commendable.

Component 2: Assignment
The standard of coursework again showed an improvement compared with the previous year. Generally, the quality of processed information was very good, and this allowed candidates to perform well, in both section A and section B of their write-up.

It was clear that more centres had facilitated opportunities for pupils to undertake fieldwork or research, allowing them to generate original data, which they were then able to interpret in

the assignment. The majority of candidates gave good accounts of the methods they used to gather data and went on to describe and explain their findings in sufficient detail to be able to gain plenty of marks.

There were fewer candidates who scored very low marks this year. This may be because centres are more familiar with the requirements for the assignment and the need for candidates to avoid direct copying from their processed information sheets. There were also fewer candidates who scored full marks this year. This may have been because of the reduction in the number of marks awarded for description in Section B (reduced from 7 to 4 marks).

Many centres clearly opted to restrict the choice of topics that candidates could research to just two or three. This may be due to the logistics of organising suitable opportunities for fieldwork, as well as the need to provide appropriate field equipment and support. Candidates from these centres were still able to produce very good assignments.

Examples of research topics undertaken in this way included: urban studies, such as the comparison of two different urban land use zones; river studies looking either at the differences between rivers, or between different sections of the same river; weather studies which examined micro-climate or how observed weather conditions were affected by atmospheric pressure; comparative studies looking at different shopping areas within a town, or at the characteristics and popularity of different country parks for example.

Many candidates who undertook research from secondary sources were also able to achieve good marks in their assignment. Examples of topics based on research from secondary sources included comparative studies examining the impact of natural disasters on two different areas, or the reasons for differing levels of development within two different developing world countries.

Many processed information sheets showed evidence of very good research. Candidates displayed this in the form of graphs, charts, annotated photos or field sketches, and colour-coded land-use maps as well as mind maps. Candidates mostly appear to be well aware of the need to add value to their processed information sheets and that simply copying data or transferring statements from their data sheets will not gain marks. By careful use of their pre-prepared data or information, candidates were able to get prompts to help them show their knowledge and understanding of the research which they had undertaken.

Areas which candidates found demanding

Component 1: Question paper

As indicated in section one above, many candidates found Question 2(b) (the formation of a limestone cave) difficult. It should be noted that candidates can be expected to explain the formation of any of the landscape features listed in the Course Assessment Specification. Although they will sometimes be given a choice of features, this will not always be the case.

Some candidates are still confusing the command words 'describe' and 'explain', with answers often containing descriptions rather than explanations. This resulted in some candidates losing marks, for example, in Question 7 (reasons for falling worldwide death

rates) and in Question 10 (b) (management strategies used to protect tundra areas), where they had written descriptive rather than explanatory answers.

In Question 5 (weather), although candidates showed good knowledge by correctly identifying weather conditions which appeared in the synoptic charts, many lost marks by failing to adequately explain why the conditions shown on their chosen chart matched the weather symbols shown in Diagram Q5A.

Overall the quality of candidate responses was pleasing, but the quality of handwriting remains an issue, with the legibility of some responses causing concern. Centres should be aware of the possibility of transcription where a candidate's handwriting is problematic.

Component 2: Assignment

The vast majority of candidates submitted good or adequate processed information, enabling them to potentially access all of the marks for the assignment. Fewer candidates submitted very weak or no processed information, though a small number of candidates were still simply describing their main findings, making little attempt to explain them. This meant they were not able to access the marks awarded for explanation and conclusions, therefore limiting themselves to a maximum of 4 out of 14 of the available marks in section B.

There are still a significant number of candidates who have very detailed processed information and who need to be aware that by simply copying or quoting this information in their write-up, they will not gain any marks unless they add value in some way, such as by pointing out a trend or providing an explanation. It may therefore be best for candidates to have a straightforward outline of their findings on the processed information sheets, enabling them to then add further detail, explanations, summaries and concluding remarks in the write-up to show geographical knowledge and understanding of their chosen topic.

It is also important that candidates complete their write-up strictly within the one hour time allocation, and that it is done under exam conditions, without opportunities for redrafts.

Section 3: Advice for the preparation of future candidates

Component 1: Question Paper

The Course Assessment Specification (CAS) indicates topics on which questions are likely to be based. It is not possible to ask questions on every aspect of every topic in a single question paper, so it is important that centres cover everything indicated in the CAS to ensure candidates are able to fully access the question paper.

In 2016, a variety of questions on map skills were included in both the Physical Environments and in the Human Environments sections, although this will not necessarily be the case in all future National 5 question papers. Map Skills questions may appear in either, or both, of these sections.

It is essential that candidates read the questions carefully and that they cover all parts of the question in their answers. For example, in Question 8 (modern developments in farming), candidates could only gain marks by referring to strategies relevant to developed world countries such as Scotland, as stated in the question, and could not gain credit for references to developing world countries. Also, only two of the developments shown in the diagram could be described, and candidates were not able to gain extra marks by describing more than this.

In questions where candidates are asked to describe in detail from a resource on the question paper, responses are expected to contain specific numeric or geographical information which shows that they have carefully studied, understood and correctly interpreted the resource for that question. For example, where candidates are asked to interpret a distribution map, such as question 9(a) (average global temperature differences), answers will be expected to include reference to accurate geographical locations such as continents and countries. Answers that are generic or vague will not gain full marks.

In many answers to 'explain' questions, candidates continued to show good geographical knowledge by giving detailed descriptions, but didn't go on to give an explanation, therefore losing out on available marks. For example, in Question 10 (b) some answers described environmental problems in the tundra but didn't explain how these could be managed effectively.

The detailed marking instructions published on the SQA website are a useful guide to the level of detail which candidates are expected to give in their answers, and centres are encouraged to make full use of these.

Component 2: Assignment

Overall, candidates performed well in the assignment. The quality and nature of the data on the processed information sheets is important in determining a candidate's chances of being able to do well in the write-up. Clearly presented data that is not overly elaborate is perfectly adequate for candidates to be able to achieve good marks in the assignment. The processed information should consist of only two single A4 sheets, which must be submitted along with the write-up. Simple graphs, illustrations and mind-maps are examples of straightforward data which may constitute good processed information.

Detailed knowledge and understanding of their research topic is often reflected in the write-up and allows candidates to gain credit for explanatory and concluding remarks. In the 2016 exam, only four of the fourteen marks in section B were available for description of research findings, and so it is vital that candidates show their understanding by offering explanations of what they have found, in order to have a chance of being able to access all of the marks.

The quality of candidates' research often becomes apparent in their responses, both in Section A and Section B of the assignment, and will therefore affect their overall mark.

The marking instructions for the N5 Geography coursework assignment published on the SQA secure website are a useful guide as to how marks are allocated in this part of the assessment, and centres should make full use of these in helping to prepare their candidates.

Grade Boundary and Statistical information:

Statistical information: update on Courses

Number of resulted entries in 2015	11573

Number of resulted entries in 2016	11018

Statistical information: Performance of candidates

Distribution of Course awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of Course awards	%	Cum. %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum Mark -				
A	36.2%	36.2%	3989	59
B	24.0%	60.2%	2646	50
C	20.1%	80.4%	2220	41
D	8.0%	88.3%	879	36
No award	11.7%	-	1284	-

General commentary on grade boundaries

♦ While SQA aims to set examinations and create marking instructions which will allow a competent candidate to score a minimum of 50% of the available marks (the notional C boundary) and a well prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70% of the available marks (the notional A boundary), it is very challenging to get the standard on target every year, in every subject at every level.

♦ Each year, SQA therefore holds a grade boundary meeting for each subject at each level where it brings together all the information available (statistical and judgemental). The Principal Assessor and SQA Qualifications Manager meet with the relevant SQA Business Manager and Statistician to discuss the evidence and make decisions. The meetings are chaired by members of the management team at SQA.

♦ The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the exam is more challenging than usual, allowing the pass rate to be unaffected by this circumstance.

♦ The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the exam is less challenging than usual, allowing the pass rate to be unaffected by this circumstance.

♦ Where standards are comparable to previous years, similar grade boundaries are maintained.

♦ An exam paper at a particular level in a subject in one year tends to have a marginally different set of grade boundaries from exam papers in that subject at that level in other years. This is because the particular questions, and the mix of questions, are different. This is also the case for exams set in centres. If SQA has already altered a boundary in a particular year in, say, Higher Chemistry, this does not mean that centres should necessarily alter boundaries in their prelim exam in Higher Chemistry. The two are not that closely related, as they do not contain identical questions.

♦ SQA's main aim is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and all levels and maintain comparable standards across the years, even as arrangements evolve and change.