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# AS LEVEL GEOGRAPHY

7036/2 Human geography and the geography fieldwork investigation  
Report on the Examination

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## Synopsis and general points

- The number of students sitting the exam in May 2023 was nearly 900, around 100 more than the summer 2022 entry. The entry cohort is still around one third lower than that of 2019.
- The paper returned to its original format and mark allocation as the two questions on students' own fieldwork (Q02.4 and Q02.5) were reintroduced. These carry an additional 15 marks so the total marks available returned to 80.
- Students generally handled the questions on their own fieldwork reasonably well. They were usually able to express sound knowledge and understanding of the fieldwork process and apply this to the particular questions. This gives some indication that practical fieldwork has returned to normal and that teaching and learning of enquiry-based skills are in a relatively healthy state.
- In general, students were prepared well for the breadth and depth of specification content included in this paper. Teachers should be commended for managing this with many students having likely covered less underpinning background knowledge than in the past. However, it was evident that there were a few specific areas of content, especially in general geographical skills, that had not been covered quite as fully or in as much detail.
- As in previous years, a similarly wide range of performance was seen but the overall marks attained by students were generally higher than on both last year's and on the more comparable 2019 paper. Thus the overall mean mark was higher than on both of these previous papers and performance on the majority of the corresponding items also improved noticeably.
- Students continued to perform better on Section A (Changing Places) than on Section B. The confidence with which students now approach the AO1 and AO2 based questions on the Changing Places topic is not usually carried over to the AO3 skills and fieldwork questions in section B. However, improvements were seen in both sections. Therefore, although the gap in performance between the two sections remains noticeable, this had more to do with better marks achieved in section A, especially on the high tariff Q1.6, than it did with a poorer performance in section B.
- The paper proved to be generally accessible to students across the ability range. Students also appeared to use their time effectively and there were very few who failed to complete the paper.

## Section A

Changing Places has become a well embedded topic and an integral part of advanced level studies in Geography. It appears to provide a popular focus for students, who are able to relate to studies of both local and far places, readily engaging with the underlying theory of how places are shaped and perceived. Students increasingly demonstrated clear knowledge and understanding of the concepts involved and also, though to a slightly lesser degree, their practical application to places. Responses demonstrated that students were familiar with a wide range of terminology and used it appropriately. Students coped generally well with the questions in section A, performing especially well on Q1.6, the 20-mark essay, though finding Q1.3 more challenging.

## Question 1

**1.1 & 1.2** – The multiple-choice questions were clearly well understood with over 90% of students answering each question accurately.

**1.3** – Many students found this question difficult to answer convincingly. It referred to a specific part of the specification concerning how external agencies, in this case ‘community and local groups’, influence place meaning. Many students interpreted this question quite theoretically by focusing mainly on place meaning. Instead, they needed to outline the practical link between the presence or actions of particular groups and how this had shaped place, which would have provided the more applied response being sought. Others referred to ‘communities’ more generally rather than specific groups within a community. Credit was awarded for this interpretation if the response outlined how some clear action of the community had influenced place meaning or had changed the perception of a place. Despite the difficulties encountered, around two thirds of students gained some credit from their responses, though full marks were seen less frequently (around 15%). The better responses often used named examples of a specific group or place in support or development of a point.

1.4 – This was handled quite well using a number of different approaches to analyse the data. The analysis of graphical data seemed more accessible to students than the corresponding map comparison question that was set in last year’s paper. The majority (around 55%) achieved level 2 credit for this question and the mean mark was nearly 4/6. Students attaining level 2 marks demonstrated their understanding of the data, including the compound nature of the bar graph. Some form of data manipulation was expected and could be demonstrated by calculating the outer London population in the upper part of each bar or by calculating percentage or actual change between stated years. Ideally, data manipulation should have complemented an analysis of the underlying trends (ie, between inner and outer London and/or total population figures).

The scale of the graph and position of some bars led to some inaccuracies in interpretation of quantity but some tolerance was allowed when marking this. Level 1 responses tended to be more descriptive, or they contained individual random points of analysis that were not linked, together with either very limited or inaccurate data manipulation. A small minority of students did not understand the compound nature of the bar chart. More significant was the number of students who drifted into an explanation of each analytical point they had made. Although their analysis was recognised, no credit was available for explanation; so, time and wordage were wasted when a fuller analysis, including more data manipulation, might have been undertaken.

**1.5** – Approaches to this item were quite varied. Analysis of the awarding data determined that nearly two thirds of students attained level 2 credit, with the marks being concentrated around 4 or 5 out of 9 (52%). This might be explained by the mixed performance seen in many responses.

In general, students made good use of the photograph and satellite image to identify factors, including those relating to location, that might have influenced the character of Ramsbottom. Students applied their knowledge and understanding of a range of endogenous and exogenous factors to the images, eliciting a number of reasonable assumptions regarding the character of the town. Common interpretations included that Ramsbottom was a former mining village, was both a current and/or former manufacturing town (post de-industrialisation) or was primarily a dormitory commuter settlement (because of the nearby transport links to Manchester) and even a tourist destination. Therefore, some analysis of the current nature of the town was evident and inferred from the images. However, any clear assessment of the relative (or even absolute) importance of these factors (especially location) in influencing the character of the place was less evident and, in most cases, was only implied. The question invited reference to other places, some of the better responses also used the student’s own local places, for which they had greater understanding of the importance of location in influencing its character.

**1.6** – The essay question was, in the main, handled well by the majority of students with nearly 15% of students achieving a level 4 mark and 62% gaining at least level 3 credit. Fewer than 7% achieved only a level 1 mark. It appeared to be more accessible than the corresponding question on last year's paper. The question sought to make links between different elements of the specification content on Changing Places and this seemed to suit the way in which most students undertake their local place study. This enabled students to approach the question using a wide range of place knowledge and understanding and to apply this to the idea of 'past connections'.

Many interesting narratives about 'past (and/or present) connections' were seen and, in most cases, these were applied well to the idea of 'shaping' a place. Assessment of shaping factors was generally clearer than was seen in Q1.5. The majority of students seemed to appreciate that the idea of 'past connections' referred to any historical legacy that had shaped the place they had studied. Equally, many also appreciated that past connections, while of considerable importance (depending on the place referred to) had to be assessed against more recent events and influencing factors (both endogenous and exogenous) and the role of external agencies etc. in shaping the place. Consequently, most responses were well focused with some clear assessment.

The stronger ones tended to integrate AO1 and AO2 objectives in their response by outlining the 'connection' and then assessing its relative importance by referencing its legacy in the current day. A number of approaches were seen of varying breadth in terms of factors covered or depth in terms of their relative importance. Indeed, it was clear that a substantial minority of students interpreted the concept of 'connections' as being solely related to transport and/or links with nearby places, rather than its broader interpretation. This was not necessarily a hindrance to their response and, in the context of an appropriate place, could be equally compelling. This narrower approach, with a single but more in-depth focus on how evolving transport types have successively dominated to shape a place, provided some equally successful responses. However, generally speaking, responses covering a very limited number of influencing factors, and in less depth, tended to fare less well. Similarly, a noticeable minority of students used more than one 'local place', which went against the rubric of the question and to some extent of the specification. In these cases, as usual, the whole response was considered but only one place that was better used and any general points were credited.

## **Section B**

**2.1** – This question was considered a relatively accessible question, yet many students gained no credit. This was largely due to the question being misinterpreted and students missing or misunderstanding the term 'evaluate'. Among many students, there seemed to be an underlying assumption that all secondary data is reliable and professionally gathered and presented etc. Consequently, instead of explaining the need to evaluate secondary data for its reliability, validity, usefulness and lack of bias etc., a large proportion of responses offered reasons why it was important to use secondary data to check the reliability of their primary data, or to combine it with their primary data as further evidence.

**2.2** – Performance on this particular item was mixed with over 90% attaining at least some credit; 40% of students gained 2 marks out of 4 but only just over 20% gained 3 or 4 marks. Students were credited for two main approaches to the question or by using a combination of each. Firstly, many used the map/satellite image/overlay to identify features, particularly those revealing some change over time, that might be studied in a fieldwork investigation, for example, changes in land use, coastal erosion etc. Alternatively, the same set of images could be used from the planning perspective of a fieldwork enquiry such as identifying suitable sites for investigation, planning access or undertaking risk assessments etc. The main negative issue with student responses was the lack of clarity in making the link between what they saw in the images and a practical

application to any aspect of fieldwork planning. Many responses were primarily descriptive of the images with only very broad reference made to the idea of fieldwork planning, often as an afterthought. Responses needed to be more specifically related to types of fieldwork enquiry and the associated planning for these. With more thought, specific application and perhaps more practice and involvement in fieldwork planning, many students would have fared better.

**2.3** – Student performance on this question was not as expected, with 62% of students gaining no credit. Analysing qualitative data features in the specification geographical skills checklist. It was evident that many students had not been introduced to the idea of coding or categorisation of qualitative data, for example from interview transcripts. If they had undertaken such analysis as part of their studies, they were generally unable to convey how they had accomplished it. In an effort to improve performance on this question, the mark scheme accommodated alternative ways that this analysis might be undertaken. However, it seemed that this was something that only a relative minority of students had covered and fully understood.

**2.4** – The reintroduction of questions concerning the students' own fieldwork did not seem to particularly faze them. This particular question made them consider the link between health and safety and choice of site for their investigation. The idea of a fieldwork site was broadened to include general location of the fieldwork and this gave more opportunity for clearer responses, particularly from more human geography investigations. Students demonstrated a generally good understanding of health and safety considerations in their responses and this was generally sufficient for them to gain level 1 credit. A clear, relative assessment of the importance of these considerations in influencing site or location lifted nearly 45% of students into level 2.

The inclusion of the relative importance of other factors, for example, accessibility or proximity, that influenced site choice was a perfectly acceptable approach to answering this question. This often resulted in a more realistic assessment of why they had chosen certain sites and locations, once a risk assessment had been completed. A more common aspect of health and safety considerations was their importance in determining why certain sites/locations had been avoided, which was an equally valid approach. A number of students drifted into ethical considerations rather than health and safety and these were not credited.

**2.5** – Although this question primarily concerned evaluating planning as a means to reliable data collection, it was also interpreted more broadly as an overall review of their fieldwork. Student performance was sound with more than two thirds of them gaining level 2 credit or higher, though only 7% managed to include the detail required to move into level 3. The detail required for level 3 came from going into more depth about what was planned well, for example, data to be collected, or more often, what went wrong that caused the data to be unreliable.

Credit was awarded for outlining the planning involved in their fieldwork investigation and also for assessing how much this affected the reliability of the data they collected. Many clear responses were seen that covered both aspects well but rarely did they include a detailed evaluation of either the planning process or the reliability of the data collected. In terms of evaluation, most responses were balanced suggesting that planning is extremely important (and on the better ones, why it is) but that data collection can still be unreliable because of other unexpected factors, for example, human error, faulty equipment etc. Many students referred to the discipline of planning as a positive and necessary procedure to ensure reliable data collection, for example, in terms of deciding on sampling methods, making effective use of time, levels of accuracy and teamwork etc. However, their responses also recognised the unpredictability of actually working in the field, mostly referring to variable weather conditions or to lack of people available to survey. Ultimately both the timing and the short duration of most investigations meant that representative samples were inadequate or the conditions experienced did not provide a reliable set of data.

There was a problem with a noticeable minority of responses to this question which were 'generic' in their approach with very limited reference to any specific fieldwork experience, despite having already answered Q2.4 comfortably. Students adopting this more theoretical approach were credited for any relevant content, but it was difficult for their responses to gain credit above lower level 2, while referring to fieldwork in a very general and abstract manner.

### **Questions 3 and 4 - Fieldwork investigation optional questions**

Overall marks for the unfamiliar fieldwork aspect of the paper were higher than last year and also better than most of the corresponding questions in the 2019 series. Of the unfamiliar fieldwork questions, question 3 was by far the most popular option, chosen by a ratio of more than 4 to 1. Skills traditionally associated with fieldwork were handled fairly well by students. The graphical and mathematical skills required for Q3.2/4.2 and 3.3/4.3 enabled the bulk of students to gain some credit on these questions.

**Q3.1/4.1** – Students handled both option questions quite well and over 80% of them gained some credit. Most students had the right ideas but these were not always conveyed as clearly as they might have been. While some latitude in interpretation was given, it was not always possible to credit ideas that were vague and that did not clearly relate to the mark scheme. Basic sampling concepts such as reduced bias, equal coverage over distance, or the notion of it being a representative sample would have been sufficient for credit.

**Q3.2/4.2** – A range of presentation methods were accepted providing they would work for the nature of the data collected; the mark scheme was broadened to accommodate this. As a result, over 50% of students gained both marks available on these questions. Some presentation techniques suggested were not valid as they could not credibly be used to present the specific data sets; these included pie charts, histograms and isoline maps. For the second mark to be awarded it required a developed explanation of how the data would show the relationship between the variables. This was done, for example, by outlining how the variables would be allocated against each axis on a named graph or by the inclusion of a line of best fit on a scatter graph etc.

**Q3.3/4.3** – The inclusion of a Spearman's calculation, or indeed any engagement with mathematical formulae, can sometimes prove daunting to some students at this level. However, in this case, the first part involving the calculation seemed reasonably accessible. It proved less of a problem for students than the follow up requirement to interpret the level of significance, and what this meant for the hypothesis. Around 70% of students gained some credit and in the majority of cases this was given for the initial calculation within the table.

The potential for being double-penalised throughout the process of calculation and interpretation was taken into account by examiners. Thus, if one part of the question was incorrectly calculated, that part was not credited but its outcome was carried through (as though it were correct) for the next stage of calculation or interpretation. It was the application of levels of significance (in figures 8 and 13) to the calculated correlation coefficient that proved to be the main stumbling block for many students on this question. Only around one third of students attained either 3 or 4 marks on each option question. Among many students, there was a lack of clear understanding of how the levels of significance related to confidence in the findings and, in turn, what this meant for acceptance or rejection of the hypothesis. However, for those students with a clearer awareness of the relationship between the coefficient value, significance levels and what this meant for findings, there was good use of the idea of a null hypothesis being accepted.

**Q3.4/4.4** - The final option questions usually demand some general evaluation of the unfamiliar fieldwork enquiry. On this paper, this was specifically related to the reliability of data collection and processing and testing of the hypothesis, though a more general evaluation equally addressed these aspects of the study. There was a good general appreciation of what 'reliability' entails as a concept in fieldwork, but equally there was some confusion between reliability of data collection and testing, and the idea of 'proving' the hypothesis. Some students found it difficult to separate the two ideas and many, having determined that the hypothesis should be rejected, automatically assumed that this meant that the data collection was unreliable, without supplying further evidence to support this claim. Similarly, on both questions, it was only rarely that students identified and evaluated that the hypotheses being tested were substantially different to the aims of the enquiry in each case. Recognition of this underlying weakness in each enquiry had a key bearing on addressing these particular questions.

There were two main routes for students to gain credit from their responses to the questions:

Firstly, the question asked students to use all 5 figures presented for each enquiry. Explanatory links made between any of these figures and the hypothesis and/or aim was given credit. In particular, the use of the sketch diagrams (Figures 5 or 10) which was part of the data collection, could be used to analyse and explain anomalies appearing in the data in Figures 6 or 11. This in turn would have affected the hypothesis testing. Similarly, the sketch diagrams in each enquiry presented data that was more in line with meeting the aim rather than with the hypothesis that was being tested.

The second approach credited was a more traditional evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of data collection and processing, that could be identified from the enquiry in each case. As part of this approach, suggestions made to improve data collection or processing were also credited.

Clear responses that covered either of these approaches usually lifted credit into level 2 comfortably. A coherent combination of both approaches usually meant higher level 2 or level 3 marks were awarded. The detail required for level 3 credit needed to be given by linking different aspects of the figures and/or a detailed evaluation or suggestion for improving the data collection and processing. More than 50% of students achieved level 2 credit or higher in each option but level 3 responses were rare on both questions. Unfortunately, around 40% of students on each option achieved only level 1 credit. Typically, these included responses that used the figures very descriptively, usually stating the purpose of each figure as part of the wider enquiry with very limited or no evaluation. Descriptive responses at level 1 were sometimes accompanied with basic evaluative comments. These were mostly positive comments, commending all aspects of the enquiry with limited evidence to support this view and without identifying any weaknesses.

Students generally find responding to unfamiliar fieldwork questions more challenging, especially those requiring an evaluation of data and evidence to support this. There was some improvement in handling these on this paper, though elements of detailed analysis are still lacking in most responses. The way in which the enquiry is presented and the amount of detail that students have to absorb means that many tend to rely on describing and commenting on the figures with only basic (and mainly a positive) evaluation of the evidence in front of them.

### **Key suggestions for improvements in Section B of Paper 2**

- Practise all geographical skills in the skills checklist thoroughly, preferably as part of a fieldwork investigation but otherwise as an integral part of the general learning of other topics.
- Make detailed notes on fieldwork enquires and use this detail when responding to questions about all the various stages of an enquiry, including data collection, results and conclusions.
- Think more critically when responding to questions that require assessment, evaluation or judgement and look for evidence to support any critique in responses.

### **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.