GCSE
GEOGRAPHY A

Paper 1 / 90301F Physical Geography
Report on the Examination

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General

Question 1 continues to be the most popular question on the paper, followed by Questions 5 and 7. The least popular was Question 2.

There were occasional excellent case studies of fold mountains in 1(f), where candidates described uses of the Alps and Andes by referring to specific factual detail. The requirement for such information in their case studies needs reinforcing so that candidates are able to access all the marks available. Where questions are common to Higher Tier, it is important that the same standard is maintained across both papers so that Foundation Tier candidates anticipating a C grade should be prepared for such questions. Similarly, when asked to explain the formation of landforms, such as limestone pavement, there should be knowledge of the sequence of the formation of the landform and the specific processes involved. In the 6 mark questions, candidates should be coached in the need to develop and link ideas, providing clear responses to the question asked.

Attention is drawn to the command words document available in the GCSE Geography A area of the AQA website. This lists the command words, plus other key phrases, together with their definitions, which have been used in past GCSE Geography exam papers and which may be used in future exams. Candidates should be familiar with these and understand what they demand. There should be an expectation that any of the command words in the list might appear on the question paper.

In the 2014 exam, candidates struggled to distinguish between the commands 'what is' and 'explain the formation of' or 'explain why'. There should have been recognition that 'what is' warranted a definition, e.g. of levées, an avalanche, cliff collapse rather than of the sequence and process of formation of a levée or an explanation of cliff collapse. Many sought to explain in the 'what is' questions and subsequently failed to gain marks. Candidates should be able to define key terms and this should be an integral part of their learning. The command 'describe' proved equally challenging, especially in relation to describing features in photographs with many candidates struggling to set out write down what they could see – as in the case of areas of granite in 2(f), the vegetation in 4(a)(i) and the beach in 7(b)(ii). Again, many incorporated irrelevant explanation into their answers.

Candidates also need to understand the meaning of phrases such as 'use Figure 3' (photographs showing responses to earthquakes) and 'with the help of'. In the case of the former, there was a requirement to refer to the photographs which clearly showed the responses and then describe what is being done. The instruction 'with the help of' indicates that candidates should use not only the stimulus material but also incorporate knowledge of their own – this may be case study material but could be alternative illustrative information.

SECTION A

Question 1 The Restless Earth

As stated in the General comments, some candidates did not understand that 'what is' simply required a definition in part **(a)**, and so they sought to explain why earthquakes occur, rather than define them. Only a minority got both marks, though over half scored one mark, usually for recognising the ground shaking. Most candidates obtained two or three marks in **1(b)(i)**, with over a third obtaining all three marks.   The ability to match the largest and deadliest proved to be the discriminator here. Some answers to **1(b)(ii)** were too vague to obtain a mark such as 'being prepared'; Many noted a basic point such as level of population, whilst just over a third elaborated a little to get the second mark – often this depended on the clarity with which the answer was written. Many were secure on the first part of the sequence in **1(c)**, recognising the oceanic and continental plate and subduction; however, they struggled then to make the clear links in explaining the sequence regarding the earthquake itself. There was also some irrelevant material on volcanoes which was not creditworthy. Despite the instruction to 'Use Figures 3a and 3b' in part **1(d)**, some candidates used neither of the photographs while others used only one of them. This limited the marks that they could score. There was also a need select the features shown in the photos and use these appropriately to answer the question but this requirement eluded many candidates, which stranded them in Level 1 of the mark scheme. Most candidates got the second and third statements correct in part **1(e)**, whilst the first and fourth proved more challenging. Overall, just over a fifth got three or four marks and a third got two marks. The case study in **1(f)** elicited some very good responses – but these were disappointingly few. Only a small number of candidates had the specific case study knowledge required to lift their answer to Level 2. In relation to the need to describe the uses, this was not best met by a random collection of facts, so those candidates who relied on that approach could not achieve Level 2. Too many answers were very vague and generalised, talking about tourism and usually specifying skiing and farming but often not indicating what crops or livestock.   Many encouragingly named a valid range of fold mountains, but then failed to capitalise on this this piece of information.

Question 2 Rocks, Resources and Scenery

Almost two thirds of the candidates identified all three types of weathering correctly in part **2(a)**. Candidates got confused between lava and magma in part **2(b)**, with about half getting 3 or 4 marks. At the lower end of the ability range there was a high incidence of guessing at the correct answer, rather than genuine application of their knowledge. There appeared to be very variable knowledge in **2(c)(i)**, with very few scoring two marks and about as many again gaining 1 mark for a clear prescribed surface limestone feature. Many labelled the rock type rather than on the limestone pavement and its specific features. Responses to part **2(cii)** were equally disappointing with nearly a fifth of candidates not even attempting this mainstream question. Of those that did, a significant proportion talked about freeze-thaw weathering in preference to solution. Even where this was recognised, acid rain was often referred to rather than a consideration of carbonation. There is a need to address sequence and process in the explanation of landforms, but the vast majority failed to do this as more than three quarters scored no marks with only a very small number of candidates managing to access Level 2. Similarly in part **2(d)**, many offered explanation of the formation of stalactites and stalagmites – last year's question – rather than explaining how water got underground so as to form such features. Only a small number recognised the permeable nature of the limestone.   Almost half gained three or four marks and another quarter scored two marks by selecting the correct words regarding an aquifer in part **2(e)**. As indicated by the wording of the question – with the help of Figures 6a and 6b – candidates needed to use the photographs in their answer to part **2(f)**, not just their own knowledge. Many

referred to Figure 6a only and so obtained Level 1, as there was no consideration of an economic use as required by the question.

Question 3 Challenge of Weather and Climate

Nearly three quarters of candidates gained all three marks in **3(a)(i)** by successfully identifying the three correct statements. However, in **3(a)(ii)** many sought to explain variation in sunshine as variation in temperature and so latitude, rather than cloud cover, became the focus. Therefore only a small number gained any credit on this question. A few candidates gained two marks and a quarter got one mark in part **3(bi)** for recognising the unusual, severe or recent frequency of events. Some merely copied the headlines, without using them in any way. Answers to **3(b)(ii)** were again disappointing as candidates failed to understand the key term 'benefits' in the context of the question. Too many wrote about the benefits of tourism without linking these to a particular weather type which was critical for Level 2. In **3(c)(i)**, about a quarter of candidates obtained three or four marks, with over a third accessing two. Most could not identify the direct and intermediate impact of increasing population with regard to increasing use of fossil fuels arising from buying more manufactured goods, though they did generally note the increased level of carbon dioxide in the second statement and could read off the level accurately for the third statement. Many referred to global warming in the fourth statement instead of explaining how or why the heat was trapped. Over half gained all four marks in part **3(cii)** as all the categories were correctly identified. Some included more than one type in a box and therefore negated their answer. In part **3(d)**, some candidates failed to stay focused on 'local' and drifted to national and international, but there were some good, detailed descriptions on appropriate aspects such as congestion charging and the use of bicycles in London. Again, some of the poorer answers here illustrate the need to develop ideas and not just list responses.

Question 4 Living World

In **4(a)(i)** candidates had to write about what was visible in the photograph using the parameters given. Most were able to describe the vegetation cover, but found the height (relatively few used the person as a guide) and number of species more challenging. For the latter, a significant number wrote about animals rather than plants. Thus, just under half obtained two or more marks, whilst a quarter did not score any marks at all. Only a very small number gained all four marks in **4(a)(ii)**, with many identifying needles that protect against predators which was not valid in the context of climate, but well over half did get two or three marks here. In **4(a)(iii)**, just under a half failed to engage with the soil aspect; where they did, most talked about long roots, with only a third qualifying to obtain the second developed mark regarding access to deep underground stores. A significant number continued on the climate theme from the previous question. Nearly a quarter obtained all four marks in part **4(bi)**, but a significant number did not gain the first mark about the location near to the Equator. Some candidates defined deforestation in **4(b)(ii)**, rather than explain why it occurred. Few had any clear appreciation of the scale of it or the underlying reasons why it occurred, or linked it to the need to access minerals or the infertility of the soil. Many answers were somewhat list-like referring to mining, farming and tourism. The best answers referred to case studies, with only a small number accessing Level 2. Over a third could outline an effect in **4(b)(iii)** and almost three quarters identified an appropriate effect, usually linked to loss of habitat and impact on wildlife. In part **4(c)**, responses ranged from those at one end who copied indiscriminately from Figure 11 without understanding, across those who simply 'lifted' parts of relevant information, to the minority who used the information more astutely and showed an awareness of how reducing debt meant that the countries concerned no longer had to cut more trees down to pay off the debt.

SECTION B

Question 5 Water on the Land

Most candidates gained both marks for correctly identifying an upper and middle course landform in **5(a)(i)** which was well answered. However, many candidates referred to the river rather than the valley in **5(a)(ii)** and consequently over half did not score any marks here. Otherwise occasional marks were scored more by chance than design from the odd comment on the valley amid the channel information. Some candidates also unnecessarily gave an explanation.   Too many candidates focused on explaining how levées formed, rather than defining them in **5(a)(iii)** and so only little over a third scored one or two marks. The recognition of raised banks was needed and a little further elaboration regarding deposited sediment for example.   Some candidates randomly slotted in the key phrases provided in **5(a)(iv)** without consideration of their relevance or accuracy – the given key words needed to be utilised in a way that made sense in the sequence of levée formation. Even where the overflowing of the banks was recognised via flooding, many did not then link to the subsequent loss of energy and its impact. In **5(b)(i)**, many candidates described 'flooding' in terms of a river bursting its banks, with the better responses recognising that this resulted from the river carrying 'too much water'.   A common error, however, was for some candidates to simply rearrange the words in the question and state that 'river flooding is when a river floods' which clearly does not convey to the examiner an understanding of the term.   The vast majority of candidates correctly matched the cause to the explanation in **5(b)(ii)**, whilst in **5(c)(i)**, over a third obtained both one and two marks. Those gaining two recognised the correct type from Figure 13, whilst others confused hard and soft engineering or selected a strategy that was not given on information board in the figure. Part **5(c)(ii)** was relatively well answered.   Valid explanations in this context, such as 'increasing the discharge a river can hold within its banks meaning that it can cope with higher discharges, thus lowering the frequency of flooding' led to higher marks being accessed. Many candidates simply identified responses, rather than explained how they worked.

Question 6 Ice on the Land

Many candidates identified the correct sea in **6(a)**, but struggled to calculate the distance correctly. Common responses in **6(a)(ii)** were to note increased temperatures linked to global warming and ice melting – this was a typical Level 1 answer. Only a minority developed and linked ideas to explain why there was an increase in greenhouse gases or considered the glacier budget. About a quarter of candidates correctly identified the U-shape valley and the ribbon lake.   The latter proved to be the harder to identify and many struggled to describe the truncated spur in **6(b)(ii)**, opting to try to explain its formation. A small number of candidates gained credit here for noting information such as the steep slope and its position. In contrast, **6(b)(iii)** was well done with two thirds of candidates correctly selecting three or four words in the explaining the formation of a truncated spur. About half gave a partial definition of an avalanche in **6(c)(i)** whilst fewer went on to add a little elaboration for the second mark. In **6(c)(ii)**, candidates were able to identify triggers, but struggled then to explain the sequence of events set in motion by the trigger. Nearly half the answers to part **6(d)** accessed the upper end of Level 1 but fewer reached Level 2, as there had to be some application of own knowledge for this and an appreciation of both elements. The best responses realised that the power of the attractions overcame the dangers.

Question 7 The Coastal Zone

Over two thirds identified the correct process in **7(a)**. Most identified the cliff or headland for X in **7(b)(i)**, but far fewer noted the wave-cut platform for Y. In **7(b)(ii)**, many candidates described a variety of landforms that could be seen in the photograph, often in the format of a list, rather than focusing their response on the beach itself, referring for example to the wide, sandy, flat nature of this beach. This lack of focus meant that not very many candidates got both marks. Only a small number gained three or four marks in the explanation of the formation of a beach in **7(b)(iii)**. Many failed to note the source of beach material – the sea was inadequate for the mark; most could define deposition in the second statement, but struggled with a reason why beaches are found in bays. The final part was well done, with a recognition of a stronger swash than backwash in constructive waves. Many sought to explain why cliffs collapse in **7(c)(i)**, rather than define the term. Some just repeated the word 'collapse' from the question instead of using a substitute, such as 'fall', and thus failed to demonstrate understanding. Part **7(c)(ii)** was answered well by some candidates, with the best answers making reference to wave erosion (with reference to processes) between high and low tide; the formation of an enlarged wave cut notch; and the subsequent downward pressure and collapse of the overhanging rock. Many candidates, however, only partially identified this sequence and/or failed to refer to processes of erosion and subsequently remained in Level 1. Other candidates approached the question differently and highlighted equally acceptable explanations of cliff collapse which were linked to the geology of the coastline, mass movement and human development but again responses varied in terms of detail and clarity of expression. It was these aspects which then became important in determining the level attained. In **7(c)(iii)**, almost half of the candidates identified a valid effect of cliff collapse on both people and the environment, while over a third only identified one – usually on people. In **7(d)**, most candidates could offer some basic description of the strategies shown in Figure 18 and about a quarter began to explain. However, relatively few could explain a clear sequence – such as how rock armour protects the bottom of the cliff by absorbing the wave energy itself or the impact of a beach due to groynes.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the Results Statistics page of the AQA Website.

Converting Marks into UMS marks

Convert raw marks into Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) marks by using the link below.

UMS conversion calculator