

Examiners' report

GCSE

GEOGRAPHY A

(GEOGRAPHICAL THEMES)

OCR Level 1/Level 2 GCSE (9-1) in
Geography A (Geographical Themes)

J383

For first teaching in 2016

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Introduction

Our examiners' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on candidates' performance in the examinations. They provide useful guidance for future candidates.

The reports will include a general commentary on candidates' performance, identify technical aspects examined in the questions and highlight good performance and where performance could be improved. A selection of candidate responses is also provided. The reports will also explain aspects which caused difficulty and why the difficulties arose, whether through a lack of knowledge, poor examination technique, or any other identifiable and explainable reason.

Where overall performance on a question/question part was considered good, with no particular areas to highlight, these questions have not been included in the report.

A full copy of the question paper and the mark scheme can be downloaded from [Teach Cambridge](#).

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Paper 2 series overview

All examiners and team leaders agreed that the 2025 examination was pitched at an 'appropriate level' for the candidates. They felt that most candidates made good use of their time to complete all necessary questions. Many candidates took advantage of the inclusion of an additional page for the 12-mark case study question to continue their responses with ease. This was also appreciated by the examiners; an experienced team leader remarked: *'the addition of an extra page to answer this question was helpful and greatly reduced the need to link pages as fewer candidates continued on to the additional pages at the end of the booklet'*.

Most answers were well written, with most candidates getting 2 or 3 marks for their SPaG mark on Question 2 (b).

Question 1 was the most successfully answered question, closely followed by Question 2. All three Level of Response questions required case study examples. A tropical rainforest for Question 1 (c), an LIDC or EDC aid project for Question 2 (b) and a named drought event for Question 3 (c). Candidates were most successful on Question 1 (c), which they answered marginally better than Question 2 (b).

A key factor for high performance on the case study questions was the successful application of relevant knowledge and understanding to meet the specific requirements of the questions. The 12-mark question will always cover a range of requirements and assessment objectives. This ability to read the questions and focus on applying precise knowledge and understanding distinguishes the best candidates from the rest. With all three-case study questions some candidates included a wide range of place specific detail (PLC) but were unable to provide developed or well-developed ideas that matched the question demands. Such answers are limited to Level 1 marks only, or in some cases, no marks at all. A case study response with developed ideas but no PLC will always gain higher marks than a response with a range of PLC but only simple ideas.

Assessment for learning



Place specific detail is an important element of case study responses. However, candidates should understand that developed and well-developed ideas relevant to the specific demands of the question are more important. The quality and depth of developed and well-developed ideas determine the level that the response can reach. Place specific detail is then considered to determine the mark within the level band. Answers which are overloaded with place specific detail at the expense of relevant developed ideas will achieve few, if any, marks. Place specific detail does not affect the mark for a Level 1 response with only simple ideas.

Candidates who did well on this paper generally:	Candidates who did less well on this paper generally:
• focused on and addressed all the specific requirements of the case study questions • included developed and well-developed ideas in their case study responses • included relevant place specific detail to support their case study answers • wrote clear and concise answers to the 2, 3 and 4-mark questions.	• chose incorrect or irrelevant examples for the case study questions • only addressed some aspects of the case study question requirements • included place specific detail for case study answers without developed or well-developed ideas • wrote lengthy responses to the 2, 3 and 4-mark questions that lacked focus and clarity.

Question 1 (a) (i)

Ecosystems of the Planet**1****(a)** Look at **Fig. 1** in the Resource Booklet.**(i)** Name the hot desert which covers the largest area on **Fig. 1**.

..... [1]

A successful introduction to the exam, with almost all candidates gaining the mark.

Question 1 (a) (ii)

(ii) Describe the distribution of hot deserts shown on **Fig. 1**.

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..... [3]

Many of the candidates were given 3 marks. The most successful responses focused on the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn, with some adding specific examples. Anomalies included deserts close to the Equator or Turkestan north of the Tropic of Cancer. Other credible ideas included more deserts in the northern hemisphere and a concentration of deserts in the Middle East and/or Africa. A common incorrect idea was stating that most deserts were found on the Equator. Some candidates lost valuable time by describing the locations of all the deserts shown on Fig. 1 or giving reasons to explain the locations of deserts.

One examiner noted that the best answers used the TEA structure (trend, evidence, anomaly).

Exemplar 1

Hot deserts are mainly found along the tropics of cancer and capricorn. However Deserts like the Somali desert and the Sechura desert are found closer to the equator.

This exemplar got full marks. The first mark was given for the correct general idea that hot deserts are mainly found along the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn, the second mark was awarded for the inclusion of named deserts which are anomalous by being closer to the Equator. The response is clear and concise and economically expressed for the 'C' mark.

Assessment for learning



With only 60 minutes, time management is a crucial factor in exam success. The crude equation of 1 mark per minute is a useful mind-set. Writing clear, concise responses to questions worth 2, 3 or 4 marks saves time to devote to the more challenging Levels of Response questions. Candidates should practice writing short, clear and coherent responses to these questions. The clues are the mark allocation and the limited number of lines for the answer.

Question 1 (a) (iii)

(iii) State **two** climate features associated with hot desert ecosystems.

- 1
- 2

[2]

Most candidates gained both marks. Simple but valid responses such as hot/high temperatures and dry/low rainfall were enough to get full marks. Some candidates provided valid data to support their ideas, unfortunately additional marks could not be given. Common errors included writing about desert landscapes or vegetation.

Question 1 (a) (iv)

(iv) Describe how animals **adapt** to live in a hot desert ecosystem.

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..... [2]

Most candidates gained both marks, while some got 0 marks. A few candidates omitted this question. Two marks could be awarded for two valid separate ideas or one feature developed with detail. Camels with long eye lashes to keep out the sand was the top choice, closely followed by fat storing humps and big feet for avoiding sinking into the sand. The larger ears of fennec foxes also featured in responses, along with burrowing or nocturnal animals avoiding the daytime heat. Some candidates showed impressive knowledge by covering in detail more than one valid feature; unfortunately, 2 marks was the maximum for this question. Some candidates wasted valuable time by writing about how plants are adapted for desert life.

Misconception



A common misconception was that camels store water in their humps.

Question 1 (b)

Look at **Fig. 2** in the Resource Booklet.

(b) Explain how the **nutrient cycle** operates in a coral reef ecosystem.

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..... [4]

This question assessed a complex element of the Specification, section 2.1.5. **Fig. 2** was included to support candidates, with some candidates using this to good effect. Some did not need to, and some did not understand the coral reef nutrient cycle at all. Some candidates scored 0, 1 or 2 marks, with fewer gaining full marks. Candidates who were most successful covered the symbiotic relationship between coral and algae clearly with reference to the exchange of nutrients. The roles of phytoplankton, zooplankton and fish faeces as a source of nitrates and phosphates were also mentioned by some. Some candidates lost time by writing about food sources or the food chain without any reference to nutrients or offered incorrect ideas about coral turning into algae and vice versa. Some applied irrelevant knowledge such as fish using coral for shelter and breeding grounds or the conditions needed for coral to thrive.

Exemplar 2

The most important nutrient is nitrogen and there is a symbiotic relationship between the coral and the algae. The zooxanthellae are small ^{algae like} creatures that live inside the coral. They photosynthesise and provide nutrients to the coral. The coral give ~~zooth~~ zooxanthellae its waste nutrients and also gives them a place to live. Zooplankton are microscopic ~~sub~~ creatures that are eaten by fishes for [4] nutrients. Fish excrete ammonia, which is absorbed by the Corals for nutrients.

This is a full mark exemplar, where the candidate's ideas exceeded the total of 4 marks. The first mark was for nitrogen being an important nutrient. The second was for the symbiotic relationship between coral and algae. The third is for zooxanthellae providing the coral with nutrients via photosynthesis, and the final mark was for coral giving nutrients to the zooxanthellae. Further ideas were creditworthy, fish gaining nutrients from eating zooplankton and fish excreting ammonia which is absorbed by coral for nutrients.

Assessment for learning



This exemplar could be used by asking students to place four ticks to show where marks were awarded. Students could then be asked to edit the answer accordingly.

Question 1 (c)*

CASE STUDY

Threats to tropical rainforest biodiversity

Tropical rainforest studied:

(c)* Explain how threats to **biodiversity** affect interdependence in a tropical rainforest.

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..... [8]

A few candidates omitted this question, and some attempted but did not gain marks. More candidates were able to give relevant ideas with some place specific detail to gain Level 2 marks. A few were given full marks. The most common example was the Peruvian rainforest. Many Level 1 responses gave only simple ideas about the impact of deforestation on animal habitats and food chains. Developed points included the impact of mercury, from gold mining, contaminating water supplies and its impact on aquatic life and indigenous people. The most successful responses gave detailed coverage of the impact of deforestation and mining on the nutrient and water cycles with clear step by step explanations leading to soil erosion and local climate change. Some responses displayed an impressive range of place specific detail such as the location and size of the Peruvian rainforest, data about its biodiversity and rate of illegal logging and examples of plants and animals in the rainforest. Allied with developed or well-developed ideas, these answers would get the top of Level 2 or Level 3 marks. However, those with only simple ideas about habitat loss would be limited to Level 1. The most impressive responses were about the impacts of deforestation and mining in the Congo rainforest with detailed accounts of the interdependence between elephants and the moabi tree and bonobos and strangler figs through seed dispersal.

Question 2 (a) (i)

People of the Planet

2

(a) Look at **Fig. 3** in the Resource Booklet.(i) Which continent, did **not** have an increase in urban population from 1990 to 2014?

..... [1]

A straightforward graph interpretation question meant that most candidates were awarded this mark.

Question 2 (a) (ii)

(ii) What is the correct ratio for the increase in urban population, shown on **Fig. 3**, for Asia from 1990 to 2050?

A 1:1

B 1:2

C 1:3

D 1:4

Write the correct letter in the box.

[1]

Most candidates used their maths skills to work out the correct ratio of 1:2. Some candidates used the space at the side of the options to work out the steps from 32:64 to arrive at the answer.

Question 2 (a) (iii)

(iii) Explain **two** negative consequences of rapid urbanisation in LIDCs.

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2

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[4]

The most common idea was a lack of housing availability leading to the development of informal settlements. Lack of jobs leading to the growth of the informal sector and increased traffic causing congestion and air pollution also featured. Less convincing were those who tried to explain an increase in crime or the spread of disease. The impact of rapid urbanisation on rural communities was also given. Some candidates gave general ideas about the impact of urban migrants on service provision without any clear detail. Some candidates ignored the 'urbanisation' element of the question and wrote about the impact of migration in general which received no credit. However, some candidates were also able to get full marks.

Exemplar 3

- 1 one consequence of rapid urbanisation is development of informal living areas, as there is not enough housing, such as slums on peripheries of the city. This is harmful as land is often in vicarious and dangerous locations, while also being unsanitary, meaning disease spreads quickly.
- 2 another consequence is increased unemployment rates that cause stress on local economies. large numbers of people moving to cities causes higher demand for jobs this leads to more people not earning a salary, however still using social infrastructure such as hospitals. This puts increase strain on social systems without receiving investment into economy. [4]

This was another exemplar that was given full marks. The first mark was awarded for informal living areas, with a development mark given for 'as there is not enough housing' and the location of such informal areas. A third mark was awarded within section 1 for the idea that these informal areas are harmful due to their 'vicarious and dangerous locations', with development added for 'meaning disease spreads quickly'. A further mark could have been given for 'increased unemployment rates' with development for 'higher demand for jobs this leads to more people not earning a salary'. The final idea about strain on social infrastructure such as hospitals lacked clear development so would only have gained 1 mark.

Assessment for learning



As with Exemplar 2, ask students to add ticks and development (DEVs) to show where the 4 marks were gained and then edit the answer accordingly.

Question 2 (b)*

CASE STUDY

One aid project in an LIDC or EDC

LIDC or EDC studied:

An aid project can promote and hinder economic development in an LIDC or EDC.

(b)* Evaluate the **success** of an aid project in your chosen LIDC or EDC.

[12]

 Spelling, punctuation and grammar [3]

This was the second most successfully answered question, marginally behind Question 1 (c). Some candidates were able to include well-developed ideas in their response to reach Levels 3 and 4. Goat Aid in Ethiopia was by far the most common example, although some candidates did give credible accounts of Goat Aid operating in Nigeria and Kenya. Developed ideas for Level 2 responses focused on the specific benefits of Goat Aid such as dairy produce for consumption or sale, manure used as fertiliser and breeding goats to engender sustainability. Some candidates also covered associated problems including overgrazing, veterinary costs and theft of goats. Well-developed answers widened the coverage to write about the 'Girl Effect' and its impact on female opportunities, status and security, and birth rates. Issues such as the local scale of Goat Aid and its limited impact on economic development and dependency on aid were also discussed. The evaluate element of the question required some overall judgement of the success of Goat Aid. Some candidates did this in a conclusion, others throughout the body of the answer, both are valid strategies. Credible place specific detail included information about the location of Ethiopia, it being landlocked, bordering nations and accurate data for population and development levels. Some excellent responses were also noted covering the work of Médecins Sans Frontières and their projects in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Despite writing at length, there were several reasons why some candidates did not gain many marks. Some wrote about more than one aid project, ignoring the word 'one' in bold at the start of the question. For these examples, only the first valid aid project is given credit. Mid-Level 2 for a maximum of 5 marks was applied to responses which did not name a valid LIDC or EDC; these included examples of cities such as Rosario, Istanbul and Lagos. Some candidates ignored the aid project element of the question and chose to write about Transnational Corporations (TNC) investment in Ethiopia or India. These responses were not given credit. Exceptions to this were specific, valid aid projects linked to TNCs, such as Afriflora's school related projects in Ethiopia and Project Shakti funded by Unilever in India. Other valid case study examples included WaterAid, Charity: Water, various Action Aid projects, SCAD and Beti Zindabad projects in India and the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean-Up India) campaign. Marks were also given for accounts of debt relief and bilateral aid, such the China funded Addis Ababa to Djibouti railway. Interestingly, with the 40th anniversary of Live Aid in 2025, some chose to write about this as their aid project.

Assessment for learning



Teachers have developed a wide range of excellent practice to encourage candidates to analyse the requirements of questions before writing their responses. This can be difficult to apply during the high-pressure atmosphere of a 60-minute exam. However, time should be devoted to applying this to the Levels of Response questions. Highlighting the words '**one**' '*aid project*' '*promote and hinder economic development*' and '*evaluate*' would have helped some candidates to focus their thinking on relevant creditworthy ideas for greater marks.

Question 3 (a) (i)

Environmental threats to our Planet

3

(a) Look at **Fig. 4** in the Resource Booklet.

(i) Identify **two** important messages shown in **Fig. 4**.

1

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2

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[2]

Almost all candidates got marks, with most gaining full marks. Some candidates focused on the time scale of warnings about climate change, others that these warnings were ignored until the 2020s. Others used the visual evidence such as the continued burning of fossil fuels and the negative impact on the natural environment. It would also be fair to say that some used this a vehicle to express their own opinions regarding the lack of action or the need for urgent action to deal with climate change. Candidates who only lifted the phrases used in the cartoon were limited to 1 mark only.

Question 3 (a) (ii)

(ii) Explain **one** consequence of climate change currently being experienced.

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..... [2]

Important elements of this question included the command word explain and the specifying of **one** consequence. Most candidates got both marks. The melting of ice caps/glaciers was the most common response with a link to rising sea levels. Melting ice caps were also linked to the threat to polar bear habitats, while rising sea levels were linked to coastal flooding. Increased frequency or severity of extreme weather events such as wildfires, drought and tropical storms were also given. Some candidates did not clearly specify an increase in these types of events, and some described the process of global warming via the enhanced greenhouse effect.

Question 3 (a) (iii)

(iii) Evaluate the **reliability** of paintings and diaries as evidence for climate change.

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..... [3]

Some candidates clearly got the idea of paintings and diaries as evidence of past climate to be compared with present day climate and got full marks. Suggestions were that such evidence could be biased, exaggerated, and open to misinterpretation or only depicting a snapshot in time and place. However, some wrote that paintings and diaries could provide a useful starting point especially if corroborated by other contemporary evidence. Some responses were supported with reference to examples such as paintings of ice fairs on the river Thames. The lack of quantitative data was also contrasted with the reliability of scientific evidence, such as ice cores and tree rings. Less successful responses assumed that paintings and diaries depicted actual evidence of climate change as opposed to evidence from the past. Some candidates misunderstood the question and thought that the cartoon **Fig. 4** was the evidence to be commented on.

Question 3 (a) (iv)

(iv) Which **one** of the following is a natural cause of climate change?

- A burning fossil fuels
- B cattle farming
- C changes in the Earth's orbit
- D deforestation

Write the correct letter in the box.

[1]

Most candidates correctly chose option **C** as the correct answer.

Question 3 (b) (i)

(b) Look at **Fig. 5** in the Resource Booklet.

(i) Which statement correctly describes the movement of air in a Hadley Cell?

- A cold air descends at 0° and rises at 30°
- B cold air descends at 30° and rises at 60°
- C warm air descends at 0° and rises at 30°
- D warm air rises at 0° and descends at 30°

Write the correct letter in the box.

[1]

Only some candidates correctly chose option **D** as the correct response. There is a possibility that some candidates did not look at **Fig. 5** closely enough or at all in making their choice.

Question 3 (b) (ii)

- (ii) Use **Fig. 5** to explain how the global circulation of the atmosphere leads to different extreme weather conditions at the equator and the poles.

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..... [4]

The most successful candidates explained how rising air/low pressure leads to heavy rainfall at the Equator due to rapid evaporation and condensation, with a few candidates explaining how high pressure with cold dry sinking air leads to low precipitation at the poles. Some also suggested that the lack of cloud cover enhanced cold temperatures at the poles. Other responses included incorrect ideas such as low pressure causing droughts at the Equator. Other candidates started at the Equator and gave lengthy descriptions of the circulation of air within all three cells, without any reference to weather conditions.

Question 3 (c)

CASE STUDY

Causes of drought

Drought event studied:

(c) Explain the **causes** of the drought event.

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..... [6]

Compared to the other case study questions this was the least successfully answered. A few candidates did not attempt this question. Most candidates that answered got marks, with many of those achieving Level 2 or Level 3. With the exception of a few accounts of drought in Ethiopia and South Africa, the responses overwhelmingly used the Big Dry drought event as their example. El Niño was correctly cited as a main cause, although there was confusion with La Niña and even El Niño and the Indian Ocean Dipole. Level 2 marks were achieved by correctly describing the reversal or weakening of trade winds in the Pacific during an El Niño event. Some candidates went further by explain how this led to cold water off the eastern coast of Australia causing a lack of evaporation and low rainfall. Equally successful responses were those that explained how overuse of water sources in the Murray-Darling basin exacerbated the drought event. A wide range of place specific detail was common with correct dates, data about the percentage lack of rain, and the severity of the drought. This information could only be given if accompanied by a correct developed idea about the cause of the drought. These developed ideas were usually supported with correct place information about El Niño or the Murray-Darling River basin. As usual with a drought event case study question, some candidates defined drought, gave accounts of the impact or attempts to manage the drought. Highlighting the word 'causes' in the question would have helped these candidates to focus on relevant ideas.

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