

COHORT PERFORMANCE REPORT

AQA GCSE Geography

Paper 1: Living with the Physical Environment

Analysis of the 2026 examination performance of a 70-student cohort

Headline finding Performance was broadly in line with the national picture. The strongest outcomes were on one-mark and geographical-skills questions; the main opportunity is improving developed explanations and sustained extended writing.

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Executive summary

The cohort of 70 students performed broadly in line with the national picture. The reconstructed question-level result was 44.3 marks out of 88, or 50.3%. Performance was strongest on one-mark questions, geographical skills and questions requiring students to select or extract information.

The central area for improvement is students' ability to turn geographical knowledge into developed explanations and sustained extended answers. Four-mark explanation questions produced just 26.1%, while only 15 of the 420 responses to six- and nine-mark questions reached the upper response band.

The results suggest that future improvement will come less from increasing basic factual recall and more from teaching students how to:

- Construct connected chains of geographical reasoning.
- Apply knowledge to figures and unfamiliar contexts.
- Integrate case-study evidence into answers.
- Evaluate alternatives and reach supported judgements.
- Complete longer questions within the available time.

Overall and unit performance

Area	Cohort	National	Difference
Natural Hazards	51.8%	53.3%	-1.6 percentage points
Living World	51.5%	51.2%	+0.3 percentage points
Coastal Landscapes	45.7%	42.7%	+3.0 percentage points
River Landscapes	45.9%	44.7%	+1.2 percentage points

Both Section C options were above their national averages. Natural Hazards was the only unit to fall noticeably below the national outcome, largely because of weak performance on the four-mark climate-change explanation.

What went well

1. Geographical skills were a relative strength

Performance on questions assessing AO4 was 76.2%, slightly above the national figure of 76.0%. Students generally interpreted graphs, maps, photographs and numerical information successfully.

Particularly successful questions included:

Question	Focus	Cohort performance
01.1	Reading a tropical-storm graph	98.6%
03.2	Identifying a coastal landform from an OS map	95.7%
01.10	Applying plate-movement knowledge to a figure	91.4%
01.9	Interpreting an earthquake-intensity map	90.0%
02.6	Interpreting changes in forest area	87.1%
02.7	Calculating percentage decrease	77.1%
04.2	Comparing river shape using an OS map	77.1%

This suggests that regular practice with figures, maps and numerical data has been effective and should be retained.

2. One-mark questions were answered successfully

Across 23 one-mark questions, the cohort achieved 75.3%, compared with 74.3% nationally. Students were generally successful when required to recognise, select, identify or extract a single piece of information.

Command-word performance supports this:

Command word	Cohort performance
Where	90.0%
Which	83.9%
What	77.1%
State	77.1%
Calculate	72.9%
Identify	66.4%
Give	64.3%

These percentages are influenced by the content and tariff of the associated questions, so they should not be interpreted as evidence about command words alone. Nevertheless, they show that short-answer access to the paper was generally secure.

3. Section C performance exceeded national outcomes

Coastal Landscapes was 3.0 percentage points above national performance, while River Landscapes was 1.2 points above. Several Section C questions exceeded their national averages:

- Q03.4, explaining variation in wave-cut platform width: 57.1%, compared with 50.0%.
- Q03.5, explaining the presence of a headland: 62.9%, compared with 50.0%.
- Q03.6, sand-dune formation: 28.6%, compared with 22.5%.
- Q03.7, evaluating coastal management: 41.4%, compared with 40.0%.
- Q04.2, comparing river channel shape: 77.1%, compared with 70.0%.
- Q04.7, evaluating flood-management impacts: 43.1%, compared with 40.0%.

Absolute performance on some of these remained low, but students coped with nationally challenging material slightly better than the wider entry.

4. Six- and nine-mark performance was slightly above national outcomes

Tariff	Cohort	National	Difference
Six marks	44.2%	42.9%	+1.3 percentage points
Nine marks	37.1%	36.1%	+1.0 percentage point

This indicates that extended writing was not weaker than it was nationally. Students were often able to access the middle response band, and some relevant teaching was clearly transferred into examination answers.

5. SPaG performance was secure

The cohort averaged approximately 2.14 out of three SPaG marks, or 71.4%, compared with a national average of approximately 70%. Students generally used geographical terminology and written English with reasonable accuracy.

Improvements needed

1. Four-mark explanations were the clearest weakness

The three four-mark questions produced only 26.1%, below the national figure of 28.3%. Collectively, students missed 621 marks, equivalent to 8.9 marks per student across these questions.

Question	Focus	Cohort	National
01.8	Natural factors affecting climate change	22.5%	37.5%
03.6	Formation of coastal sand dunes	28.6%	22.5%
04.6	Formation of river depositional landforms	27.1%	25.0%

Although the coastal and river questions were above their national averages, the low absolute outcomes show that students struggled to construct complete formation sequences.

Teaching model Process -> immediate effect -> further consequence -> resulting landform or pattern.

Students should routinely annotate model answers to identify where each causal link earns credit and then practise reconstructing the explanation without the model.

2. Natural climate-change processes require reteaching

Q01.8 was the largest relative underperformance against the national average:

- Cohort average: 0.9 out of four.
- Cohort performance: 22.5%.
- National performance: 37.5%.
- Students scoring zero: 32.
- Marks missed: 217.

Future teaching should distinguish clearly between natural and human causes of climate change. Students need secure explanatory chains for:

- Volcanic aerosols reducing incoming solar radiation.
- Variations in solar output affecting the energy received by Earth.
- Orbital changes altering the distribution or amount of incoming solar radiation.

This content should be revisited through short, repeated explanation tasks rather than factual retrieval alone.

3. Extended responses lacked depth and top-band development

Across the six included extended-writing questions:

Response outcome	Number	Proportion
Lower band	168	40.0%
Middle band	220	52.4%
Upper band	15	3.6%
Not attempted	17	4.0%

The overwhelming majority of answers remained in the lower or middle bands. Only 15 responses out of 420 reached the upper band.

The priority questions were:

Question	Focus	Cohort performance	Marks missed
02.10	Desertification: causes and management	32.9%	423
01.12	Management of tectonic hazards	41.4%	369
03.7	Effectiveness of coastal management	41.4%	246
04.7	Impacts of flood-management strategies	43.1%	239
02.9	Environmental effects of deforestation	45.0%	231
01.6	Widespread impacts of tropical storms	47.1%	222

Future cohorts need regular practice in:

- Addressing every element of the question.
- Integrating evidence from the supplied figure.
- Adding accurate case-study or place-specific evidence.
- Developing rather than listing ideas.
- Considering more than one side of evaluative questions.
- Ending with a judgement supported by the preceding evidence.

4. Desertification was the single greatest improvement opportunity

Q02.10 accounted for 423 missed marks, or approximately 6.0 marks per student. Although the cohort was slightly above the national average, its average score was only 3.0 out of nine.

- 37 responses were in the lower band.
- 27 responses were in the middle band.
- Three responses reached the upper band.
- Three responses were not attempted.

Students need a clearer distinction between climatic causes, human causes, local management and wider strategies such as the Great Green Wall. “Discuss” answers should connect each strategy to the cause it addresses rather than simply listing generic solutions.

5. Some core geographical terminology was insecure

Q03.1 required students to identify abrasion. Only 38.6% answered correctly, compared with 50.0% nationally, and 41 students scored zero. Q04.5, which required students to recognise how impermeable surfaces or geology influence river discharge, produced 48.6%.

These results indicate gaps in foundational process knowledge. Retrieval should continue, but distractors should require students to distinguish between easily confused terms, such as:

- Abrasion, attrition, hydraulic action and solution.
- Traction, saltation, suspension and solution.
- Infiltration, surface runoff and throughflow.
- Erosion, transportation and deposition.

6. Tropical rainforest soils need clearer process-based teaching

Q02.5 produced an average of 0.7 out of two, with 31 students scoring zero. Students need to explain why rainforest soils can remain relatively infertile despite dense vegetation.

- Rapid decomposition.
- Rapid nutrient uptake by vegetation.
- Nutrients being stored mainly in biomass.
- Heavy rainfall and leaching.
- The effect of forest clearance on the nutrient cycle.

7. Examination completion needs attention

The spreadsheet records 91 questions not attempted, although 36 of these are associated with the student whose question-level data is missing. Even after allowing for that record, omissions remain significant. The most notable included question was Q04.6, which had nine blank entries. Five students did not attempt Q04.7.

Future mock examinations should include:

- Timed completion checks.
- Suggested finishing times for each section.
- A requirement to move on when the time allocated to a question has elapsed.
- A final check for blank responses.
- Explicit reminders that even a partial extended answer can gain marks.

Recommended departmental priorities

Priority	Action for future cohorts	Intended impact
1	Introduce weekly four-mark “explain the process” practice using connected causal chains.	Improve AO2 and combined AO1/AO2 performance.
2	Standardise a departmental approach to six- and nine-mark planning, figure use, evidence and judgement.	Increase the proportion of upper-band responses.
3	Reteach natural causes of climate change, rainforest soils, coastal erosion terminology and depositional landforms.	Address the most significant content-specific weaknesses.
4	Use comparative modelling: lower-, middle- and upper-band answers to the same question.	Help students recognise what development and evaluation look like.
5	Continue regular work with OS maps, graphs, photographs and numerical information.	Preserve the cohort’s relative strength in AO4.
6	Build timed extended responses and completion checks into mock examinations.	Reduce unanswered questions and incomplete responses.
7	Review question-level analysis after each internal assessment, not only after the final examination.	Identify weaknesses early enough for targeted intervention.
8	Correct and validate source data before interpreting dashboards.	Ensure percentages, rankings and student priorities are accurate.

Overall judgement

The cohort demonstrated secure access to the paper through generally effective recall, selection and geographical-skills performance. Its outcomes were broadly comparable with, and in several areas slightly stronger than, national performance.

The main barrier to higher attainment was the quality of developed geographical reasoning. Students frequently possessed some relevant knowledge but did not extend it into complete explanations, integrate specific evidence or sustain evaluation sufficiently to reach the upper levels. Improving these skills—particularly across four-, six- and nine-mark questions—should be the principal teaching priority for future cohorts.