

GCE



Revised GCE
Student Guidance
Geography

Decision Making in Geography

For first teaching from September 2016



A Guide to the Decision Making Exercise in A2 Geography

The Background to Decision Making Exercise at A level

Issues are those things around us that generate debate. Many have a geographical context and the study of our subject provides us with the skills we need to understand these issues, make our mind up about them, and argue our viewpoint effectively. You will be aware of proposed developments in your area local area which have generated debate and discussion. Such developments may have been covered on local TV or radio, in local newspapers and may have led to protests such as shown in the photograph below.



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We should always remember that there is always more than one side to any argument. Some arguments are NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) type arguments. This means that those making the argument agree that the development is required, but they don't want it located next to them. Sometimes arguments are made claiming to represent a particular viewpoint, while in reality they may have another underlying motive. An industrialist may claim that the proposed development is designed to help local people, but the main motive may actually be profit.

Even the language used when discussing issues can be interesting: while one side may describe a development as a 'Waste to Energy Plant', which has a positive ring to it, opponents may term it an 'Incinerator', which has much more negative connotations.

A 'landmark icon' for someone in favour of a development may be an 'eyesore' for someone opposing it. Taking into consideration the various reasons behind the arguments put and the emotive language used, a decision on which side has the stronger case can only be made when you have a good grasp of the issue and the competing arguments around it.

The Decision Making Exercise (DME) has been a component in A Level Geography examinations in Northern Ireland for many years. Its continued inclusion reflects the fact that geographers remain very much concerned with geographical issues.

The contemporary issues explored are real-world issues which have caused and are often still causing disputes. Sincerely held and strongly argued views are presented from both sides and the social, economic and environmental aspects of the issue have to be understood, thought through and presented coherently in a balanced way. Ultimately however, a decision has to be made and justified by the candidate.

The issue at the heart of the Decision Making Exercise can be from any part of the world. In order to avoid a perception of bias, issues from within Northern Ireland tend to be avoided. The issue can be at any scale, from a relatively small scale development such as a new bridge or a bypass, to a large scale hydroelectric scheme or port development.

Recent Decision Making Exercises 2012-2017

Year Topic/ Location

2017	Harbour development in Dún Laoghaire
2016	Peace Valley Dam proposal (Canada)
2015	A potash mine in the North York Moors National Park,
2014	A port development plan in Falmouth
2013	An airport in St Helena, located in the South Atlantic Ocean,
2012	A windfarm in the Monadhliath Mountains in Scotland

There is no incorrect answer in a DME, only one which is poorly supported with evidence.

To enable candidates to make a fully informed decision, a resource booklet is provided. The structure of the resource booklet is very similar from year to year, and the questions asked vary only in terms of reflecting the issue. Similar types of environmental, social and economic issues turn up again and again.

Decision Making Exercise in Geography Unit A2 3

Structure of the Paper

This is a one hour 30 minute examination. In this paper you must complete a decision-making exercise which will take the form of a case study report.

You are advised to spend 30 minutes reading the question and selecting appropriate information from the resources before attempting to write your answers. The range of text resources that you have to read and the number of maps and diagrams that you have to understand is designed to be approachable in that time. You should try to get through all the content and make your selection of resources within the 30 minute period. While rushing through the resources is not advisable, you must also remember that spending longer than the suggested 30 minutes may also restrict the quality of your written answer.

If you have timed the reading and preparation correctly, this should leave you 60 minutes to approach the report itself.

The Decision Making paper is worth 60 marks, this includes the completion of a graph from a table of data. It is very important not to spend too much time on any one section as you will have denied yourself the opportunity to check over your answers to identify minor errors.

In order to avoid spending too much time on any section:

- answer quickly, succinctly and keep content relevant;
- focus on the elements of resource relevant to that section; and, most importantly,
- read the question carefully to avoid straying into material that you will need for a later section.

During your 30 minutes reading period, it is advisable that you highlight, underline and annotate the resources to signpost for yourself the relevant resource material in order that you can locate it quickly as you write your response.

Skills and techniques

The skills involved in the DME are considerable. Some of them are geographical skills that you will have been developing since you first started studying the subject. Initially you have to engage with a geographical issue and develop an understanding of often complex text and graphical resources. You have to examine different viewpoints and show an empathetic understanding of conflicting values. You also have to make a decision and justify it. All of this has to be presented in a report format which challenges you to present coherently but succinctly the context of the issue, both sides of an argument and your decision, alongside the justification for it.

The skill of being able to dispassionately evaluate an argument is important. You should approach the DME with an open mind. For example, while you might generally have strong views on the environment and may usually give it a pre-eminence in environmental/developmental issues, you must present a balanced and well supported argument for whatever decision you come to and acknowledge the opposing side of the debate. You would aim for a similar balance, even if you generally favour economic progress over environmental concerns. Each issue must be taken on its own merits. The viewpoints in the resources must be given their due recognition and the strength of each position should be acknowledged.

Eventually you will make a decision, and your justification must be sound.

You should credit all strong arguments, even those opposed to the decision you make, but be prepared to

rebut them with even stronger counterarguments. Geographical issues are complex; if they were not, they would not be contentious and would not be issues.

The resource booklet in the examination

Quickly assimilating and developing an understanding of complex materials in the resource booklet is a central part of the challenge of the DME. You have been developing skills of interpretation for years through your study of geography and will have considerable experience using tables of data, maps, photographs and diagrams. The DME requires you to use your skills to assimilate the information in the resource booklet in a restricted time. Past papers are often a good source of information and will provide practice in getting to grips with unseen resources and organising your answer. However, be aware that some of the older DME sample papers provide different timings than those in the new specification.

We will look at each of the resources in turn to examine how best to deal with them.

Text

This will form the bulk of the resources provided in the booklet. There is often:

- a section giving the background;
- a section giving the arguments for;
- another giving the arguments against; and
- a series of quotations from people with an interest in the issue.

The preliminary text in the question paper often provides information that can be used to give a context for the issue, or to provide some of the background to it. Reading all of the text effectively and developing an understanding of it in the time available can be challenging. There is generally some jargon or abbreviations specific to the issue which has to be mastered. You should aim to develop a strategy to retrieve a particular relevant fact or statement when you are in the middle of your answer. You may find it helpful to number the paragraphs or colour-code points as you read the text and then use these numbers or colours when planning your answer. Only practice will show you what strategy works for you in the time allowed.

Maps

These could be map extracts from commercial maps such as Ordnance Survey maps. The type used will vary according to the scale of the development. Most popular is the 1:50,000 (2 cm to 1 km) scale maps as these often show well the development in its spatial context i.e. you can see the land around it: the settlements and farms, the hills and valleys perhaps. You can see protected areas such as places designated as National Parks or Nature Reserves. Sometimes a smaller scale issue requires a more detailed map and a 1:25,000 map (4 cm to 1 km) may be used in those circumstances. While this is a less commonly encountered map scale, a key is always provided. If there is a map excerpt of this sort, often the text will contain 4- and 6-figure grid references. While you can occasionally use the grid references produced in the text, it would be more creditable for you to spot something on the map not directly referred to in the text, to make reference to it and to give its grid reference. Avoid spending too long poring over the map to find every place mentioned.

Other maps will help you to visualise the place, and to locate it on the commercial maps, when they are used. Since these are generally more simplified maps with much less detail, they are often a good place to start in trying to understand what the issue is about.

The various maps should also help to bring the issue to life, especially when used in combination with other resources. You can see that it is a real issue which affects real communities in a real landscape.

Diagrams or graphs

These are not always present but, where they are, they should provide useful information. They might show noise levels for example, or traffic flows over time or changing levels of pollution. Like the maps, these can be useful resources and, if possible, you should show you have looked at and understood them by incorporating a figure or some other relevant detail from them in your answer. You should not spend too long trying to decipher a diagram or graph as it may lead to time difficulties later.

Tables

A table is a fairly common inclusion in the paper it can provide facts that you can use in your answer to give precision and to add weight to your argument and is often the basis for the skill element.

Photographs

Alongside maps, photographs are often vital to help give you a mental picture of the issue. They can also provide information that you can use in your argument. In the picture at the start of this description of the DME, for example, the photograph could be alluded to as a reflection of local anger at proposals which may damage a pristine countryside. Alternatively it could be described as using alarmist imagery to convey a misleading impression to those who see it. A photograph showing a bleak, barren landscape could be seen by someone else as a beautiful, unspoilt landscape.

Quotations

There may be four or five quotations from a range of interested parties. You should treat them as another background resource indicating the strength of feeling on both sides. Some quotations may be neutral and balanced but most often they represent the views of one side or the other. Use a particularly effective word or phrase from a quotation, to support an argument that you are making and avoid using the quotation verbatim. For example, you might write:

“This view is confirmed by one local councillor who felt so strongly about the development that he described it as a ‘blot on the landscape’ for residents”.

This is much better than writing:

“Frank McGurk, local councillor said:

‘This is a blot on the landscape ... it is visible all along that stretch of the A45 and seriously impacts on the views of the local people of Glendermot, as well as reducing house values’ ”.

Remember: all resources text, photographs, tables diagrams can be used to support either side of the argument, depending on the spin you put on them or your selection from them.

Other aspects of the report

Role

You are always required to ‘adopt and maintain’ a role in the DME. This is often as the person who is preparing the report, making the decision and justifying it. You need to make reference to the role you are adopting in a couple of sections of your answer; you might perhaps close to the start of you answer ‘adopt the role’ and in the final decision section might be where you ‘maintain the role’ to get the 2 marks. A simple ‘As Secretary of State for the Environment, I ...’ ,or similar, is all that is required.

Statistics

You will not be expected to calculate statistics such as the Chi-Squared test or Location Quotients in

the exam. However, you may be given a Chi-Squared statistic or a set of location quotients along with significance tables as required. You should make sure that you have revised all the statistical techniques as preparation for the DME. Interrogate the data to make sure you know exactly what it is telling you. Statistical analysis of relevant data may help you to support your decision. However, remember that for example, a correlation tells you about the degree of association between two variables, it does not indicate a causal relationship.

Graph

Often the skill section of the paper involves preparing a graph from a table of data. As this can be worth up to 8 marks or so, you should prepare yourself well for this. While you cannot know the data you will be asked to represent, you can be aware of the potential types of graph you could draw and which graph is appropriate for the type of data presented. For example, line graphs are appropriate for continuous data and bar graphs for discrete data. Bear in mind also that you will want to complete this graph in as short a time as possible. Constructing a series of pie charts may be an entirely appropriate technique, but are likely to be much too time consuming to construct in a limited time frame – another technique would therefore be preferable.

Make sure that you make reference to the graph within your answer in an appropriate place – marks allocated for referencing your graph at an appropriate place in your answer.

Format

There are often 2 marks for this, and they should be easy marks to gain. These marks are designed to reward an answer which follows the structure provided. To be sure of getting the marks you must do exactly what you are told to do, down to the names of the headings and sub-headings, and lay out the different section and sub-section headings clearly.

Levels of Response mark schemes

All of the sections on this exam paper are marked using a 'Levels of Response' mark scheme. You should become aware of what these mark schemes look like and become familiar with how they are applied – you will quickly become able to distinguish between answers which are at the different levels, and even to apply marks within the levels as well. If you look at a range of responses to a question alongside the mark scheme, you should be able to decide on the level in which you would put each answer and the marks you would award with that level.

Timing

This is a recurrent theme in any discussion of how to approach a DME because it is a vital component in trying to maximise your mark. You must ensure that you spend an amount of time on an answer proportional to its value. Be very aware of when your finish time is, and leave enough time to complete the final part of the question, where you state and justify your decision. Sometimes it is the largest component in the whole section and you must leave enough time to cover it effectively. The question will require you to make a decision on the basis of 'the greater overall benefits'. This means that you must give credit where necessary to the opposing argument but be persuasive and counter-argue strongly. You should weigh up the issue and make a decision, with a justification for your choice, although it is often easier to do this at the beginning of the decision section, and then justify that decision in the rest of the answer. You must accept or reject the proposal as presented in the paper and cannot invent a compromise or a different version of the proposal.

It might be thought that there is little you can do to prepare for an unseen geographical issue but, as we have seen, that is far from the case. There is a lot you can do, in reflection and in preparation, before the Decision Making Exercise which comprises Assessment Unit A2 3.



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IN PEOPLE

