

Subject specific vocabulary

The following subject specific vocabulary provides definitions of key Geography terms used in our A-level Geography (7037) specification.

All terms stated in the specification can be used in the examinations. Students should be familiar with these terms in relation to the topics that they study. The specified terms are listed below under each of the topic headings.

Note that each list includes only the geographical terms stated in the specification. Students are encouraged to use other specialist geographical vocabulary in their answers as well as the terms listed here.

Terms featuring across the specification

Adaptation

Action taken by human to reduce their vulnerability or exposure to impacts.

Causes

Reasons for the form/character of a phenomenon – for example why a process occurs or why a phenomenon displays its characteristic features.

Challenges

Difficult, large-scale problems that require solutions.

Characteristics

The key features and properties of a phenomenon.

Conflicts

Issues over which two or more groups of people disagree.

Consequences

The results of an action, change or process. These may be many and various and can be positive or negative in their geographical impacts.

Contrasting

Where two or more phenomena differ from one another in one or more significant ways.

Distribution

The geographical locations of specified phenomenon/phenomena, most often shown on a map. A distribution may or may not present as a recognisable pattern.

Dynamic equilibrium

A state of balance in a constantly changing natural system, the operation of which attempts to balance inputs with outputs.

Economic

Connected with the economy and therefore related to production, distribution and consumption of goods and services. Conventionally measured in money terms and connected with employment, industry, income and human welfare.

Environmental

Concerned with the environment – water, air and land, and the organisms which occupy it (including humans) and natural resources obtainable from it.

Factors

The underlying causes of a phenomenon and the elements which influence it.

Impacts

The results/outcomes of events, actions or processes on people and the environment. They can be positive or negative.

Implications

What happens or might happen as a result/consequence of specific events, actions or processes.

Issues

Matters which cause concern to people about which there may be differing views, and which may be sources of conflict.

Lifestyle

The way in which people normally live their lives. Lifestyles vary both within and between places.

Management

The design and implementation of policies and strategies to run human systems and influence natural systems in order to minimise or reduce impacts or problems and enhance outcomes. Management involves deliberation, planning and action.

Mitigation

Any actions or measures taken to reduce or offset the adverse impacts or severity of a process or event.

Negative feedback

A cyclical sequence that decreases/diminishes an initial change in a natural system and tends to return the system to a state of equilibrium or balance.

Opportunities

Situations where change might be achievable and a better situation reached.

Patterns

Regularities in the occurrence or distribution of phenomena. Geographically, often shown on a map.

Political

Concerned with the distribution and exercise of power over human affairs, the promotion of different viewpoints and policies, the resolution of any such differences and the consequent decisions and their implementation.

Positive feedback

A cyclical sequence that increases or amplifies an initial change in a natural system.

Problems

Difficulties, risks or issues that worry people and indicate that responses are required.

Process

A sequence of actions, changes or functions that causes a change to take place and bring about a result.

Response

The ways in which people react to events or possible events – some responses are individual, some are collective; some are planned, some are unplanned.

Scale

The area or scope of a phenomenon or focus of study – for example: local, regional, national, international and global.

Social

Connected with people, their quality of life, health, education, lifestyles and welfare.

Strategies

Overarching views and approaches designed to manage a system, problem or issue.

Sustainable

That which is capable of being maintained into the foreseeable future without prejudice to its own continuation and damage to the environment.

System

A set of interrelated components that work together in which there are inputs and outputs of energy and materials. Natural systems tend towards dynamic equilibrium which balances inputs and outputs of energy and materials.

3.1 Physical geography

3.1.1 Section A: Water and carbon cycles

Atmosphere

The mixture of gases that surround the Earth whose main constituents are nitrogen and oxygen.

Biosphere

That portion of the Earth's outer sphere where life forms are found.

Carbon budget

The relative amounts of carbon that are transferred in a given time period between the various stores of carbon.

Carbon cycle

The combination of processes by which carbon is transferred between the main carbon stores.

Carbon sequestration

The long-term storage of carbon. This process occurs naturally in oceans and sediments. It can also refer to the human process of capturing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and storing it.

Cryosphere

The frozen water component of the Earth's outer layers, including ice caps, glaciers and snow cover.

Drainage basin

The area of land from which precipitation is drained by a river and its tributaries.

Evapo-transpiration

The combined processes of evaporation and transpiration transferring water from the Earth's surface to the atmosphere.

Groundwater

The store of water beneath the Earth's surface in soil and rock in pore and fissure space.

Hydrosphere

That portion of the Earth's surface layers contain water, including ice, groundwater, lakes and rivers, oceans and water vapour and droplets in the atmosphere.

Lithosphere

The crust and upper mantle comprising the outermost solid layer of the Earth.

Runoff

Water transferred from river basins to oceans, principally via river channels.

Sere

A stage in the succession of plant and animal communities in an ecosystem. Seres are named after the character of their starting locations; lithosere (starting on bare rock), hydrosere (starting in fresh water), psammosere (starting in sand) and halosere (starting in saline conditions).

Stemflow

Precipitation that is intercepted by vegetation and reaches the ground by flowing down stems, stalks and trunks.

Variation

How far and how frequently a phenomenon differs from the norm or the average.

Water abstraction

The process of taking or extracting water from natural sources for different uses by human populations.

Water balance

The balance, in a drainage basin, between the inputs of water, mainly precipitation, and the outputs of water, mainly run-off, flows of groundwater and evapotranspiration.

Water cycle

The continuous series of processes by which water is transferred between the main water stores.

3.1.2 Section B: Coastal systems and landscapes

Barrier beach

A narrow, elongated sand ridge rising above sea level, parallel to the shore and separated from it by a lagoon.

Cavitation

Collapse of bubbles in waves crashing into and then receding from cliffs and other solid rock features causing energetic pressure waves which break up the rock and enlarge joints and fissures in the rock.

Coastline of emergence

A coastline that has experienced a fall in sea level or tectonic uplift of the land surface.

Coastline of submergence

A coastline that has experienced a rise in sea level or tectonic sinking of the land surface.

Constructive wave

Waves having a long wave length, low wave height and low frequency. The swash tends to be more powerful than the backwash and hence they are associated with the build-up of beach material.

Dalmatian coasts

A submergent landscape of ridges and valleys that runs parallel to the coast and features islands and sea inlets – named after the landscape of Dalmatia on the eastern coastline of the Adriatic Sea.

Destructive wave

Waves having a short wave length, high wave height and high frequency. The backwash tends to be more powerful than the swash and hence they are associated with the removal of beach material.

Eustatic sea level change

A fall or rise in sea level, resulting from changes in the volume of water in the oceans – usually connected with global changes in the volume of ice caps and ice sheets.

Fjord

A glacial trough flooded due to a rise on sea level.

High energy coast

A coastline with high energy waves where erosion processes typically dominate over deposition processes.

Isostatic sea level change

A fall or rise in sea level resulting from the land rising or falling relative to the sea.

Littoral drift (or longshore drift)

The process whereby waves approach the shore at an angle and the difference in the direction of swash and backwash transports material along the coast.

Low energy coast

A coastline with relatively low energy waves where deposition rates typically dominate over erosion rates.

Mudflat

A coastal expanse of mud deposits exposed at low tide but inundated by high tides.

Offshore bar

A ridge of sediment parallel to the coast formed of material eroded by destructive waves and transported offshore.

Raised beach

A former beach occupying a higher level than current sea level and deposited when sea levels were higher than at present for a sustained period of time.

Rias

A non-glaciated river valley submerged following a rise in sea level.

Saltmarsh

An ecosystem formed on tidal mudflats largely comprising of salt-tolerant plants. It is an example of a halosere.

Sediment budget

The balance between the input and output of sediment on a stretch of coast, commonly termed a sediment cell.

Sediment cell

A stretch of coast in which sediments are transferred by various processes between different stores, tending to form a self-contained coastal system. The understanding of sediment cells helps in coastal management.

Tectonic sea level change

A fall or rise in sea level, resulting from changes in land surface levels and configuration associated with tectonic processes.

Tides

The cyclical rise and fall of the level of the sea in response to the gravitational attractions of the moon and sun.

Tombolo

A ridge of beach sediment that has extended to join a former island to the mainland.

Wave quarrying

This involves high energy waves hitting rock faces with sufficient force to enlarge joints and remove particles of rock through vibration.

Weathering

Sub-aerial processes occurring above the waterline leading to the disintegration and decomposition of rock and thus influencing the nature of landforms and the character of the landscape.

3.1.3 Section C: Hazards

Acid rain

Acidic precipitation that has negative impacts on natural ecosystems and is associated with air pollution.

Coastal flooding

Dry and low-lying land is submerged by seawater.

Convection currents

The circular motions of upper mantle layers responsible for sea floor spreading and driven by upwelling mantle material.

Gravitational sliding

The movement of tectonic plates as a result of gravity.

Island arc

A linear chain of volcanic island associated with an ocean trench where subduction is taking place.

Lava flow

Molten rock flowing on the surface. Acidic lava tends to be more viscous and solidifies nearer to source than basaltic lava which generally flows over greater distance before solidifying.

Liquefaction

Loosely packed, water-logged sediments at or near the ground surface lose cohesion and behave as a liquid rather than a solid because of shaking during an earthquake.

Lithosphere

The crust and upper mantle that form the outermost solid layers of the Earth.

Magma plume

A rising column of hot rock in the mantle.

Magnitude

The overall strength or 'size' of a hazard.

Mudflow (lahar)

A mix of volcanic ash and rainwater or meltwater that travels downslope.

Multi-hazardous environment

An environment prone to experiencing combinations of seismic, volcanic, atmospheric or wildfire hazard.

Nuées ardentes (Pyroclastic flows)

Dense, fast-moving flows of hot gas (over 800 °C) and rocks that move rapidly downslope at speeds over 700 km/hr. These terms are often used interchangeably but some volcanologists confine the term *nuées ardentes* to flows comprising only of hot gases.

Pyroclastic and ash fallout

Airborne particles of varying sizes that have been ejected from volcanic vents into the atmosphere before falling to the surface.

Ridge push

A driving force for the movement of tectonic plates that occurs at mid-ocean ridges as a result of gravitational forces causing downward movement away from the ridge.

Rift valley

A steep sided valley formed by the downward displacement of crust due to separation of tectonic plates.

Sea-floor spreading

The formation of a new oceanic crust which occurs through the upwelling of magma at mid-ocean ridges and its outward movement from such ridges.

Seismicity

The processes associated with earthquakes in a given area. The frequency and intensity of such processes.

Shockwave

A wave of energy spreading outward from the focus of an earthquake.

Slab pull

A driving force for the movement of tectonic plates occurring at subduction zones as a result of sinking of the crust there.

Storm surge

A temporary, localised rise in sea level as a result of atmospheric pressure changes and storm wind direction.

Tephra

Rock fragments and particles, eg pyroclastic material, ejected during a volcanic eruption and subsequently deposited on the earth's surface.

Tsunami

One or more high magnitude sea wave caused by an earthquake or other offshore underwater disturbance such as slippage of submarine slopes.

Vulcanicity

The processes associated with active volcanoes in a given area. The frequency and intensity of such processes.

Wild fire

An uncontrolled fire occurring in open country or wilderness regions.

3.2 Human geography

3.2.1 Section A: Global systems and global governance

Benefits

The advantages/positive impacts of something (social, economic, environmental, etc).

Geopolitics

How relationships between geographical, economic and political factors impact on political decisions and international relations and therefore affect the use and control of territory and resources.

Global commons

A region, resource or natural property of Earth beyond the exclusive control of individual nation states and requiring common governance and management by the international community.

Global governance

The system and institutions that coordinate the behaviour of international agencies, facilitate cooperation, resolve disputes and improve global decision-making.

Globalisation

The process whereby individual national economies, societies and cultures are increasingly integrated through advances in communication and transport technology, international trade and movement of peoples.

International trade

The exchange of capital, goods and services across international borders. An individual country's exports are outbound to other countries; imports are inbound from other countries.

Labour

A factor of production incorporating human effort and ingenuity into the production, trade and consumption of goods and services.

Latin America

A commonly used term to describe the countries in the Americas found to the south of the continental United States, including Central America, South America and the islands of the Caribbean where the dominant languages derive from Latin (mainly Spanish and Portuguese). Some see the use of this term as problematic due to its use homogenising the region and using a characterisation of language that originates from colonisation.

Non-governmental organisation (NGO)

A non-profit, voluntary citizens group with a common interest in pursuing political goals, organised on a local, national or international scale.

Norms

The shared values, traditions and customs that govern individual and group behaviour in a society.

Sub-Saharan Africa

A term collectively describing countries in Africa located mainly south of the Sahara Desert. The dividing line has origins in colonial ideas of race, separating the predominately Arab states of North Africa, which colonists considered to be more developed from the rest of Africa. This term replaced racist phrases such as 'Black Africa' that were used up until the 1950s.

Transnational corporation (TNC)

Large businesses that operate in several different countries and commonly allocate different productions functions to different types of country – for example in terms of assembly, research and development, and decision taking.

United Nations (UN)

An international organisation founded in 1945 consisting of 193 member states with the aim of maintaining international peace, security and cooperation. It self-defines as “one place where the world’s nations can gather together, discuss common problems and find shared solutions.”

United National Environment Programme (UNEP)

A global authority for the environment with programmes focusing on climate, nature, pollution and sustainable development. UNEP’s mission is “to inspire, inform, and enable nations and people to improve their quality of life without compromising that of future generations.”

3.2.2 Section B: Changing places

Community group

An organised collection of people with shared interests and aims often concerning aspects of public life.

Endogenous factor

These constitute the characteristics of the place itself, including aspects such as climate, topography, land use, the built environment and social and economic characteristics, all of which contribute to peoples' experience of the place and their sense of place.

Exogenous factor

These constitute external agents and processes that affect the character of a place and the experiences of those who live there. They include the activities of central governments, decision taking by business and public agencies, and the operation and effect of the national and international economy.

Experienced place

A place in which a person has actually spent time and directly experienced its characteristics.

Far place

A place that a person has not directly experienced and thus their perception of it is derived from communication and contact with others, often through media such as journals, radio, television, film and so on.

Identities

A combination of physical, psychological and behavioural traits that contribute to a person's self-awareness and how others perceive them. This is in part shaped by where they live and/or their place of birth.

Insider perspective

A viewpoint from an individual who typically lives in a place and therefore has frequent, direct experience of that place, and understands the social and cultural norms.

Media place

A place that has a meaning for a person as a result of exposure to images and information about that place via TV, radio, print, film or online.

Near place

A location that a person perceives as being physically close, whether spatially or through easy access. Often this place is inextricably linked to the place the individual is located.

Outsider perspective

A viewpoint from an individual who is not from a place or who doesn't live there and has little experience of the place. Such individuals may not understand the social norms of the society.

Perspective

A particular attitude or view towards a place. This can be influenced by media representation and/or personal experience.

Place

An area on the Earth's surface which is identified as distinct by the people who live in it or visit it, and which has meaning for them. Such meaning can and may well be shared by different groups of people.

Representation

How a place is portrayed by the views, statements and communications of others. This may be through formal sources such as census data or through informal sources such as media reportage and imagery or verbalisation by others.

3.2.3 Section C: Population and the environment

Agricultural productivity

The ratio of agricultural outputs to agricultural inputs.

Agriculture

The practice of farming, including cultivation of the soil for the growing of crops and the rearing of livestock, to provide food and other products.

Asylum seeker

Someone who has fled their country of origin because of persecution, war or violence and is seeking safety in another country. They have applied for sanctuary, but it is yet to be processed or determined.

Carrying capacity

The maximum population size that an area or environment can sustain indefinitely.

Demographic dividend

The economic growth potential that can result from shifts in a population's age structure, mainly because the percentage of the working-age population increases compared with that of dependants.

Ecological footprint

A measure of the demand humans place on ecosystems; the amount of productive land and water required to produce the resources a population consumes and to absorb the waste it produces.

Economic migrant

A person who has left their country to seek employment in another country in order to improve their living conditions and life chances.

Epidemiological transition

The changing patterns of population age distribution, mortality, fertility and life expectancy associated with the control of infectious diseases and their replacement by chronic disease as leading causes of mortality.

Health

A state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, as defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Malthusian

This term refers to perspectives on human population related to those of Thomas Malthus who believed that there are inevitably limits to human population growth imposed by “positive checks” on such as famine, disease and conflict.

Morbidity

A term related to and used to describe the incidence of illness and disease within a society.

Mortality

A term related to and used to describe the incidence of death within a society and its different elements. It is commonly measured by death rate and infant mortality rate, case mortality and attack rate.

Neo-Malthusian

This term refers to perspectives on human population which hold that there are environmental limits to population growth, control of which can be achieved by adjustments to lifestyle, consumption and contraception.

Non-communicable disease

A medical type of disease that is non-infectious and non-transmittable between people.

Optimum population

The concept of an ideal number of people that can make the best use of all available resources within an area, ensuring that everyone has an adequate standard of living.

Overpopulation

Too many people for the space, resources and technology available in a given area to support an adequate standard of living.

Refugee

Someone who has been forced to flee their country because of persecution, war or violence and seek safety in another country and are unable to return.

Salinisation

The build-up of salts in soil diminishing its capacity to support thriving.

Vector borne disease

Disease caused by vectors which are organisms that transmit infectious pathogens between humans or from animals to humans. For example bloodsucking insects, such as mosquitoes, which ingest disease-producing microorganisms during a blood meal from an infected host and later transmit it into a new host, after the pathogen has replicated.

Well-being

The state of being comfortable, healthy or happy which is variable between populations, places and time.

Zonal soils

A soil which has experienced the prolonged impact of climate and natural vegetation upon the parent rock.