

Regional geography in focus

A key section of the course is Core Unit Two – Regional Geography. There will be three questions on this section and you will be required to answer one. All questions will be in three parts.

Part A – 20 marks. This is mainly skills based, eg drawing a sketch map or graph, or interpreting a diagram, graph or photograph. The 2007 exam also examined the concept of a region in Part A.

Parts B and C – 30 marks each. Short essay type answers are best here. You should deal with two examples/themes in your answer. Most questions carry marks for cohesion (how you “tie” the answer together) and these may be lost if you use bullet points.

This section involves:

- ◆ the study of the general concept of a region;
- ◆ the study of two contrasting Irish regions;
- ◆ the study of two contrasting European regions;
- ◆ the study of one continental or sub-continental region.

Students are expected to study the physical, economic and human processes in each of their five chosen regions. The emphasis is on regions rather than on national boundaries or countries. The chosen regions can be within one political entity, eg the Mezzogiorno in Italy, or can cross national boundaries, eg Norrland in northern Norway and Sweden. Students should gain an understanding of the character of the region, and be able to identify the key characteristics which distinguish it from other regions.

The concept of a region

A region is “an area of the earth’s surface which can be identified by selected criteria operating at a variety of scales. Single and multiple indices may be used to study these regions”. However, you can get by with a simpler definition such as “a region is an area of land which has certain characteristics that distinguish it from areas”. Students should have a knowledge of the different types of regions:

Geomorphological (physical) regions: the karst landscape of Co Clare is a good example.

Administrative regions: the counties of Ireland are obvious administrative regions in this country. A student could also look at administrative regions abroad, eg the Departments of France, which is the French version of local government.

Cultural regions: these are usually associated with either language or religion. Obvious examples include the Gaeltacht region of Ireland. On an international scale the Islamic world is often seen as a single cultural region despite many variations within this large area.

Socio-economic regions: obvious choices here would be Core Regions which are major centres of growth (Randstad; Dublin Region) and Peripheral Regions (Mezzogiorno, West of Ireland), which have marginal locations.

City/Urban regions: this type of region includes both the city and the area surrounding it (hinterland).

Two contrasting Irish regions

The obvious basic division that can be made is between the east and the west of the country. One could look at the division in broad terms, such as agriculture and manufacturing, and this would provide a classic example of internal regional variations. The east can be seen as a relatively prosperous core region, while the west is a peripheral region.

Agriculture

West of Ireland: here the difficult physical environment (mountainous terrain, infertile soils and high rainfall levels) hamper agricultural development. This peripheral region has many small pastoral farms, where average family income levels are less than the average for the country. Approximately half of all farmers in the West are over 55 years of age and are conservative in their methods – therefore there is little chance that things will improve greatly in the near future.

East of Ireland: agriculture in the eastern part of Ireland takes place mainly on large mechanised arable and dairy farms and the income levels there are accordingly high. The success of farming in this core region is mainly attributed to low-lying and fertile ground and to the suitability of the climate for growth. Also, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) tended to favour the larger farmers and so it wid-

ened the gap between farmers in the east and in the west.

Manufacturing

The east, or core region, is the favoured location for industrial development. This is due to various factors, including a well-developed infrastructure, large urban markets, and an educated workforce. By the beginning of this century, over one-third of the industrial workforce was located in the east. Disadvantages of the west for the location of manufacturing include the peripheral location, a poor transportation infrastructure, and the absence of large markets. The Industrial Development Authority (IDA) has focused on attracting development to western regions in an attempt to increase economic growth there.

As with all other regions, students need to study their chosen one under the following headings:

- ◆ Physical processes – climate, soils, relief;
- ◆ Economic processes – primary, secondary and tertiary activities;
- ◆ Human processes – population dynamics, urban and rural development.

Dublin region

This is a core region, and Ireland’s smallest but most populous region. The Dublin region covers just over 1 per cent of the total land area, but has almost 29 per cent of the total population of Ireland. Students need to know about the physical characteristics of the region; for example, it is the driest part of the country, with good quality soils (mainly brown earths). The exception here is the Dublin mountain area with its significant granite outcrop.

Patterns in Dublin’s manufacturing activities and the significance of tertiary activities should also be noted. Difficulties caused by urban sprawl, social exclusion and the need for inner city renewal also need attention.

A key to the successful study of this section is the ability to place the Dublin region into the context of successful, expanding core city regions in other areas. In other words, be able to compare and contrast Dublin with the urban area you are studying at the European level.

The West of Ireland (eg Galway/Mayo/Roscommon)

A peripheral region with most of the difficulties associated with such regions. This area comprises almost 20 per cent of the total land area of the state (Dublin just over 1 per cent) and has just under 10 per cent of the total population (Dublin has almost 29 per cent). The population density is about half of the national average.

Agriculture in the west faces many physical problems including a higher than average annual rainfall and soils of poor quality. Outward migration in these three counties has resulted in an imbalance in the age and structure of the population, and, consequently, the area has a high dependency ratio. Despite many improvements (often with the help of EU funds), the region still suffers from a deficit in its communication structure. Many roads and the key rail links need urgent upgrading.

Despite the above, students should be aware of the potential in this region. There are possibilities for development in fishing, off-shore gas and tourism, for example. Students need to place their study of the west in the context of their study of peripheral regions, eg the Mezzogiorno in Italy or Norrland in Scandinavia.

Two contrasting European regions

Here students have a variety of regions to choose from. The obvious point is that the two chosen regions should be contrasting. As with the contrasting Irish regions, students should examine these regions under such headings as physical processes, economic processes and human processes.

Students should gain an understanding of the character of their chosen region and be able to identify the key characteristics which distinguish it from other regions. The variety of regions available for study is wide and suggestions include peripheral regions, such as the Mezzogiorno or the Massif Central in France.

The Mezzogiorno

Physical environment: The Apennines are a mountain range that runs through the centre of this region, and it is sometimes referred to as “the backbone of Italy”. Generally, soils are poor. The region has a Mediterranean climate.

Primary economic activities: The Mezzogiorno is a peripheral or problem region. Students should be able to give some reasons for poor agricultural development here (94 per cent of farms are considered small). The reasons include poor soil quality, low rainfall and the fact that 80 per cent of the land is either hilly or mountainous.

Secondary economic activities: Manufacturing is poorly developed overall in the Mezzogiorno. Reasons for this include poor energy supplies, poor communications and poor markets. Attempts have been made by the government since the early 1960s to solve these problems. The work of the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno (a development fund in operation up until the 1980s) is important here.

Tertiary economic activities: The Mediterranean climate is an excellent tourist attraction. The region needs, however, to develop the transport infrastructure and tourist facilities in order to reap the benefits of the tourist industry. Attractions in the region include Sicily, Mount Vesuvius and Pompeii.

Core Region – the Paris Basin

Physical environment: Two climate types influence this region. There is a maritime climate near the coast, while further inland a continental climate dominates. Geographically, this region is very centrally placed in relation to the rest of Europe. The Paris Basin has low-lying, well-drained, fertile loess soils.

Primary economic activities: The Paris Basin is known as the “granary of France” as 60 per cent of French cereal production occurs there. The primary economic activity of the region is intensive, commercialised farming. Market gardening is practised on a large scale around Paris, and wine production is important to the economy in the north and northeast of the region.

Secondary economic activities: This core region has many examples of successful industries. Farming provides raw materials for food processing industries. Paris is home to car-manufacturing, oil-refining, petrochemical, iron and steel, perfume and clothing industries.

Tertiary economic activities: Tourism is the main case study for tertiary activity in the Paris Basin. Paris is famous as a “romantic” city, with attractions such as the Eiffel Tower and Notre Dame. Accessibility to France is a key factor of the development of tourism.

One continental/sub-continental region

What is required here is the study of one large area outside of Europe. As this is potentially a continent-wide study, students are not required to go into the same detail as they would for the study of the two Irish regions, for example. Remember, at H level the syllabus allocates 10 class periods to the study of the Irish regions and a similar 10 class periods to the study of the continental/sub-continental region.

There are many areas that students can focus on for this section, including the Southern US, Brazil or the Indian sub-continent. Students should examine their chosen continental region under such headings as physical processes, economic processes and human processes.

India

A study of India would include a knowledge of the monsoon climate with its two seasons, the dry (October to June) and the wet (June to September). The influence of this climate and that of the varied reliance of the area on agriculture and other primary activities should also be noted. India’s recent development as an important manufacturing centre and developing IT centre is also of interest. India is a very suitable study for the elective and optional units of the syllabus. For instance, spatial variations in economic development (Elective 4 Patterns and Processes in Economic Activity) could be studied in relation to the range of economic development evident in India today.

Likewise, the influence of population patterns on levels of human development (Elective Unit 5 Patterns and Processes in the Human Environment) or the problems of religious conflict (Optional Unit 8, Culture and Identity) can be easily illustrated with regard to the Indian sub-continent.

As the Continental/Subcontinental region is a very large one, students will not be expected to study it in the same detail as the study of the two (much smaller) Irish regions of their choice.