

The Gaeltacht areas are distinctive cultural regions. Discuss.

(80 marks)

Marking Scheme:

Number of aspects discussed:	3 @ 20 marks each	4 @ 15 marks each
<u>For each aspect:</u>		
Identifying aspect	4 marks	3 marks
Discussion	8 x SRPs	6 x SRPs

Overall Coherence 20 marks graded* 20 marks graded*

In this answer, I choose 3 aspects to discuss (1. Past, 2. Present and, 3.Future). Overall coherence means how well your answer is structured (Introduction, main section, conclusion – well-structured and coherent) and do you keep to the point/ answer the question directly.

The Gaeltacht is a group of regions in Ireland where Irish is spoken as the first language in the home and local community. It is a cultural region based on its language. Other cultural activities associated with these regions are; Sean nós singing, set dancing, céilís and storytelling. These are mainly found in rural communities on the western and southwestern coasts of Ireland including; Donegal, Mayo, Galway, Kerry and Cork. There is also ones in Meath and Waterford and Belfast now boast the fastest growing Gaeltacht. I will examine this distinct cultural region under three aspects, which are – the formation of the Gaeltacht, current supports in place today, and finally my third aspect will look at the future of the Gaeltacht.

The beginning of this distinct cultural region led from when Irish was the number one language of the country up until the British Plantations in the 16th Century. Many Irish farmers were forced to leave their lands and move to the more remote and less fertile lands of the western counties ('to hell or to Connacht'). This strengthened the language in these areas. Then during the famine (1845-48) the high emigration and mortality rates due to the starvation of the native Irish people reduced the native Irish speaking population dramatically. By the end of the famine only 1.5 million people spoke the language and these were mainly in Munster and Connacht. Regional variations of Irish further supported the cultural distinctiveness of the area as today it is generally believed that Munster Irish is spoken much more slowly than Connacht Irish and Donegal Irish has some similarities with Scots Gaelic. The purest form of Irish is synonymous with that off the islands on our western sea board. The way of life practiced by the Irish speaking inhabitants of the Blaskets (Kerry) was unique. Here the language was handed down generation to generation and was studied by many scholars of the language. It is said that the real traditional Irish is still spoken in Inis Meán in the Aran Islands. Along with the Irish language sean-noós singing and dancing are particularly associated with the Gaeltacht and south Connemara. The singing is sung in Irish and is unaccompanied. A drone effect is achieved by an emphasis on the consonants and on nasalisation and the melody may vary from one verse to the next. They can often be a lament for fishermen lost at sea of other local topics. The dancing is also a solo form of dance, with footwork low to the ground. It has improvised steps (based on the music played) and free arm movements. In 1925 the Free State government set up the Commission for Irish Speaking Districts (Coimisiún na Gaeltacht). It

established the boundaries for the Gaeltacht based on the numbers of people speaking the language; which were Fíor (true) who had over 80% speaking Irish and Breac (Partial) who had 25%-79% speaking Irish. Thus the cultural distinctiveness of this unique region became embedded in our country.

Today the Gaeltacht region has a population of about 92,000 of which 60% or more of the residents are fluent in Irish and use the language in the community or at home. Donegal is the largest Gaeltacht in Ireland. An Daingean (Dingle) in Co Kerry is the largest Gaeltacht Town. Irish has 3 main regional dialects; Munster, Connacht and Donegal each having its own local characteristic and accents. The Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands has responsibility for promoting the regions both culturally and economically. It provides government funding to the regions. Údaras na Gaeltachta was established to improve the economic, social and cultural development of the Gaeltacht. The greatest threat to the Gaeltacht today is that the diminishing Irish speaking population of these areas are going to be swallowed up by the influx of in-migration of the English speaking population, and the influence of English speaking media such as social media and the internet, TV, music and film. Encouraging Irish speakers to remain in the Gaeltacht is vital to the survival of these regions existence. The government recognises this by providing extra financial support to Gaeltacht families. These include grants paid to the families in the Gaeltacht who can satisfy the Department that Irish is their usual spoken language, and grants paid to families who facilitate the learning of Irish by accommodation of the students of Irish who attend the Gaeltacht to learn Irish in the Irish Colleges. These grants can be used to modernise their homes to allow for these visitors, or even grants to build new houses for such projects. A 20 year national strategy 2010-2030 has been implemented by the government with the aim of increasing the number of people who use Irish on a day to day basis up to 250,000 outside the education system. Other supports for the continuation of the distinct cultural region include TG4 and Raidió na Gaeltacht who use Irish in their TV and radio programs and the GAA who promote the use of Irish in all their sporting and social activities. Government initiatives include Foras na Gaeilge who promote the use of Irish across Ireland and the Irish Language Act which ensures the provision of public services and documents through Irish e.g. drivers licences etc.

The third and final aspect for discussion is the future of the Gaeltacht as based on a study in 2005 by the Educational Council for Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools said that Gaeltacht schools were facing a crisis. It forecast that, without support, few of them would be teaching in Irish in 20 years' time. In that sense it is a major boost for this distinct region that in Northern Ireland, where there is a stronger link to cultural Identity due to its turbulent past, may hold some of the answers to the future of our Gaeltacht regions. Here "The Gaeltacht Quarter" (*An Cheathrú Ghaeltachta*) is an area in Belfast where the Irish language is actively promoted. It is situated mainly along the Falls Road and has Gaelscoileanna (Irish-medium primary schools), a Gaelcholáiste (Irish-medium secondary school) and Naíonraí (crèches), together with a restaurant and agencies where Irish is used. Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich, a cultural centre which also houses Raidió Fáilte (Northern Ireland's only full-time Irish-language radio station) further promotes the cultural distinctiveness of the region. St. Mary's University College Belfast, also situated on the Falls Road, is the only teaching college with a dedicated Irish Medium Unit. It is also home to *An t-Aisíonad* (resource center) which translates literature into Irish and publishes it for use in schools and other organisations in Ireland. With this in mind, there is an area in southern County Derry centred on Slaghtneill and Carnogher, which unfortunately had

gone from being 50% Irish-speaking in 1901 to having only a few speakers by the end of the century. This area has seen a language revival however since the setting up of a naíscoil (preschool) in 1993 and a gaelscoil in 1994. In 2008 two local organisations launched a "strategy for the rebirth of the Gaeltacht", based on Irish-medium primary and secondary education. Speaking at the launch, Éamon Ó Cuív, the Republic's Minister for the Gaeltacht, said that the area was now "an example to other areas all over Ireland which are working to reestablish Irish as a community language".

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