

National Association of Teachers of RE – Written evidence (EDU0082)

This response is from the RE Policy Unit which is a strategic partnership between NATRE: The National Association of Teachers of RE, the REC: The Religious Education of England and Wales and RE Today. We offer evidence to the inquiry in relation to the subject of Religious education, acknowledging that many of the issues we raise will apply to several other subjects.

How the school accountability system affects the 11-16 curriculum AND The range and breadth of subjects covered in the 11-16 curriculum

The text in italics below is sourced from the [Commission on RE \(2018\)](#) and demonstrates that one of the unintended consequences of introducing the English Baccalaureate has been to **narrow the curriculum followed by pupils aged 11-16.**

THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL PERFORMANCE MEASURES (section 8.2) page 59ff

The evidence is clear that the exclusion of Religious Studies GCSE from the English Baccalaureate (Ebacc) has been extremely detrimental to RE in many secondary schools. The following are examples of these impacts.

- (a) GCSE Religious Studies is often taught in less than one hour a week, less than half of the required curriculum time. Some schools start GCSE in Year 9 in order to cover all the content. This leads to an impoverished experience for pupils.*
- (b) Pupils are being encouraged by school leaders to drop GCSE Religious Studies in favour of Ebacc subjects, and hence lower take-up of GCSE Religious Studies. This is beginning to be evident from the GCSE entry figures, and anecdotal evidence suggests that there have been significant drops in take-up in cohorts set to take examinations in 2019 and 2020.*
- (c) Pupils and parents devalue RE because they perceive Ebacc subjects as more important, and therefore consider RE to be less important than other subjects in the Humanities.*

(d) Subject specialists are losing their jobs, or not being replaced when they leave, leading to more hours being taught by teachers without a relevant post-A-level qualification in the subject.

(e) There is increased non-compliance with the law, with over a third of schools not offering any RE in Key Stage 4.

The Commission sets out a new vision for Religious education whereby pupils are entitled to an education in religion and worldviews (the term 'worldviews' is understood in the Commission report as to include both religious and non-religious worldviews) through which pupils study:

- what religion is and worldviews are, and how they are studied;
- the impact of religion and worldviews on individuals, communities and societies;
- the diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews in society;
- the concepts, language and ways of knowing that help us organise and make sense of our knowledge and understanding of religion and worldviews;
- the human quest for meaning, so that they are prepared for life in a diverse world and have space to recognise, reflect on and take responsibility for the development of their own personal worldview

Since 2018, the RE Council has been developing this work with its partners. This has included presentations, discussion, webinars and publications including discussion papers, a literature review and a bibliography. The RE Council, in partnership with RE Today is currently engaged in a project whereby three school based teams, working in different contexts, are road-testing a draft resource for syllabus writers.

The Bloom Review: Does Government Do God? (April 2023) examines the place of Religious education in the curriculum and concludes with the following recommendation.

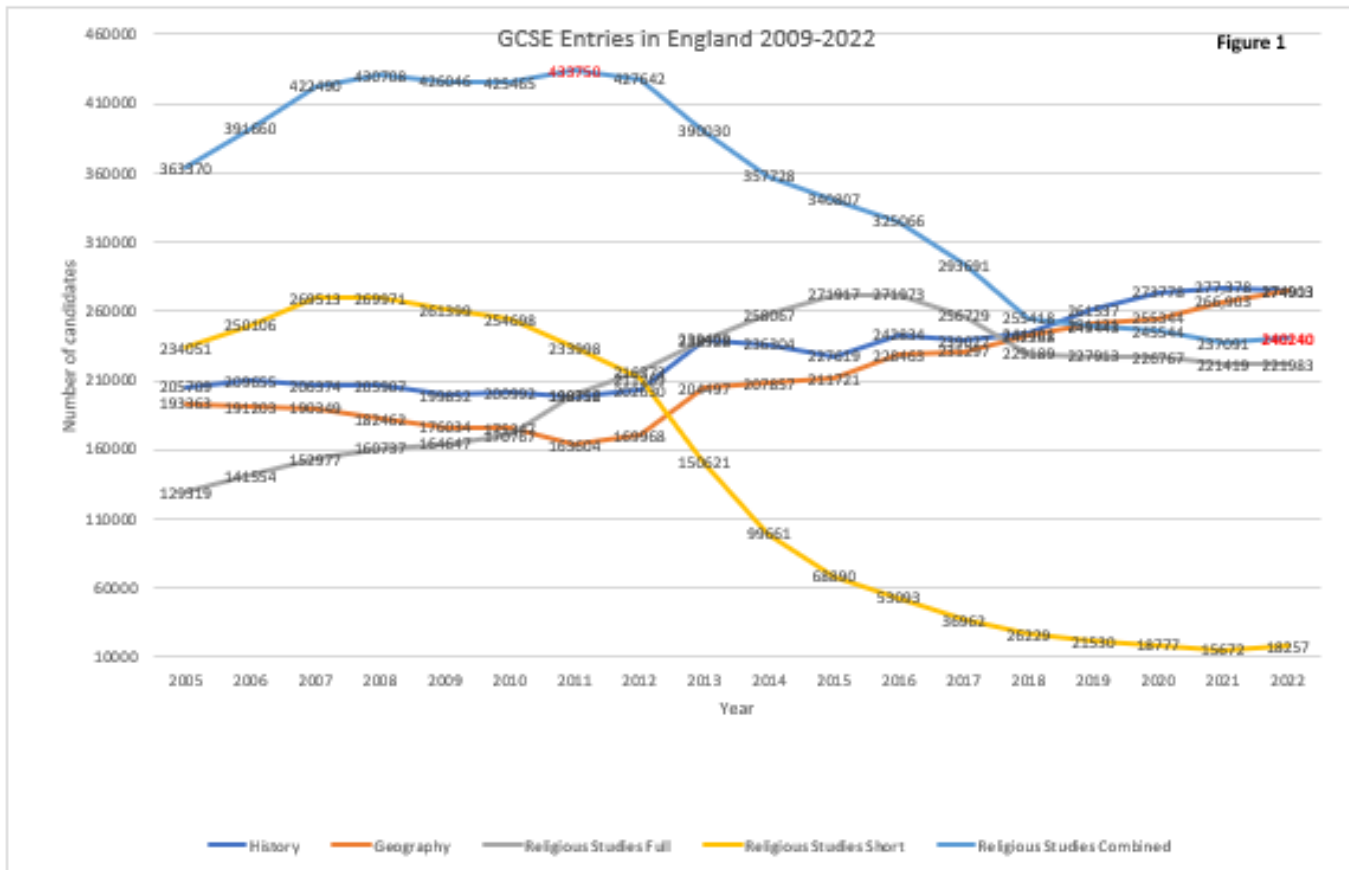
Recommendation 7 (chapter 3)

"Government should look again at why religious education (RE) in schools has become the 'Cinderella subject' and should consider methods for improving the

teaching of faith literacy and RE, with a view to cultivating a more inclusive society where people of all backgrounds are able to engage in debate about the different faiths and beliefs that shape society. Possible solutions could include the introduction of minimum standards regarding timetabling and resourcing to bring RE alongside other humanities subjects which would then be centrally inspected by Ofsted, the introduction of religious studies GCSE into the English Baccalaureate, or even outreach programmes to university graduates of theology and religious studies to ensure higher levels of faith literacy among RE teachers.”

200,000 fewer pupils leave school with a GCSE in Religious Studies than in 2011.

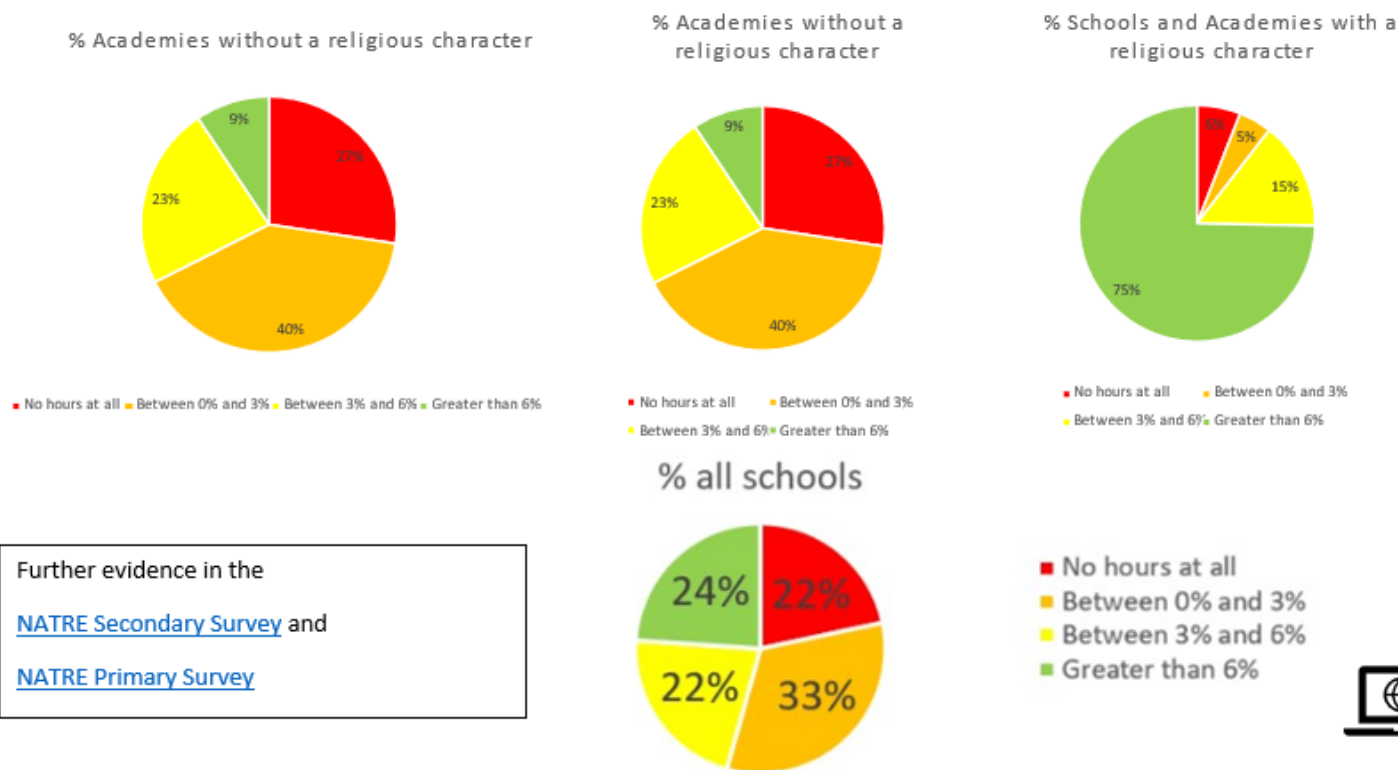
The removal of GCSE Short Course RS from the subjects that contribute to performance tables has led to a rapid decline in entries for this course and inevitably to widespread non-compliance with the law on Religious education. This is because the short course was routinely set as the minimum requirement for Key Stage 4 in the Statutory Agreed Syllabuses. The end result of this is that **almost 200,000 fewer pupils** each year now leave school with a GCSE in Religious Studies than in 2011.(See figure 1 below – JCQ data)



Declining provision for RE – especially at Key Stage 4 (14-16) Further evidence of declining provision for RE and consequential narrowing of the curriculum can be found in the government school workforce data. Figure 3 below evidences the number of schools reporting zero hours of RE in year 11 – according to the most recent school census – November 2021.

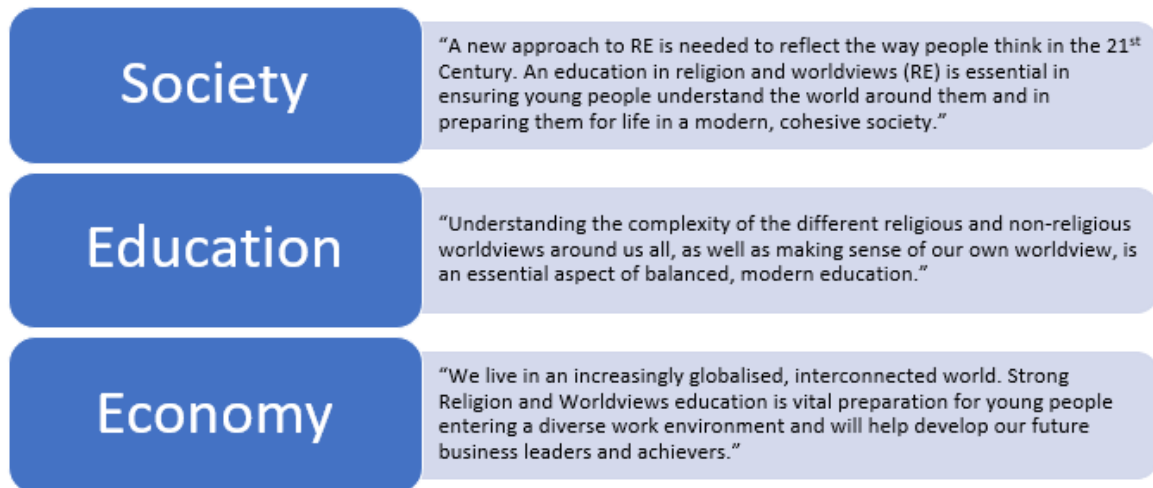
Evidence from the DfE’s school workforce data

Figure 2



The effectiveness of the 11-16 curriculum in equipping young people with the skills they need to progress into post-16 education and employment in a future digital and green economy

Why religious education is vital:



Lord Bilimoria of Chelsea - CBE DL Former President of Confederation of British Industry, Chancellor of University of Birmingham explains [here](#) why Religious education is so vital to build the economy

The impact of the 11-16 system on the motivation and confidence of pupils of all abilities

Disadvantaged pupils less likely to be entered for GCSE Religious Studies than their peers

In 2019, NATRE published [this report](#) which shows that disadvantaged pupils are considerably less likely to be entered for GCSE RS. This finding concurs with those of David Lundie and Mi Young Ahn's findings in "[GCSE at the Crossroads](#)" (2017-8). You might also like to look at the evidence in this report relating to pupils from ethnic minorities (on average) outperforming their peers in RS but in schools where they are the minority, being less likely to be entered. The result in both cases of course is that the disadvantaged are even more disadvantaged by the neglect of RE

Disadvantage gap for GCSE RS, narrowed with the introduction of 'reformed' specifications

Research from the Sutton Trust in 2019 – [Making the grade](#), shows that unlike many subjects, the attainment gap for pupils taking GCSE RS narrowed.

This collection of research would suggest that schools that are serious about improving the outcomes for their disadvantaged pupils, should look carefully at their provision for Religious Studies at key stage 4 and 5. A couple of years ago, NATRE published [a report](#) looking at average performance at GCSE in a local authority with the average points score at GCSE. If you look at the graph on page 5 you'll see a clear correlation between rate of entry for GCSE RS and overall pupil attainment. We all know that correlation does not equal causation, but this data reaffirms Ofsted research about the importance of a broad and balanced curriculum, David Lundie and Mi Young Ahn's findings referenced above and similar research into rates of entry for GCSE Music carried out by [Cambridge Assessment \(2020\)](#).



How spending for this phase of education should be prioritised, in the context of the current fiscal climate

According to the answer to a written question tabled by Kim Leadbeater MP, the government has failed to spend any funds on Religious education for the last 5 years.

The effectiveness of GCSE's as a means of assessing the achievements of all pupils at the end of the 11-1 phase

The GCSE is only truly effective in assessing what pupils have learnt for the GCSE. There is no guarantee that it will assess their achievements for the

whole of key stage three as well as the GCSE mainly because there is no universal key stage 3 syllabi that will be followed by all students at this level. Thus, schools will be following different courses that have differing relationships with the GCSE content. The way the current GCSE has been designed takes this into consideration as it is perfectly feasible for pupils to approach religions and topics that they have not encountered before. Furthermore, this, in part, fits the nature of the subject as it is not, predominantly, a vertical subject like Mathematics and the Sciences which require certain foundational knowledge, understanding and skills to be mastered for higher knowledge, understanding and skills to be gained. Thus, it is not so incremental being more horizontal in nature. However, this does not mean that it is not possible to design a course which does require certain knowledge, understanding and skills to be gained at key stage three and which therefore builds upon these. Indeed, such prior learning could help ensure that students are not revisiting much of the same kinds of content when they move into secondary from primary.

Another reason why the GCSE is not effective in assessing the achievements of all pupils is because of the nature of the examination style of assessment that is currently prescribed. Thus, the examination, as with all examinations, do not ever enable a pupil to demonstrate all that they have learnt but rather they only enable them to show what they know and understand from a small snap shot of content that happens to be included in a question paper. This will inevitably mean that if a student has a better command of an area of the specification that does not appear in their particular examination, the grade that they are awarded will not truly reflect their capabilities. However, the examinations are able to help cater for pupils with different levels of prior attainment, in that they include different types of questions which are assessable for a range of pupils. This means that more students are now able to achieve a graded award. Furthermore, the effectiveness of an examination to truly reflect the achievements of a pupil is also based upon the robustness of the process by which examination papers are marked. There is some work, undertaken by Daisy Christodoulou and her team at [no more marking](#), which would suggest the current system of marking against levels alone is not very reliable and valid. Instead they argue this marking for answers which are for

longer written responses (which appear in all GCSE papers) would be more valid and reliable if assessors used a system called comparative judgements. This approach, which is used a lot in English, is more robust and therefore reliable than the current model used.

Coursework

There are advantages and disadvantages to the use of coursework. Some would say, not all pupils will be able to access the same level of support for their coursework as their peers but parents who are able to afford a tutor during a GCSE can give their child an advantage in a written examination too. The development of artificial intelligence (AI) means assessors face a further challenge in authenticated candidates' work. Many teachers would disagree that candidates are able to convince a teacher that work produced by others or AI is actually their own.

Another consideration is that many pupils are not able to best demonstrate their command of the subject through a written examination. It is clear that even with extra time to answer written examination questions, pupils with some special needs can face a disadvantage.

It is also important to note that, especially, in subjects where a whole cohort of pupils is entered for an examination, places an unsustainable burden on teachers.

GCSE as a preparation for A level?

Currently there is a disconnect between the GCSE and A level. In some ways this is positive as it means that pupils can choose to take the A level even if they have never taken the GCSE. But in other ways this is a missed opportunity. This does not mean that the A level needs to be changed to match the GCSE; On the contrary, the GCSE needs to be updated to make it less about content that is often covered in key stages one to three, to being more focussed on equipping pupils with the knowledge and skills to be religion and worldviews literate and therefore prepared for life in a multi-religious and multi-secular world. A Religious Studies qualification should match its name. i.e. an opportunity to

study religion as well as religious and non-religious worldviews through multiple relevant disciplines. Therefore, the GCSE should, for example, enable pupils to appreciate the role religion plays in politics both in the UK and globally, how it shapes ethical and philosophical considerations, how it can be studied from a sociological perspective as well as a theological positions. But the programme should not simply be learning beliefs, teachings and practices which are often best suited to the study of Christianity and more 'Abrahamic' faiths. Religious Studies should be more sophisticated and build on foundational principles or core themes in different religious and non-religious worldviews and include an emphasis on diversity.

2 May 2023