# Curriculum and Assessment Review 2024

## Background Notes

**1. RE in the curriculum**

- The Ofsted research review, subject report and Commission on RE all provide evidence that over the last 14 years, quality and level of provision for RE, together with its status in the curriculum has declined.
- The main findings of the Ofsted subject report were as follows:

Main findings of the Ofsted subject report (2024)

i. The RE curriculum often lacked sufficient substance to prepare pupils to live in a complex world. The RE content selected rarely was collectively enough to ensure that pupils were well prepared to engage in a multi-religious and multi-secular society.

*ii. A superficially broad curriculum does not always provide pupils with the depth of knowledge they require for future study. In most cases, where the curriculum tried to cover many religions, like equal slices of a pie, pupils generally remembered very little. In cases where the curriculum prioritised depth of study, pupils learned much more.*

*iii. The RE curriculum rarely enabled pupils to systematically build disciplinary knowledge or personal knowledge.*

*iv. The content of some secondary curriculums was restricted by what teachers considered pupils needed to know for public examinations at the end of key stage 4. In a significant number of cases, teachers taught examination skills too prematurely. This significantly limited the range and types of RE content taught.*

*v. In the secondary phase, most statutory non-examined RE was limited and of a poor quality. A notable proportion of schools did not meet the statutory requirement to teach RE to pupils at all stages of their schooling.*

*vi. Where RE was weaker, the knowledge of traditions specified for pupils to learn was overly and uncritically compartmentalised. Sometimes, pupils were presented with over-simplistic assertions about religious traditions, which were often based on visible entities, such as places of worship.*

*vii. What schools taught was rarely enough for pupils to make sense of religious and non-religious traditions as they appear around the world. Curriculums did not identify clearly the suitable mix of content that would enable pupils to achieve this.*

*viii. There was a profound misconception among some leaders and teachers that 'teaching from a neutral stance' equates to teaching a non-religious worldview. This is simply not the case.*

*ix. In some schools, leaders were rightly focusing on developing the curriculum before considering assessment. However, even when leaders had systems of assessment in place, these rarely gave them the requisite assurance that pupils were learning and remembering more and increasingly complex content over time.*

*x. Long gaps between lessons hindered pupils' recall. When the timetable was organised so that pupils had regular RE lessons, they remembered more.*

xi. Although a few teachers had received subject-based professional development in RE, the overwhelming majority had not. Given the complexity of the subject and the kind of misconceptions that pupils were left with, this is a significant concern.

These circumstances have renewed the debate within the RE community and beyond about whether or not Religious education should be more closely aligned to or even part of the National Curriculum alongside History, Geography, English and Mathematics. Rather than ignite a debate about content and who should make decisions about that content, might the RE Council's National Content Standard form the basis for that alignment or inclusion?

There are advantages and disadvantages to RE being part of the National Curriculum and the REC would like to provide an opportunity for member organisations to share their perspectives of these and to consider the options available.

**The status quo:**

This is the explanation provided by the House of Commons Library here:

*"Religious Education (RE) must be taught by all state-funded schools. However, it has an unusual position on the curriculum: it is part of the basic curriculum but not the National Curriculum, and is one of two subjects (along with sex and relationship education) where parents have a legal right to withdraw their children from class.*

*All state-funded schools must teach religious education (RE). Maintained schools without a religious character must follow the syllabus agreed by the local Agreed Syllabus Conference (ASC), an occasional body which local authorities are required to establish.*

*Each Local Authority has a statutory duty to establish a Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE) to advise it on the provision of RE and convene any ASC.*

*RE in a school with a religious character must be provided in accordance with the school's trust deed or, where provision is not made by a trust deed, in accordance with the beliefs of the religion or denomination specified in the order that designates the school as having a religious character.*

*RE is compulsory in both academies designated with a religious character and those without (except for Alternative Provision academies), as set out in their funding agreement."*

REC note: Academies are not required through their funding agreements to follow a local agreed syllabus and are simply required to 'make provision for RE'. Unlike the subjects of the National Curriculum, there is no statutory benchmark for the quality of RE in English Schools which is why the REC published its National Content Standard.

**2. RE at key stage 4 (14-16)**

- GCSE subject content sets out the knowledge, understanding and skills common to all GCSE specifications in a given subject.
- It provides the framework within which awarding organisations create the detail of their specifications, so ensuring progression from Key Stage 3 and the possibilities for progression to GCE A level.
- Assessment objectives are part of the assessment arrangements for GCSE and A level. Ofqual adopt them into their regulatory framework through the subject-specific conditions that exam boards must comply with when designing their specifications.
- The assessment objectives are published by Ofqual for GCSE Religious Studies here

**3. RE at key stage 5 (16-19)**

- A level subject content sets out the knowledge, understanding and skills common to all A level specifications in a given subject.
- It provides the framework within which awarding organisations create the detail of their specifications, so ensuring progression from GCSE
- Assessment objectives for A level Religious Studies are published here

4. **Religions and Beliefs at examination level (14-19)**
    - The number of religions and beliefs available for study at GCSE is limited to two and at A level just one. The overwhelming majority of schools choose Christianity as one of those religions and the largest second religion is Islam. Very few students study either Hindu Dharma, Sikhi or Buddhism. There is no opportunity to study Zoroastrianism, Jainism, the Baha'i Faith or Humanism for example.

5. **The statutory requirement for all pupils to study RE at KS4 commonly known as Core RE**
    - The NATRE secondary survey found that just over 1/3 (34%) of respondents reported there was no provision for RE outside their option system which means the curriculum was not compliant with the law which requires all pupils in all year groups to study Religious Education. This figure represents an increase from 29% in the 2021 survey. In these schools, pupils' religious education ended at age 13. The DfE school workforce data shows that just under one in six schools tell the DfE that they provide no RE in year 11 – a breach of the law. But there are rarely any consequences.

6. **The right of withdrawal from RE – for compulsory school age**

*This applies to parents withdrawing children from RE and students over 18 withdrawing themselves from RE*

- Parents have the right to withdraw their children from religious education and/or collective worship.
- From age 18, pupils can choose for themselves to opt out of receiving religious education
- The Government in Wales has passed legislation removing the parental right of withdrawal from RE. This was achieved by also requiring Religion, Values and Ethics (the new name for RE in Wales) to be critical, objective and pluralistic
- Professor Stepen Parker wrote in the Journal of Beliefs and Values in 2018:
    - *"...now that curriculum RE's educational (as opposed to confessional) purpose in state-funded schools without a religious character is clear, then it is no longer necessary to give parents the right to withdraw from the subject. In effect, parents should no longer have troubled consciences when it comes to RE, because the subject's purpose is to debate rather than to persuade, to educate not indoctrinate. Secondly, given the value, even necessity, of RE as part of a broad and balanced curriculum which prepares young people for life in a diverse society, it seems counterintuitive to provide an exemption from it.*
- In 2016, The National Association of Head teachers (NAHT) has passed a motion calling for an end to the right of parents to withdraw their children from Religious Education (RE). In 2017, the Church of England supported this decision as reported here. NATRE also found evidence through their secondary survey that some parents use the right of withdrawal from RE for reasons other than those originally intended by the legislation and instead try to prevent children from learning about any religions and beliefs other than the home religion or belief. This creates divisions in schools and appears inconsistent with the Equality Act, the duty of schools to promote community cohesion and the Fundamental British Values.

7. **Accountability measures – curriculum**
    - According to the Department for education, accountability measures are:
        - *"… are used to inform parents and students about school performance; to prompt and promote self-improvement, to inform the public and stakeholders; and to provide credible information to enable action in cases of underperformance. Performance data is used as the starting point for a conversation about school performance and improvement."*

- For secondary schools these include:
    - Progress 8 – Note: RS can only 'count' in the open group and is excluded from the Humanities category. *

    - the percentage of pupils achieving grades 9-5 in English and Mathematics
    - the percentage of pupils achieving the English Baccalaureate (note Religious Studies is not included in the English Baccalaureate and short course RS GCSE does not count in performance tables at all.)
    - the percentage of pupils entering the English Baccalaureate
    - the percentage of students staying in education or employment after

** Image courtesy of Department for Education* *Vocational qualifications, Progress 8 and 'gaming' – Ofsted: schools and further education & skills (FES)*