

Analysis of Responses to our Consultation on Conditions and Guidance for GCSE, AS and A Level Religious Studies



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Executive summary

Our consultation about the Conditions and guidance for GCSE, AS and A level religious studies took place between 20th March 2015 and 24th April 2015.

The consultation questions were available either to complete online or to download. A copy of the consultation is available at:

www.gov.uk/government/consultations/gcse-as-and-a-level-reform-regulations-for-religious-studies.

There were 19 responses to the consultation – eight from individuals and 11 from organisations. All responses were in a form that matched or broadly followed the layout of the online consultation.

The majority of respondents commented on issues that were outside the scope of this consultation, specifically:

- the Department for Education’s subject content; and
- the wording and weighting of our assessment objectives.

Both of these issues were considered in detail in either our earlier consultation on assessment arrangements for religious studies¹ or the Department for Education’s consultation on the subject content for religious studies.²

Where respondents did comment on our proposals, they largely supported them.

¹ www.gov.uk/government/consultations/religious-studies-gcses-as-and-a-levels-new-qualifications-for-2016

² www.gov.uk/government/consultations/gcse-and-a-level-reform-religious-studies

1. Introduction

This report is a summary of the views expressed by those who responded to our consultation on the Conditions and guidance for GCSE, AS and A level religious studies, which took place between 20th March 2015 and 24th April 2015.

Background

Reformed GCSE, AS and A level qualifications are being introduced in England. We have consulted on, and announced our policy on, the general design of reformed qualifications, and on our policy and technical arrangements related to those subjects that are due to be introduced for first teaching in 2015.³

Following an earlier consultation, we have also taken decisions on the design of the reformed GCSE, AS and A level qualifications in religious studies that are to be introduced for first teaching in 2016.⁴

This consultation focused on more technical matters – that is, on the regulatory arrangements that we must put in place to make sure that awarding organisations design, deliver and award the new GCSE, AS and A level qualifications in religious studies in line with our policy decisions.

³ Reformed GCSEs in English language, English literature and mathematics will be taught from September 2015.

⁴ www.gov.uk/government/consultations/religious-studies-gcses-as-and-a-levels-new-qualifications-for-2016

2. Who responded?

We received a total of 19 responses to our consultation.⁵ There were eight responses from individuals and 11 responses from organisations (see table 1 for a more detailed breakdown). All of the responses were from individuals or organisations based in England, Wales, Northern Ireland or Scotland.

Table 1: Breakdown of consultation responses

Personal / Organisation response	Respondent type	Number
Personal	Teacher	7
Personal	Educational specialist	1
Organisation	Awarding organisation	4
Organisation	Other representative group or interest group	7

⁵ Where responses were received in hard copy we entered them into the online platform.

3. Approach to analysis

We published the consultation on our website. Respondents could choose to respond using an online form, by email, or by posting their answers to the consultation questions to us. The consultation included 11 questions.

This was a consultation on the views of those who wished to participate and while we made every effort to ensure that as many respondents as possible had the opportunity to reply, it cannot be considered as a representative sample of the general public or of any specific group.

Data presentation

We present the responses to the consultation questions in the order in which they were asked.

The consultation asked 11 questions and each had a different focus. Respondents could choose to answer all or just some of the questions.

During the analysis phase we reviewed every response to each question.

4. Views expressed – consultation response outcomes

In this section we report the views, in broad terms, of those who responded to the consultation document. We have structured this around the questions covered in the consultation document.

A consultation is not the same as a survey and the responses only reflect the views of those who chose to respond. Typically, respondents will be those with strong views and/or particular experience or interest in a topic. What follows is a fair reflection of the views expressed by respondents to the consultation.

A list of the organisations that responded to the consultation is included in appendix A.

Question 1 – Do you have any comments on the draft Conditions for new religious studies GCSEs?

Our draft Condition for GCSE religious studies stated that awarding organisations must ensure they comply with the Department for Education’s subject content requirements for new religious studies GCSEs,⁶ and with our published assessment objectives.

Fifteen respondents (six individuals, nine organisations) did not comment on this question.

Of the respondents who did comment:

- three (two individuals, one organisation) commented on issues related to the subject content – we have analysed these comments under ‘Other issues’ below; and
- one (an organisation) acknowledged our proposal and confirmed its acceptance of it.

Question 2 – Do you have any comments on the draft guidance on comparability of optional routes for new religious studies GCSEs?

This question referred to our draft guidance on the comparability of optional routes for new religious studies GCSEs.

⁶ www.gov.uk/government/publications/gcse-religious-studies

16 respondents (six individuals, ten organisations) did not comment on this question.

Of the respondents who did comment:

- two (both individuals) commented that they agreed with the draft guidance, with one noting that some current GCSE religious studies options were not comparable with others;
- one (an organisation) expressed concern that requiring 'maximum control' over comparability might compromise the validity of the assessment; and
- one (an individual) commented on the different options in the subject content – we have analysed this comment under 'Other issues' below.

Question 3 – Do you have any comments on our proposed approach to spelling, punctuation and grammar and use of specialist terminology in new religious studies GCSEs?

This question related to our proposal that new religious studies GCSEs will allocate 5 per cent of the total marks for accurate spelling, punctuation and grammar, and the use of specialist terminology.

11 respondents (seven individuals, four organisations) did not comment on this question.

Of the respondents who did comment:

- two (one individual, one organisation) commented that it could be difficult to assess correct spelling of certain religious terms (as there may be more than one accepted variant);
- two (both organisations) were concerned that our proposed requirements could restrict awarding organisations' ability to credit students' knowledge of key religious concepts and terms;
- two (both organisations) commented that the use of specialist vocabulary should be included within these marks;
- one (an organisation) commented that our proposed requirement was in line with other humanities subjects; and
- one (an organisation) suggested our proposals could constrain assessment design, as a rigid 5 per cent rule would mean total raw marks would have to be a multiple of 20.

Question 4 – Do you have any comments on the draft guidance on assessment objectives for new religious studies GCSEs?

This question referred to the draft guidance on assessment objectives, which outlines how we expect awarding organisations to interpret the assessment objectives in terms of discrete ‘strands’ and ‘elements’ within each assessment objective, coverage expectations and key areas of emphasis in each assessment objective.

Eight respondents (seven individuals, one organisation) did not comment on this question.

Of the respondents who did comment, only two (one individual, one organisation) commented on our draft guidance on assessment objectives. Both questioned whether the guidance stipulating a ‘reasonable balance’ between the elements of assessment objective AO1 was helpful. Of the remaining respondents:

- eight (all organisations) commented on issues outside the scope of the consultation – we have analysed these comments under ‘Other issues’ below; and
- three (two individuals, one organisation) commented on our approach to limiting recall of knowledge – we have analysed these comments under question 5 below.

Question 5 – Do you have any comments on our proposed approach to limiting the amount of recall rewarded by new religious studies GCSEs?

We proposed to introduce guidance that suggested a maximum of 20 per cent of total marks for the qualification should be awarded for recalling facts or other knowledge.

Eight respondents (five individuals, three organisations) did not comment on this question.

Of the respondents who did comment:

- five (two individuals, three organisations) supported our proposed approach – noting the importance of comparability between awarding organisations, and the need for students to apply their knowledge;
- four (all organisations) commented that recall is not a one-level skill – some knowledge is inherently more complex and more difficult to recall – and suggested that the 20 per cent limit should apply only to simple facts; several respondents also noted the need to ensure that students can be rewarded for evidencing arguments appropriately;

- one (an individual) suggested that some optional routes of study might need to place more emphasis on recall;
- one (an individual) expressed concerns that our proposals might allow for too great a proportion of questions addressing non-religious issues;
- one (an organisation) suggested that 20 per cent might not be sufficient to fulfil all the knowledge requirements in the subject content.

Question 6 – Do you have any comments on the draft Conditions for new religious studies A levels and AS qualifications?

Our draft Conditions stated that awarding organisations must ensure they comply with the Department for Education’s subject content requirements for AS and A level religious studies,⁷ and with our published assessment objectives.

18 respondents (eight individuals, ten organisations) did not comment on this question.

The one organisation that did comment expressed support for our proposals.

Question 7 – Do you have any comments on the draft guidance on comparability of optional routes for new religious studies A levels and AS qualifications?

This question referred to our draft guidance on the comparability of optional routes for new religious studies A levels and AS qualifications.

14 respondents (eight individuals, six organisations) did not comment on this question.

Of the respondents (all organisations) who did comment:

- four agreed that it is appropriate for awarding organisations to do all they can to ensure optional routes through the qualification are comparable; and
- one (an organisation) expressed concern that requiring ‘maximum control’ over comparability might compromise the validity of the assessment.

Question 8 – Do you have any comments on the draft guidance on assessment objectives for new religious studies A levels and AS qualifications?

⁷ www.gov.uk/government/publications/gce-as-and-a-level-religious-studies

This question referred to the draft guidance on assessment objectives, which outlines how we expect awarding organisations to interpret the assessment objectives in terms of discrete 'strands' and 'elements' within each assessment objective, coverage expectations and key areas of emphasis in each assessment objective.

Nine respondents (six individuals, three organisations) did not comment on this question.

Of the respondents who did comment:

- five (all organisations) supported our proposed approach to limiting the reward of recall at AS and A level, although one had concerns that the proposed 10 per cent limit might not allow for full coverage of the subject content;
- three (two individuals, one organisation) commented on issues outside the scope of the consultation – we have analysed these comments under 'Other issues' below; and
- one (an organisation) commented that it was important that assessments should focus on measuring students' knowledge of approaches and ideas, and should not demand a specific ideological perspective.

Question 9 – We have not identified any ways in which the proposed requirements for new religious studies GCSEs, A levels and AS qualifications would impact (positively or negatively) on persons who share a protected characteristic. Are there any potential impacts we have not identified?

14 respondents (eight individuals, six organisations) did not comment on this question.

All the respondents who did comment (five organisations) raised issues outside the scope of the consultation, which we discuss under 'Other issues' below.

Question 10 – Are there any additional steps we could take to mitigate any negative impact resulting from these proposals on persons who share a protected characteristic?

15 respondents (eight individuals, seven organisations) did not comment on this question.

All the respondents who did comment (four organisations) raised issues outside the scope of the consultation, which we discuss under 'Other issues' below.

Question 11 – Have you any other comments on the impacts of the proposals on students who share a protected characteristic?

18 respondents (eight individuals and ten organisations) did not comment on this question.

The respondent who did comment (an organisation) said we should ensure that minority faith groups are consulted.

Other issues

Throughout their responses, respondents commented on two key issues that were outside the scope of this consultation:

- the subject content – particularly at GCSE; and
- the wording of, and the balance between, the different assessment objectives – although most respondents commented favourably on the assessment objectives, some suggested changes to their wording or weighting.

Issues related to the subject content are a matter for the Department for Education, which has carried out its own consultation prior to taking decisions on the subject content.⁸

We have already considered comments on the wording and weighting of assessment objectives, following our earlier consultation.⁹ None of the responses to this consultation raised new issues that will cause us to revisit our earlier decisions.

⁸ www.gov.uk/government/consultations/gcse-and-a-level-reform-religious-studies

⁹ www.gov.uk/government/consultations/religious-studies-gcses-as-and-a-levels-new-qualifications-for-2016

Appendix A: List of organisational consultation respondents

When completing the questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate whether they were responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation.

Below we list those organisations that submitted a response to the consultation. We have not included a list of those responding as an individual. However, all responses were given equal status in the analysis.

AQA

Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL)

British Humanist Association

Catholic Education Service

National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE)

National Board of Religious Inspectors and Advisers [for Religious Education in the Catholic dioceses of England and Wales]

OCR

Pearson

Religious Education Council of England and Wales

Board of Deputies of British Jews

WJEC-CBAC

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