



# Estyn

*Rhagoriaeth i bawb – Excellence for all*

Arolygiaeth Ei Mawrhydi dros Addysg  
a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru

Her Majesty's Inspectorate  
for Education and Training in Wales

# Religious education in secondary schools

## June 2013



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Publication Section

Estyn

Anchor Court

Keen Road

Cardiff

CF24 5JW or by email to [publications@estyn.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:publications@estyn.gsi.gov.uk)

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## Introduction

This report has been produced in response to a request for advice from the Welsh Government in the Minister's annual remit letter to Estyn for 2012-2013. It derives from the evidence base outlined in Appendix 1.

This report covers outcomes including standards in religious education at key stage 3 and key stage 4, attainments in GCSE religious studies, and participation and engagement in learning. It also covers the factors that affect standards, including curriculum planning, teaching, assessment, leadership, improving quality and external influences.

The report will be of interest to teachers of religious education, heads of department and senior managers within secondary schools. It will also be of interest to local authorities and Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (SACREs)<sup>1</sup>.

## Background

Every secondary school must by law provide religious education for all its pupils as a requirement at key stage 3 and key stage 4. Schools must also provide religious education post 16, although outcomes and provision at this stage are not covered in this report. This provision must follow the relevant local agreed syllabus for religious education<sup>2</sup>.

Religious education encourages pupils to explore religious beliefs, teachings and practices, and their impact on everyday life. In doing so, it considers a range of philosophical, theological, ethical and spiritual questions in a reflective, analytical and balanced way.

The 'National exemplar framework for religious education for 3 to 19-year-olds in Wales' was developed by the Welsh Government in 2008 alongside its review of the National Curriculum. The framework aimed to improve standards of religious education nationally by providing a coherent curriculum and assessment framework for Wales. It contains exemplar programmes of study for each key stage, together with level descriptions for pupil performance. Local authorities and SACREs amended their local agreed syllabuses to take account of the framework.

Some schools have a religious character and teach 'denominational education' as a particular form of religious education. Denominational education does not follow the locally agreed syllabus, but instead follows a syllabus determined by the individual school or group of schools with a particular religious character. Estyn does not inspect denominational education as part of its usual school inspections as it is inspected separately by inspectors appointed by the governing body of the school. Schools that provide denominational education were therefore not included in the sample of schools visited for this survey.

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<sup>1</sup> SACREs are responsible in law for advising local authorities on religious education and collective worship. Every local authority must have a SACRE.

<sup>2</sup> The local agreed syllabus for each local authority is available from the Welsh Association of Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education: <http://www.wasacre.org.uk/publications/syllabi.html>

The two main religious studies qualifications for which schools enter pupils are: the full GCSE course and the short GCSE course (worth half a full GCSE). Most pupils do not choose to follow the short course as part of their options at key stage 4 but are expected to follow it in the time set aside to cover the legal requirement for religious education. Increasingly, schools also enter pupils for the full course in this time (usually those that the school thinks will achieve a grade C or above). However, the majority of pupils following the full course have chosen to do so as part of their key stage 4 options. In 2012, just over 10,000 pupils entered full GCSE course in religious studies and nearly 20,000 pupils entered the short course. For comparison, around 35,000 pupils entered English language GCSE.

In 2000, Estyn published 'Aiming for Excellence in Religious Education', which focused on religious education at key stage 1 and key stage 2.

## Main findings

- 1 GCSE courses in religious studies have gained in popularity over recent years. More pupils gain a qualification in religious education than in any other non-core subject in Wales. The number of pupils taking the full GCSE course in religious studies has risen significantly over the last five years, with just over a quarter of the pupils in Year 11 entered in 2012. The number of pupils taking the short GCSE course in religious studies has also risen steadily over the last five years, with just over half of the pupils in Year 11 entered in 2012. For both courses, more girls than boys are entered, though the difference is greater with the full course.
- 2 Attainment in the full GCSE course in religious studies has risen steadily over the last five years. The percentage of pupils attaining grades A\* to C in religious studies is well above the average for other subjects. While attainment in Wales is broadly similar to that for the UK as a whole, a higher proportion of pupils attain grade A\* in Wales.
- 3 Attainment in the short GCSE course in religious studies has fallen over the last five years, although it recovered slightly in 2012. In spite of this fall, the percentage of pupils attaining grades A\* to C in Wales has remained consistently better than for the UK as a whole, and a higher proportion of pupils attain grade A\* in Wales.
- 4 A significantly higher percentage of girls attain grades A\* to C than boys in both the full course and short GCSE courses in religious studies. The gap between this percentage for girls and boys is wider in Wales for both courses than it is across the UK as a whole.
- 5 Teacher assessment of pupils' performance in religious education at the end of key stage 3 is not included in the Welsh Government core data sets that cover other National Curriculum subjects and not published nationally in any other way that would enable an analysis of standards at key stage 3 or progress between key stages.

- 6 In the schools visited for this survey, lesson observations and pupils' work show that standards are good in a majority of schools at key stage 3. Standards are not excellent in any of the schools visited, but they are unsatisfactory in a few schools where pupils do not make enough progress. More able and talented pupils constitute the group that is the most likely to underachieve and this is usually because the tasks set by teachers do not challenge them to demonstrate the level of skill and understanding required for level 7 or above.
- 7 Most pupils following the full GCSE course in religious studies at key stage 4 make good progress and a slightly lower proportion of pupils studying the short course also make good progress. Where pupils are not following an examination course at key stage 4, standards in lessons are rarely better than adequate. In these lessons, a minority of pupils misbehave. This suggests that they do not value the lessons and this may be because they do not lead to a qualification.
- 8 Almost all pupils in the lessons observed showed respect for the opinions and beliefs of others. Many pupils value what they learn in religious education and understand how it contributes to their personal and social development. In particular, pupils enjoy engaging with fundamental questions, such as 'is there life after death?', 'what is evil?' and 'what is truth?'. Pupils enjoy learning about different religious responses to questions like these and why people live their lives in different ways as a result of their beliefs. They enjoy considering their own views, and discussing them with peers. They are prepared to talk about a variety of issues relating to religion and ethics and take part in lessons enthusiastically.
- 9 Teaching was good or better in just over two-thirds of the lessons observed for this survey. Teaching was excellent in nearly one-fifth of lessons and unsatisfactory in a very few lessons. These findings suggest that teaching in religious education is better than average for teaching across all subjects in secondary schools inspected since 2010.
- 10 In many schools, at both key stages, religious education teachers:
  - have good subject knowledge;
  - teach enthusiastically;
  - use a range of teaching strategies to support learning, particularly through discussion in pairs and groups;
  - use artefacts and audio-visual resources creatively;
  - prepare pupils thoroughly for GCSE examinations;
  - promote pupils' thinking skills effectively; and
  - promote literacy appropriately, particularly oracy and writing skills.
- 11 Many secondary schools use non-specialist teachers to teach religious education and the short GCSE course in religious studies, although they are rarely used to teach the full GCSE course. Non-specialist teachers do not have a negative impact on standards in the majority of schools.
- 12 In the majority of schools, teachers provide pupils with useful feedback, both oral and written, that enables them to understand their progress and how to improve their work.

- 13 Teachers generally have a very good understanding of GCSE requirements, but few have an accurate understanding of the levels of pupil performance at key stage 3 set out in the national exemplar framework.
- 14 The local agreed syllabuses across Wales are very similar, being based on the national exemplar framework for religious education for 3 to 19-year olds in Wales. Almost all schools meet the requirements of their local agreed syllabus. However, a very few schools do not meet the requirements at key stage 4 either because they do not give enough time to cover the syllabus or because, occasionally, lessons are used predominantly to help pupils gain a non-subject qualification such as an Essential Skills Wales qualification.
- 15 In the majority of schools, effective subject leaders set high expectations within the department, monitor other religious education teachers closely, provide appropriate support and challenge, and delegate aspects of leadership and management amongst colleagues to encourage a collegiate approach. Self-evaluation is good or better in only a minority of religious education departments. The paucity of national data on religious education and religious studies makes it difficult for schools to compare standards with other schools, but only a minority of departments analyse internal examination data thoroughly in order to plan for improvement.
- 16 The lack of opportunities for professional development and learning networks means that good practice is not shared enough and challenges, such as raising boys' attainment, the accuracy of assessing levels of performance at key stage 3, planning for the development of skills and improving self-evaluation, are not addressed effectively.

## Recommendations

### **Schools should:**

- R1 develop strategies to raise the attainment of boys at key stage 4;
- R2 improve standards at key stage 4 for pupils who are not entered for a qualification and consider giving all pupils the opportunity to gain an appropriate qualification;
- R3 improve the accuracy of teacher assessment of pupils' levels at key stage 3;
- R4 ensure that tasks are challenging enough to enable more able pupils to reach higher levels at key stage 3;
- R5 ensure that the curriculum, staffing and timetabling arrangements enable all pupils to make good progress through key stages 3 and 4; and
- R6 strengthen self-evaluation and use data in religious education departments to identify where and what to improve.

### **The Welsh Government should:**

- R7 collect, analyse and publish attainment data for religious education and religious studies in the same way as for non-core subjects; and
- R8 work with local authorities and SACREs to improve the opportunities for professional development and support learning networks for teachers of religious education.



## Standards in religious education

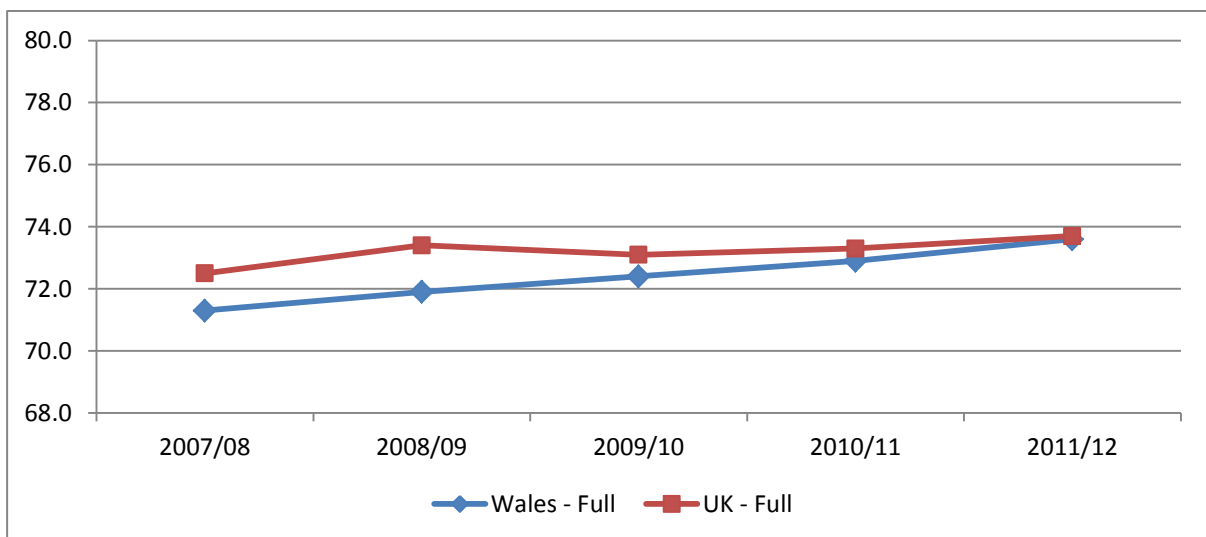
### Standards of attainment at key stage 3

- 17 Although schools are required to assess the level that pupils achieve in religious education at the end of key stage 3, the data is not included in the Welsh Government core data sets that cover the National Curriculum subjects and is not published nationally in any other way. Due to the lack of published data for all schools, it is not possible to compare attainment rates in religious education at key stage 3 with those in other subjects. It is not possible to compare the attainment of boys and girls either.

### Standards of attainment at key stage 4

- 18 Over the last five years there has been a steady improvement in standards in the full GCSE course in religious studies in Wales. In 2012, the percentage of pupils attaining grades A\* to C standards in Wales was similar to that in the UK as a whole, although the percentage of pupils who attained grade A\* was significantly higher in Wales.

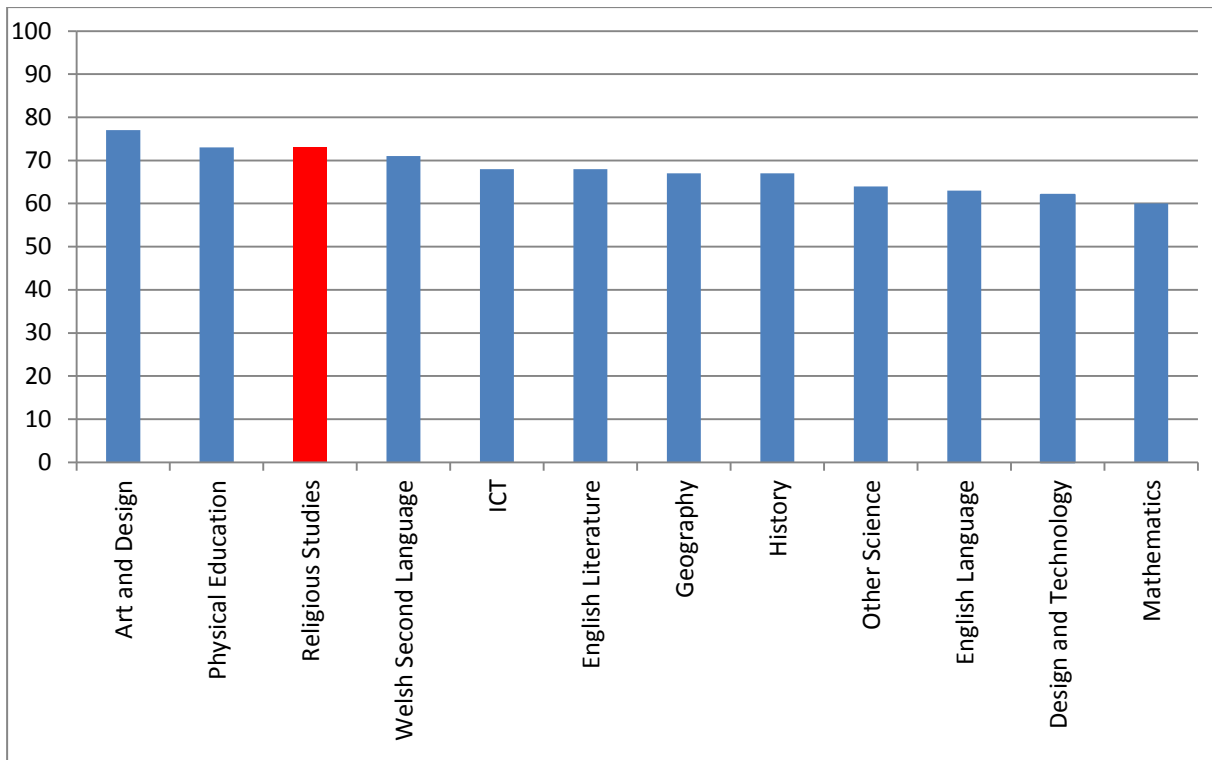
**The percentage of pupils entering the full GCSE course in religious studies who attain a grade A\*-C in Wales and the UK between 2007/08 and 2011/12**



Source: Joint Council for Qualifications 2008-2012

- 19 A significantly higher percentage of girls than boys attained grades A\* to C in the full GCSE course in religious studies in recent years, and nearly twice as many girls as boys attained grade A\* in 2012. The gap between girls' and boys' performance was smaller in Wales than for the UK as a whole until 2012.
- 20 The percentage of pupils attaining grades A\* to C in the full GCSE course in religious studies in Wales is well above the average across all subjects, particularly amongst the other most popular subjects.

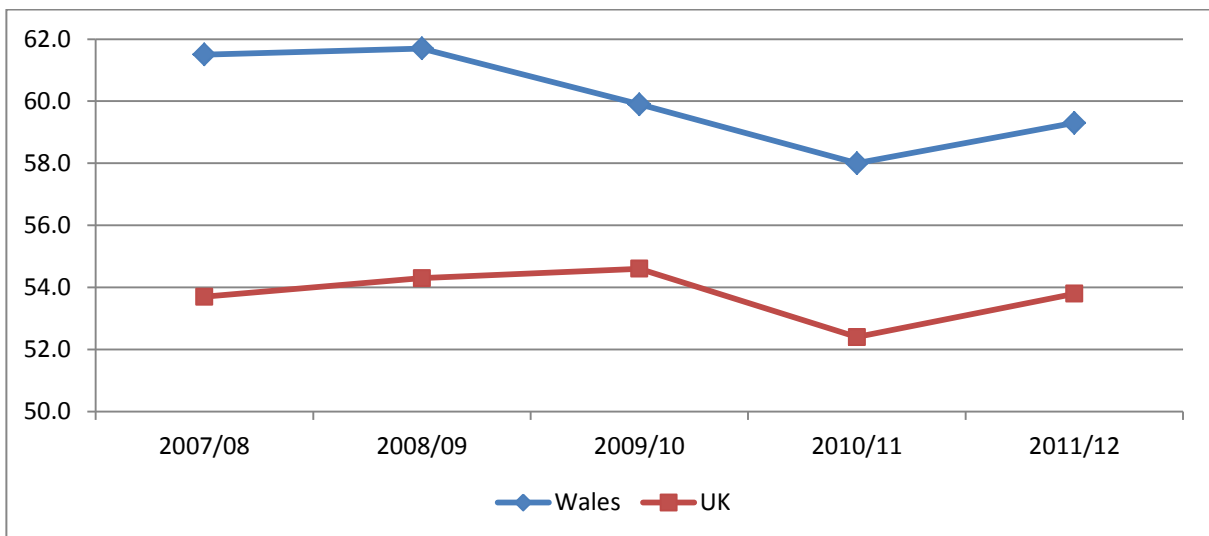
**The percentage of pupils in Wales attaining grades A\* to C in the most popular subjects at GCSE in 2011**



Source: Welsh Government 2012

- 21 The percentage of pupils in Wales attaining grades A\* to C in the short GCSE course in religious studies has fallen over the last five years, although standards recovered slightly in 2012. Standards have been consistently better in Wales than in the UK as a whole in recent years. The percentage of pupils who attained grade A\* in 2012 was higher in Wales than in the UK as a whole.

**The percentage of pupils entering the short GCSE course in religious studies who attain a grade A\*-C in Wales and the UK between 2007/08 and 2011/12**



Source: Joint Council for Qualifications GCSE results 2008-2012

- 22 A significantly higher percentage of girls attained grades A\* to C than boys in the short GCSE course in religious studies in recent years. In 2012, around two-thirds of girls attained grades A\* to C compared to around half of boys, resulting in a wider gap between girls and boys in Wales than in the UK as a whole. The gap between girls and boys is wider for the short course than it is for the full course. The gap is even more marked for those who attain the highest grade in Wales. In 2012, more than twice as many girls as boys attained grade A\*.
- 23 Standards in the short GCSE course in religious studies cannot be meaningfully compared to standards in other short course subjects due to the large differences in the number of entries in subject areas.
- 24 A few schools enter the lowest ability pupils for a qualification below GCSE level, such as the Entry Level Certificate in Religious Studies. The proportion of pupils achieving the highest grade in this Certificate, Entry 3 (formerly 'Distinction'), has fallen every year for the last four years. This may reflect a changing ability-range in the pupils entering: the number of entries has almost halved during this period as more are entered for the short GCSE course.

#### **Standards of achievement**

- 25 In the schools visited for this survey, lesson observations and scrutiny of pupils' work show that standards are good in a majority of schools at key stage 3. Standards are not excellent in any of the lessons observed. Standards are unsatisfactory in a few schools where pupils do not make enough progress in individual lessons or through the key stage as a whole. This is usually due to weaker teaching, which is mainly to be found in lessons taught by non-specialist teachers. More able and talented pupils are the most likely group to underachieve and this is usually because the tasks set by teachers do not challenge them or require them to demonstrate and develop the skill and understanding required for level 7 or above.
- 26 Most pupils following the full course at key stage 4 make good or very good progress. In schools where the full course is taught in the same amount of time as is usually given to the short course, pupils are conscious of the pressure of time and work particularly hard to complete the course and achieve a good grade. The majority of these pupils readily take up opportunities to continue their learning during lunch periods or in after-school department clubs to make up for the lack of lesson time.
- 27 Many pupils studying the short GCSE course in religious studies at key stage 4 make good progress.
- 28 In religious education lessons where pupils are not following an examination course at key stage 4, standards are poor even when pupils are able. In most schools visited, standards in these lessons are rarely better than adequate as pupils do not work hard, and are rarely expected to work hard by teachers.
- 29 Standards are higher for girls than for boys in religious education and religious studies. There is no apparent reason for this other than that it mirrors a similar gap in standards of literacy between girls and boys, and the gap between them in standards of extended writing in particular.

- 30 In most schools visited, many pupils can recall and explain the religious beliefs, teachings and practices that they have learnt. At a level in line with their age and ability, these pupils can explain what impact the beliefs, teachings and practices have on people's lives and make comparisons with their own lives.
- 31 Many pupils can express and justify opinions well orally on religious and moral issues, and the majority of pupils can do so in writing too. They use a good range of religious terminology appropriately.
- 32 Many pupils develop their thinking skills well in religious education and religious studies lessons. They ask questions to clarify meaning and understanding and can apply their understanding well to new learning. Most pupils seek information appropriately to pose and solve problems. A few pupils are very analytical and perceptive when reflecting on learning experiences.
- 33 Pupils' personal and social development through religious education is good in most schools. In particular, pupils develop a greater appreciation of, and sensitivity to, global cultural and religious diversity. However, pupils' understanding of the variety and extent of faith groups in their own community and in Wales as a whole is often less well developed.
- 34 In most schools visited, the majority of pupils are competent independent learners in religious education and religious studies lessons. They also work cooperatively and conscientiously in paired and group activities. However, where pupils are not following a GCSE course in their religious education lessons, standards are generally lower. GCSE courses in religious studies have gained in popularity over recent years.

#### **Participation and engagement in learning**

- 35 More pupils gain a qualification in religious studies than in any other non-core subject in Wales. In 2011, over 28,000 pupils gained either a full-course or short-course GCSE in religious studies out of around 36,000 pupils who entered GCSEs that year.
- 36 The number of entries for the full GCSE course in religious studies has risen by a third in Wales over the last five years. In 2012, over a quarter of all Year 11 pupils in Wales were entered for the full course and, of the non-core subjects, only history had more entries than religious studies. By contrast, in 2008, art, design and technology, French, geography, history and ICT all had more entries than religious studies.
- 37 As well as indicating the popularity of the subject, this rise in entries is also due to an increase in the number of schools that enter a significant proportion of pupils for the full course, even when pupils have not chosen it as an option. These pupils usually complete the course in the time allocated for statutory religious education, which is normally less than half of the time usually allocated to a full, non-core GCSE subject.
- 38 Apart from an unusually high number of entries in 2009, the number of pupils entered for the short GCSE course in religious studies has risen steadily over the last five years. In 2012, just over half of all Year 11 pupils in Wales entered for the short course.

- 39 More girls than boys take a GCSE in religious studies and this is particularly so for the full course. The difference in the proportion of entries of girls and boys for both courses is greater in Wales than for the United Kingdom as a whole.
- 40 The Entry Level Certificate is being used appropriately in schools visited for this survey and enables those very few pupils who are unlikely to attain at least a grade G at GCSE to gain a qualification. The number of pupils entered for this qualification has declined significantly in recent years, with just over 250 pupils entered in 2012. Every year, around twice as many boys as girls are entered.
- 41 Almost all pupils in the lessons observed showed respect for the opinions and beliefs of others. Many pupils value what they learn in religious education and understand how it contributes to their personal and social development. In particular, pupils enjoy exploring fundamental questions and learning about why people live their lives in different ways. They enjoy discussing their views on a variety of issues relating to religion and ethics and take part enthusiastically in lessons.
- 42 In lessons at key stage 3, levels of engagement and standards of behaviour are usually good or excellent, particularly in schools where the subject has a good reputation and where most pupils go on to achieve a qualification in religious studies at key stage 4. Schools that have lower levels of engagement and standards of behaviour at key stage 3 are usually those where only a very few pupils go on to achieve a qualification in religious studies at key stage 4.
- 43 In lessons at key stage 4 where pupils are following the full course at key stage 4, pupils' behaviour is usually good or excellent. In lessons where pupils are studying the short course, a few pupils do not engage well in the work and cause low level disruption to other pupils. In lessons where pupils are not following an examination course, a minority of pupils misbehave. This suggests that they do not value the lessons and this may be because they do not lead to a qualification.
- 44 While a minority of pupils believe that achieving a qualification in religious studies is valuable in helping them towards a particular career, most pupils appreciate that the subject has a wider value for their personal and social development which will be of benefit whatever their career.
- 45 The number of pupils progressing to study AS and A level religious studies has risen considerably over the last five years, and at a faster rate than the rise in the full GCSE course entries. In 2008, 12 subjects had significantly more A level entries than religious studies in Wales, whereas in 2012 only six subjects had significantly more entries. Religious studies is much more popular in Wales at A level than in the UK as a whole.
- 46 Three times as many girls enter A-level religious studies than boys in Wales, compared to twice as many in the UK as a whole. It is not clear why girls are much more likely to progress to A level than boys in religious studies. By comparison, in history, for example, the percentage of entries from boys at A level is similar to those at GCSE.

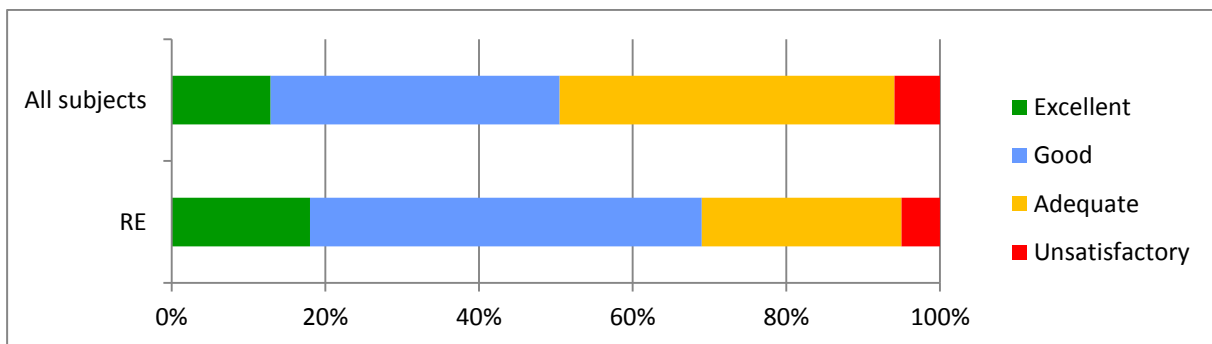
## Factors affecting outcomes in religious education

- 47 There are many aspects of a school's work that influence the standards pupils achieve, most importantly the quality of teaching. This section evaluates the impact of teaching, assessment, curriculum arrangements, resources and aspects of leadership on pupils' standards in religious education, as well as factors outside school.

### Teaching and assessment

- 48 Teaching and assessment were good or better in just over two-thirds of the lessons observed for this survey. There was no significant difference between the quality of teaching and assessment at key stage 3 and at key stage 4. Teaching was excellent in nearly one fifth of lessons and unsatisfactory in a very few lessons. These findings suggest that teaching in religious education is significantly better than average for teaching across all subjects in secondary schools inspected since 2010.

#### Judgements for teaching and assessment in religious education (RE) compared to judgements for teaching and assessment across all subjects in secondary schools



Source: Estyn inspection outcome database and school visits for this survey

- 49 The most effective teaching at key stage 3 is that which is in line with the guidance set out in the Welsh Government document on religious education: 'Guidance for Key Stages 2 and 3: Key messages for planning learning and teaching'<sup>3</sup>.
- 50 In many schools, at both key stages, religious education teachers:
- have a good subject knowledge;
  - teach enthusiastically;
  - use a range of teaching strategies effectively to support learning, particularly through discussion in pairs and groups;
  - use artefacts and audio-visual resources well;
  - prepare pupils very well for GCSE examination questions;
  - promote pupils' thinking skills well; and
  - promote literacy well, particularly oracy and writing skills.

<sup>3</sup> <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/dcells/publications/110510rekeyen.pdf>

### **Using collaborative group work effectively to strengthen learning**

A secondary school used 'delegation groups' as an effective tool for learning about Bible teaching on the subject of suffering. Pupils were organised into five small 'home' groups. One 'delegate' from each 'home' group then joined together to explore and make notes on a Bible passage in a 'research group'. Four similar 'research groups' had different passages. The 'delegates' then returned to their 'home' group, where they all briefed each other on the passage they'd explored and made notes about the other passages too. Each 'home' group then worked together to draw conclusions from what they had learnt from all the passages and debate their views. Pupils used their learning as a basis for extended writing on what the Bible teaches about suffering. The teacher moved around the various groups throughout the lesson to encourage, challenge and support pupils as necessary. The task kept every pupil fully involved by giving them responsibility for their learning. The lesson resulted in a very high standard of written work, which showed pupils' excellent understanding and their ability to express and justify their opinions on the subject.

- 51 The majority of teachers focus appropriately on developing pupils' three core skills of:
- engaging with fundamental questions;
  - exploring religious beliefs, teachings and practices; and
  - expressing personal responses.
- 52 In a majority of schools, teachers often set learning in the context of local, national and international events and news stories, which improves pupils' engagement in learning, increases their understanding and supports the development of their skills.
- 53 In a minority of schools, teachers enhance learning experiences by inviting external visitors to the classroom, such as local religious leaders or charity workers, or by taking pupils on learning visits locally or further afield. Such learning experiences support the development of pupils' thinking skills. For example, they provide valuable opportunities to challenge prejudices, explore personal feelings and beliefs, and develop empathy. These opportunities often help pupils to improve their extended writing.
- 54 Many schools use non-specialist teachers to varying extents to teach religious education in key stage 3 and key stage 4, although they are very rarely used to teach full course GCSE. Non-specialist teachers do not have a negative impact on standards in the majority of schools. In a minority of schools, the use of non-specialist teachers results in standards that are only adequate or, in a few schools, unsatisfactory. This is because these teachers are either generally less effective, they have a weak understanding of the subject or they are not being supported or monitored well enough by the subject leader.

### **Support for non-specialist teachers**

A secondary school has two specialist teachers of religious education supported by three non-specialist teachers. The non-specialist teachers teach religious education to 10 classes. The department's support for the non-specialist teachers creates an

excellent ethos in which all teachers feel valued, which has a positive impact on the pupils. All the materials needed to teach the subject are hosted in the department's area of the school intranet. As far as possible, the non-specialists are timetabled to teach in the religious education rooms in the school. The non-specialists are all given a responsibility within the department to develop their expertise and ensure that they are an active part of the department's improvement plan. For example, one of the non-specialist teachers is a physical education teacher who has expertise in organising external trips, and is given responsibility for co-ordinating visits to places of worship.

- 55 In a minority of lessons, teachers do not stretch or challenge more able and talented pupils enough at key stage 3, particularly in written work. There is a perception among specialist teachers that pupils must produce more complex writing to achieve a level 7 or above at key stage 3 than is required to achieve a grade A\* in GCSE and concentrate on preparing pupils to gain full marks in GCSE examination questions, instead, often starting this work in Year 9 rather than supporting them to achieve higher levels at key stage 3.
- 56 Most teachers' use of ICT to support religious education is limited to delivering presentations or showing websites rather than enabling pupils to make full use of ICT. A very few teachers make good use of ICT, for example by supporting pupils to research a variety of information sources on an issue online to stretch their thinking and inform class debate and extended writing.
- 57 In a few schools, Twitter and other online tools effectively teachers use to support pupils in their work and promote the subject, by highlighting relevant news stories and online resources and sending reminders about homework, assessments and examinations. This broadens pupils' thinking, helps them to apply their learning in new contexts, and prepares pupils well for external examinations.
- 58 In the majority of schools, teachers provide good feedback, both oral and written, which enables pupils to understand their progress and how to improve their work. At key stage 4 in particular, this prepares pupils very well for external examinations. Where assessment is good or better, teachers use self-assessment and peer-assessment regularly.
- 59 Just over two-thirds of schools submitted evidence of pupils' work for level 4 to level 7 to the WJEC for central moderation of religious education at key stage 3 in 2012. The Chief Moderator's report for 2012 notes that only a few schools had their understanding of levels fully accepted. Therefore the assessment of levels is likely to be inaccurate in many schools and this affects the usefulness of the data, both at school and national level. However, there is little correlation between the accuracy of levelling at key stage 3 and the accuracy of predicted standards in GCSE at key stage 4. Schools generally have much better understanding of the GCSE requirements.
- 60 In almost all schools, pupils are given, and are aware of, a target level for their work at the end of key stage 3 or a target GCSE grade. However, these targets are not informed enough by the professional judgement of a specialist teacher, as they are



often set outside the department and generated by computer models based on prior attainment. Targets in key stage 3 are more likely to lack challenge than be too challenging, whereas key stage 4 targets generally have an appropriate level of challenge. If pupils do not enter for a formal qualification at key stage 4, they do not have a target for their work in religious education as there is no other national measure for their achievement.

- 61 Almost all the schools visited provide an appropriate report to parents on their child's progress in religious education.

### **Curriculum planning**

- 62 Almost all schools meet the requirements of their local agreed syllabus for religious education. A very few schools do not meet the requirements at key stage 4 because there is not enough lesson time to cover the syllabus or because religious education lessons are used to work towards other qualifications, such as Essential Skills Wales or the Welsh Baccalaureate, and they do not cover the syllabus well enough as a result.
- 63 On average, pupils have one lesson per week (around one hour long) of religious education at key stage 3. In a few schools, religious education is allocated less time at key stage 3 than history or geography, but none of these schools had a rationale for this and it has a negative impact on pupils' attitudes. In a very few schools, religious education is provided within a wider programme of topic-based learning that covers several curriculum areas, such as the humanities. Such a programme can help teachers to focus on developing pupils' skills and, so long as there is enough input from specialist teachers in designing and monitoring the programme, it does not have a negative impact on standards in religious education.
- 64 In one school, there are no religious education lessons in Year 9, but the usual timetable is suspended occasionally and pupils are provided with a programme of religious education on these days instead. This arrangement has a negative impact on progress, standards and the take-up of religious studies at key stage 4 as it is too short to allow development over time.
- 65 The amount of time allocated to full GCSE course in religious studies varies in the schools visited between two hours to five hours a fortnight. Just less than half the schools allocate five hours a fortnight, which is the average amount of time usually allocated to a non-core subject for single award GCSE. However, half the schools allocate only two hours a fortnight. Teachers in these schools struggle to cover the course in the time. They often use a restricted range of teaching methods and are too narrowly focused on teaching pupils how to succeed in the examination rather than developing their skills more broadly.
- 66 In some schools that only provide two hours of curriculum time, the percentage of pupils achieving A\* to C grades in religious studies is higher than in subjects with five hours of time such as history or English. This is because these schools take measures to compensate for the lack of time, in particular by starting the GCSE course in Year 9 and providing additional lessons or drop-in sessions at lunchtimes and after school. While this helps pupils achieve good standards, it results in an unfair workload for some teachers and pupils.

- 67 The amount of time allocated to the short GCSE course in religious studies varies in the schools visited from one hour a fortnight to over two hours, although the vast majority of schools allocate two hours a fortnight. One hour in a fortnight is not enough time to cover the course fully and enable pupils to make the progress they should be making.
- 68 Around half the schools in Wales enter most of their pupils for the short GCSE qualification in religious studies even when they have not opted for the subject because it gives them the opportunity to gain another qualification in an area where they are required by law to continue their learning at key stage 4. Schools are increasingly covering the full course during the same time allocation (i.e. the religious education time allocation) with pupils that they feel are capable of attaining grade C or above.
- 69 A very few schools do not offer pupils the opportunity to take religious studies at GCSE level at key stage 4. When this happens, it is usually because the number of pupils choosing the subject is not enough to make a viable group. In such instances it is often the case that options for collaborative delivery with other schools have not been explored.

#### **Collaborative approach to religious studies at key stage 4**

A secondary school had not been able to provide the full GCSE course in religious studies in recent years because not enough pupils choose the subject to make it viable. The school addressed this by working in collaboration with five other secondary schools to provide the course from one site for all pupils in the consortium. The pupils can progress post-16 as the consortium offers A-level religious studies too. The collaborative arrangement has also benefited staff in the schools in the consortium, as they share responsibility for teaching the collaborative courses.

- 70 Schools have various arrangements to provide statutory religious education for pupils who do not follow either GCSE course at key stage 4. The amount of time allocated to religious education is either one or two lessons per fortnight in the schools visited for this survey. One school visited has no regular lessons, but instead suspends the usual timetable for occasional days through the year and provides a programme of religious education for the day instead. However, providing religious education solely through one-off days does not support the development of skills effectively.
- 71 Many schools plan appropriately their coverage of Christianity and the other principal religions, although a few schools restrict their coverage too much and spend too long studying one religion.
- 72 In almost all schools, religious education makes a strong contribution towards pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. This is not the case in schools where standards are unsatisfactory or the subject is not given enough time.
- 73 Schemes of work are often not explicit enough about the development of pupils' core skills in engaging with fundamental questions, exploring religious beliefs, teaching and practices and expressing personal responses. As a result, in a few lessons observed, weaker teachers focus too much on knowledge, such as the content of a story in a sacred text or facts about a religious festival, rather than using these as contexts to develop pupils' skills.

- 74 Many schools do not plan well enough to incorporate the Welsh dimension within religious education. In the few schools where the Welsh dimension is well developed, local religious leaders and charity workers contribute to lessons and pupils visit places of worship, museums and exhibitions. These schools ensure that the Welsh context is included in plans, for example by covering aspects of Wales' Christian heritage and its present multi-faith composition.
- 75 Almost all schools incorporate education for sustainable development and global citizenship well within religious education. For example, pupils develop their attitudes and understanding about issues such as prejudice, poverty and slavery through learning about the lives of people who, inspired by their faith, tackled these issues.
- 76 In a minority of schools, religious education plans incorporate aspects of the requirements for Essential Skills Wales qualifications or the Welsh Baccalaureate well. However in these instances, a few schools do not cover the religious education syllabus well enough because they place too much emphasis on the requirements for these other qualifications.
- 77 Pupils are far more likely to progress to AS and A-level religious studies if there is a sixth form at their school. Of the schools that Estyn visited for this survey that do not have sixth forms, none has strong links with further education providers to support pupils' progression in religious studies.

#### **Leadership, management and improving quality**

- 78 In the majority of secondary schools, the religious education department is led well. Effective subject leaders in these schools set high expectations within the department, monitor other religious education teachers closely, provide appropriate support and challenge, delegate aspects of leadership and management to colleagues, and encourage a collegiate approach.
- 79 Self-evaluation is good or better in only a minority of religious education departments. The paucity of national data on religious education and religious studies especially at key stage 3 does make it difficult for schools to compare standards with those in other schools. Only a few departments analyse examination data thoroughly in order to plan for improvement. In the very few schools where self-evaluation is excellent, teachers compare the results of every pupil entered for religious studies with their results in other subjects, as well as taking into account their prior attainment and relevant context such as any additional learning needs and whether or not they are entitled to free school meals. Where there is more than one GCSE class, and particularly where there is more than one teacher who teaches GCSE, the best subject leaders analyse the performance of each class. These subject leaders use their self-evaluation very effectively to inform improvement plans.
- 80 Subject leaders who are the only specialist religious education teacher in the school often do not have enough time to carry out their leadership role effectively due to their teaching commitments. This is usually the case where a school makes significant use of non-specialists, has a high proportion of pupils entered for GCSEs, does not give enough time to deliver the full GCSE course, or does not provide support for data analysis, all of which require time from the subject leader to address.

- 81 Almost all schools meet the statutory requirement to include within their prospectus a summary of the religious education provided at the school. They also provide details of how a parent, or sixth-form pupil, can exercise the right to opt out of religious education and of any alternative provision made for such pupils. In a few of the schools visited for this survey, a very few pupils are withdrawn from religious education by their parents. Almost all these pupils are withdrawn because of their parents' religious beliefs. In all cases where pupils are withdrawn, schools have satisfactory alternative arrangements in place.
- 82 The lack of opportunities for professional development and learning networks means that good practice is not shared enough and issues such as strategies to raise boys' attainment, the accuracy of assessing levels of performance at key stage 3 and planning for the development of skills are not addressed effectively.
- 83 In a few schools, subject leaders and specialist teachers arrange to meet informally with colleagues from other schools in their area to exchange ideas and work together on issues of common interest. Occasionally these meetings are formalised as part of joint INSET days across a group of schools and they are more effective when this is the case as they focus on good practice and are linked directly to improvement planning within schools.
- 84 Most religious education teachers do not have enough professional development opportunities that are specific to their subject and non-specialists rarely have any professional development in religious education. Only a very few of the schools visited had received external support for religious education from their local authority or SACRE in the last three years. A very few teachers attend, and benefit from, religious education courses provided by private companies.

## Appendix 1: Evidence Base

This report draws on visits to 20 secondary schools. This sample takes account of a range of geographical location, socio-economic background, size of school and linguistic contexts. In these visits, inspectors:

- observed lessons at key stages 3 and 4;
- scrutinised samples of pupils' work and department documentation;
- met groups of pupils; and
- met teachers and senior managers.

Additional evidence was drawn from:

- GCSE religious studies examination data;
- the Chief Moderator's report on religious education at key stage 3; and
- discussion with a representative group from the Welsh Association of SACREs (Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education).

The following schools were visited for this survey:

- Brynteg School, Bridgend
- Caerleon Comprehensive School, Newport
- Cathays High School, Cardiff
- Chepstow Comprehensive School, Monmouthshire
- Coedcae Comprehensive School, Carmarthenshire
- Coleg Cymunedol Y Dderwen, Bridgend
- Glan Afan Comprehensive School, Neath Port Talbot
- Gowerton School, Swansea
- Hawthorn High School, Rhondda Cynon Taff
- Llangatwg Community School, Neath Port Talbot
- Newport High School, Newport
- Rumney High School, Cardiff
- St David's High, Flintshire
- St Martin's Comprehensive School, Caerphilly
- Welshpool High, Powys
- Ysgol Dinas Bran, Denbighshire
- Ysgol Dyffryn Conwy, Conwy
- Ysgol Gyfyn Gymraeg Bryn Tawe, Swansea
- Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Plasmawr, Cardiff
- Ysgol Gyfun Ystalyfera, Neath Port Talbot

## The remit author and survey team

Mark Champion HMI	Remit author
Denise Wade HMI	Team member
Mary Parry AI	Team member