



Department  
for Education

# **RS GCSE and A level subject content: equality analysis**

**February 2015**

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# 1. Introduction

This document assesses the equalities impact of new subject content for GCSE, AS and A levels in religious studies. Impact is assessed by reference to the protected characteristics of pupils or students. Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 requires the Secretary of State, when exercising functions, to have due regard to the need:

- to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act;
- to advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not; and
- to foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

The relevant protected characteristics are disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation. Age is not a relevant protected characteristic in relation to schools.

Pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN), pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), pupils with English as an Additional Language (EAL), and looked after children are not groups covered specifically by the Equality Act (although pupils within those groups may otherwise share a protected characteristic), but have been included in this analysis wherever possible. This is because those groups can be over-represented among low attaining pupils and we are keen to ensure the difficulties they face are not unnecessarily compounded by qualification reforms. They have not been included as a proxy for those with certain protected characteristics.

## 2. Engagement and involvement

A public consultation opened on 7 November 2014 and closed on 29 December 2014. We received 292 responses to questions on equality from a range of stakeholders, including schools, equalities groups and awarding organisations.

The Department has led on developing content for religious studies, using expert drafters and working in close consultation with the Religious Education Council (REC), as well as awarding organisations and Ofqual. As well as formal public consultation the religious studies GCSE and A level content has also undergone an extensive period of informal consultation with subject experts, religious groups, higher education experts including representatives from the following organisations: Al-Khoei Foundation, Association of RE Inspectors, Advisers and Consultants (AREIAC), Association of University Lecturers in RE (AULRE), Avanti Schools Trust, Board of Deputies of British Jews, British Humanist Association (BHA), British Sikh Education Council, Catholic Education Service (CES), Church of England Board of Education, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Culham St Gabriel's Trust, Free Churches Education Committee (FCEC), Hindu Council (UK), Hockerill Educational Foundation, Independent Schools RS Association (ISRSA), ISCKON Educational Services, Muslim Council of Britain, National Association of Standing Advisory Councils on RE, National Association of Teachers of RE (NATRE), National Board of RE Inspectors and Advisers (NBRIA), National Society for Promoting Religious Education ISKCON, National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United Kingdom, Network of Buddhist Organisations, Network of Sikh Organisations, Pagan Federation, Religious Education Council of England and Wales, The Buddhist Society, The Stapleford Centre, The Oxford Foundation, Tony Blair Faith Foundation, TRS-UK. Additionally during the consultation the Department held two open consultation events for practicing RS teachers

### 3. Description of the policy

The government is reforming GCSEs and A levels to ensure that they prepare students better for further and higher education, and employment. GCSEs are being reformed so that they set expectations which match those of the highest performing countries, with rigorous assessment that provides a reliable measure of students' achievement. The new A levels will be linear qualifications that make sure students develop the skills and knowledge needed for progression to undergraduate study.

Reforms to these qualifications are already underway. GCSE subject content in English literature, English language and mathematics was published in November 2013, and the new qualifications will be taught from September 2015. GCSE subject content in ancient languages, geography, history, modern foreign languages and science, which will be taught from September 2016, was published in April 2014. GCSE content in computer science, dance, music and physical education was published January 2015. These new qualifications will be taught from September 2016.

At AS and A level, subject content in art and design, biology, business, chemistry, computer science, economics, English language, English literature, English language and literature, history, physics, psychology, and sociology was published in April 2014. These new qualifications will be taught from September 2015. AS and A level subject content in modern foreign languages, ancient languages, mathematics, further mathematics and geography was published in December 2014 and dance, music and physical education in January 2015. These new qualifications will be taught from September 2016.

GCSE and A level reforms are not being introduced in isolation. Reforms across the education system will benefit all pupils and lead to improvements in teaching and learning so that pupil performance will rise to meet the new higher standard. Many policies, for example the introduction of the Pupil Premium, SEN reforms, and the expansion of the academies programme, have a particular focus on those pupils left behind currently. A summary of DfE's programmes to support teaching for pupils with SEN is set out at Annex A.

## 4. Evidence base

Our analysis of the potential impact of the proposed GCSE, AS and A level content in religious studies has been informed by:

- a review of relevant literature, as referenced throughout the equality impact assessment
- stakeholder workshops with RS teachers and university academics
- meetings with religious and non-religious groups and representatives
- responses to our subject content consultation, including from organisations representing the interests of those with certain protected characteristics. DfE asked the following questions in the consultation on the proposed RS GCSE and A level content under analysis here:
  - Do you think that any of the proposals have the potential to have a disproportionate impact, positive or negative, on specific students, in particular those with 'relevant protected characteristics'? (The relevant protected characteristics are disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.) Please provide evidence to support your response.
  - How could any adverse impact be reduced and how could the subject content of RS GCSE and/or A level be altered to better advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a protected characteristic and those who do not share it? Please provide evidence to support your response.

## 5. Evidence review

The following summary of evidence draws on evidence in relevant literature, responses to the public consultation on the subject content, and views expressed by stakeholders prior to and during public consultation.

In total, 292 respondents to the public consultation answered the question about potential disproportionate impact on students with relevant protected characteristics. 150 stated that it would have a negative impact on those students with one or more protected characteristics. 77 said it would have no impact. 65 respondents were not sure if it would have an impact. In addition there were 1,691 responses to a campaign led by the British Humanist Association (BHA) about the perceived exclusion of non-religious beliefs (in particular, humanism) from the new GCSE and A level specifications.

In the sections which follow, we have considered those concerns which have been raised by respondents to the consultation alongside other issues which we have identified through our own consideration of the relevant issues. In all cases our consideration of the issues has also been informed by our work from February 2014 onwards with stakeholders in developing subject content and the relevant literature.

## 5.1 Religious Studies (GCSE and A level)

### Increased religious content across GCSE and A level

The religious content in the new GCSE and A level has been increased. The new GCSE requires students to have an understanding of the beliefs, teachings and sources of wisdom/authority of two religions, and to study religious texts or engage in a debate about philosophy and ethics which is grounded in their understanding of one or two religions. At A level it will no longer be possible to focus exclusively on philosophy and ethics. Instead students who choose to study this will be required to do so alongside a study of a religion and/or religious texts.

### Impact

23 respondents (8%), almost all of which were teachers or schools, thought the increased religious content and consequent reduced focus on philosophy and ethics would have a negative impact on all students with protected characteristics. This was because it was felt students would be less engaged with religious content, find it less relevant to them (particularly if they were non-religious) and be less prepared for other subject specialisms such as philosophy, medicine or law. Respondents also suggested the study of philosophy and ethics was useful in helping students develop critical thinking skills, the lack of which would disadvantage them in their future studies and everyday life.

12 respondents (4%) specifically thought that the reduction in philosophy and ethics would disadvantage LGBT students who would not be able to explore sexual ethics and would therefore find the subject less attractive. A number of teachers who responded suggested their LGBT students particularly liked topics about sexuality and sexual ethics. Stonewall, by contrast, welcomed the proposal to study two religions, which they noted should 'help students better understand different philosophical and ethical arguments and their impact and influence in the modern world'.

Three respondents commented that the marginalisation of ethical studies would leave key issues of prejudice and discrimination unchallenged as ethical issues related to gender, pregnancy and maternity, sexuality, race, religion, disability and socio-economic status would not be explored. Although one respondent noted that 'as the content includes consideration of issues such as diversity, gender, sexuality, race, social justice as long as they are properly taught the proposals should have a positive impact of students understanding of equality and diversity.'

While statistics show that philosophy and ethics are certainly the most popular areas of study at both GCSE and particularly at A level, many current Religious Studies specifications have been roundly criticised by Ofqual, Ofsted and religious groups for the way in which they reward students for engaging in topical debates with virtually no understanding of religious teachings, beliefs or texts. Research shows that exclusive



focus on these areas has led to students having a distorted, simplistic and superficial understanding of religion and religious beliefs and undermines the integrity of the subject as a whole.<sup>1</sup> HEI representatives the Department spoke to strongly felt engagement with philosophy and ethics needed to be grounded in an understanding of religion to be properly explored and understood. Superficial understanding would neither prepare students for higher education nor enable them to engage or properly understand the views of others. Students will still be able to spend up to half of their time engaging with philosophical and ethical issues at GCSE. At A level this has been increased from 50% to 66% to ensure philosophical and ethical arguments and scholars can be studied in depth. Furthermore there is nothing to prevent the study of issues related to sexuality, gender, race etc which are included in the various optional areas of study. The key change is that students will need to equally focus on developing their understanding of religion to ensure greater holistic understanding. At A level students will also be required to critically analyse and evaluate ideas and concepts whatever route they take.

A small number of respondents also suggested that students from a religious background, particularly Christians or others where that religion was the focus of study, would be disproportionately advantaged as they would have prior knowledge of that religion and a greater understanding of religion in general. However, this was counterbalanced by respondents who felt there is nothing in the proposed content which is inaccessible to persons of no religious belief. The Department considered whether any students would be unfairly advantaged and acknowledges that, as in any subject, prior knowledge of an area of study is useful, but, as students will only ever be judged in the exam based on the content they have learned throughout the course it was felt that anyone, regardless of their background, could succeed to the same extent at the point of assessment, with or without prior knowledge or practice of the faith. Therefore it was felt there would be no particular disadvantage in relation to those with a protected characteristic.

## Conclusion

There is general agreement that the current RS criteria are not fit for purpose and do not provide the necessary basis for the development of demanding qualifications or adequate progression. The revised content will better prepare students for further and higher education and the employment market, ensuring students develop breadth and depth of understanding, and critical thinking skills valued by HE. These reforms will therefore benefit all students.

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<sup>1</sup> *A Religious Education Otherwise? An examination and proposed interruption of current British practice, Anna Strhan, Journal of Philosophy of Education, Vol 44, No1, 2010*

## Non-religious beliefs

### Impact

The main concern raised by those who thought there would be a negative impact was the perceived omission of non-religious worldviews including humanism and atheism. This was raised by 1,691 respondents to a campaign led by the British Humanist Association (BHA) and 19% of those who responded to the public consultation (55 of 292 respondents). These respondents were concerned that without more specific references to non-religious beliefs there would potentially be a negative impact on all those with protected characteristics, but particularly students with non-religious beliefs. A number of respondents cited a YouGov poll which showed the majority of 17-18 year olds described themselves as having no religion. It was felt that these students would be disengaged as the content is not relevant for them and would potentially feel excluded as non-religious beliefs cannot be explored in the same depth as religious ones. Some of these respondents therefore felt the content was discriminatory against those with non-religious beliefs. One respondent said ‘those students with Humanist/Atheist viewpoints will feel excluded and their views not considered as equal. Another commented those of secular belief ‘will not identify with this material.’

A majority of those who were concerned about the lack of scope to study non-religious worldviews called for students to be able to systematically study a non-religious worldview such as humanism and atheism. However, a small minority did not support this. The National Secular Society, while supporting the inclusion of non-religious worldviews, commented it would not be appropriate to seek to ‘force Humanism into the mould of a religion by including the study of Humanist “practices”, texts, sources of “authority” etc.’

Four respondents suggested that an inability to study non-religious worldviews would have a negative impact on LGBT and female students because ‘humanism/ atheism is the only faith system that is non homophobic’ and ‘that upholds equal rights for women’. This view was not shared by Stonewall, who as noted above ‘welcomed the proposal to study two religions’ and did not suggest an inability to study humanism would have a negative effect on LGBT students. A small number of respondents also felt an inability to study non-religious world views would have an impact on all students with protected characteristics as all students would be unable to learn about non-religious worldviews in depth and would thereby be less well rounded students.

The revised GCSE and A level content will be inclusive of a wide range of religious beliefs as well as non-religious beliefs. At GCSE all students will be expected to learn about non-religious beliefs as part of the main, mandatory content, which is a significant improvement from the current RS GCSE content criteria which does not require this. There will also be scope for students to understand beliefs that are divergent to the principal religions through the study of different philosophical and ethical themes, which can form up to 50% of the content studied, including a specific study of the dialogue

between religions and non-religious beliefs. Similarly, at A level the content will allow students to explore non-religious beliefs in depth through philosophy and ethics. Indeed this scope to explore a diverse range of beliefs was explicitly noted by one respondent who stated 'there are appropriate opportunities throughout the proposed GCSE and A level to consider the views of a wide range of cultures, ethnicities, belief systems, non-religious worldviews and so on.'

## **Conclusion**

We carefully considered responses urging that the qualification should give students greater opportunity to study non-religious beliefs. Students already have the opportunity to learn about non-religious worldviews alongside religious beliefs, such as humanism and atheism, in the content. However, as these are qualifications in Religious Studies, it is right that the content primarily focuses on developing students' understanding of different religious beliefs. This is to stop current practice whereby students are rewarded for engaging in topical debates with virtually no understanding of religious teachings, beliefs or texts. A simultaneous focus on humanism would necessarily detract from an in-depth treatment of religion and thus on the overall rigour and standard of the RS qualification. Introducing a systematic study of humanism at GCSE and A level could potentially lead to the development of qualifications that are predominantly, or even solely, focused on the study of humanism at the expense of religion. Thus, whilst the criteria provide for the study of non-religious world views, it is intended that this should not form the focus for the majority of study.

## **5.2 GCSE Religious Studies**

### **Increased demand across all GCSEs**

The government consulted on reforming key stage 4 qualifications in 2012 and published its response and its equality impact assessment on decisions early in 2013. The response stated that: reformed GCSEs should remain universal qualifications, accessible, with good teaching, to the same proportion of students as currently sit GCSE exams at the end of key stage 4. It also stated that at the level of what is widely considered to be a pass (currently indicated by a grade C) there must be an increase in demand to reflect that of high-performing jurisdictions. At the top end, the new qualification should prepare students properly to progress to A levels or other study. This should be achieved through more challenging subject content and more rigorous assessment structures. GCSE subject content was developed in the context of these decisions.

### **Impact**

32 stakeholders who responded to the equalities questions in the consultation raised concerns that increasing the demand of subject content would impact on less able

students, particular those with SEN or EAL. The most common specific concern was that those with low literacy skills would struggle with the more theoretical content and find it difficult to grasp religious concepts and terminology. This was also raised by teachers at a DfE convened consultation event. The Department recognises that foreign language terminology may be particularly challenging for less able students and therefore where possible we have amended foreign terms to English to mitigate potentially disadvantaging those with dyslexia or SEN students.

Whilst the less able are not a group specifically covered under the Equality Act, there are some students with specific characteristics which may impact on their ability in some subjects, including EAL/ESL students, dyslexic students, those with SEN and those with certain disabilities.

In relation to general concerns about the increased demand of RS GCSE, DfE considered the evidence it had gathered during its September 2012 consultation on reforming key stage 4 qualifications, which indicated that a culture of high expectations is one of several consistent factors essential to high student attainment and good progress. The evidence suggested that, with the right teaching, all students will benefit from those higher expectations.

A discussion of this evidence can be found in the equality impact assessment we published in 2013.<sup>2</sup> Our review of research indicated that the following factors are shown to have the greatest impact on preventing and responding to low student attainment:

- effective teaching
- a culture of high expectations
- understanding and meeting the needs of all students
- engaging and relevant curriculum
- initial assessments and on-going monitoring
- effective transition
- appropriate infrastructure and
- accountability at all levels

Andreas Schleicher, Deputy Director for Education and Skills at the OECD, has said that a common factor in high-performing systems is “the belief in the possibilities for all

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<sup>2</sup> [GCSE Reform Equality Analysis, DfE, March 2013](#)

children to achieve” and there is evidence that suggests that, with the right teaching, students will benefit from those higher expectations<sup>3</sup>.

The intention of reform is to ensure parity of quality and challenge across all subjects. We wish to ensure that students studying GCSEs or A levels in religious studies will achieve a qualification whose value is recognised alongside other qualifications and which prepares them for further study or employment. The revised content is a significant improvement from the current RS GCSE because of the increase in rigorous academic knowledge and the introduction of much needed clarity about the religious knowledge that all students should acquire.

## Conclusion

Our review of evidence indicates that a culture of high expectations is one of several consistent factors essential to high student attainment and good progress for all students, and particularly in responding to low student attainment. For this reason GCSE reform is specifically intended to raise the demand for all students; both more and less academically able. We feel the increased challenge is justified by the benefits we expect it to deliver in the form of higher attainment and better preparation for further study or employment.

We acknowledge that the increased demand may have a greater impact on some students who have characteristics which can make aspects of academic learning more challenging, for example pupils with dyslexia or English as an additional language. However, we believe appropriate provision can, and should, be made to mitigate and support pupils with any additional challenge, arising from increased demand, in order to enable those pupils to benefit from greater equality of opportunity that will come from attaining higher standards. These provisions may take a number of forms including additional teacher support, extra time in exams and appropriate lesson differentiation, for example.

Overall, DfE believes that all pupils will benefit from the higher aspirations, attainment outcomes and strong reputation expected of reformed GCSEs. It is of no benefit to any student to pass a qualification that does not provide evidence – for employers or others – of their competence in key areas that are essential to progression. The reformed GCSEs will therefore advance equality of opportunity by serving to remove disadvantages for all.

## The requirement to study two religions

The content sets the expectation that all students will spend at least half of their time studying two religions. Students will also have the option to spend up to three-quarters of their time studying one religion and the remaining quarter studying a second religion.

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<sup>3</sup> [Ofsted \(2009\) Twelve outstanding secondary schools: Excelling against the odds](#), OECD (2010) PISA 2009 Results: [What Makes A School Successful](#)

Schools will also have the freedom to decide which two religions are most appropriate for their students to study from: Christianity, Catholic Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Hinduism.

## Impact

Eight respondents (3%) expressed concerns that the requirement to study two religions will have a negative impact on faith communities and could potentially discriminate against students from certain religious groups particularly those from an Orthodox Jewish background who may not feel comfortable focusing on the spiritual and practical aspects of another religion. One respondent said 'The nature of the qualification means that it will not be open to some students who for religious reasons cannot study the religious teachings of faiths other than their own.'

Other respondents noted that students who wanted to explore their own religion to high academic standards and in sufficient depth would not be able to and one even felt 'students may be put off their own faith tradition because it is conveyed too simplistically'.

There is a strong educational rationale for the proposal to study two religions. In the same way that a well-educated GCSE history student would be expected to learn about more than one period or geographical context of history, it is important that well-educated GCSE Religious Studies students should be able to demonstrate that they understand more than one religion. One university academic who responded to the consultation noted 'the general principal of including more than one approach and more than one religion is a good one. There may be a minority of students who wish to avoid studying any religion other than their own. However, the aims and purposes of study of religions require broader content and the use of methods from a variety of disciplines. Of course, students should be allowed to study their own religion as part of the examination programme, but they should do more than this in a religious studies programme.'

Students can still focus upon one religion for up to three quarters of the qualification and in doing so they can continue to predominantly learn about the beliefs and teachings of that religion. This therefore represents a moderate as opposed to fundamental shift on the current position and indeed this was noted by nine respondents.

The purpose of GCSE Religious Studies is not to focus exclusively on a particular faith, but to teach pupils to understand the role of religion and faith in life and society. Teaching faiths is the role of religious institution and pupils who want to study their own religion in greater depth have a number of opportunities to do so, either through their religious leaders and community or through further and deeper academic study in the future. In terms of the GCSE, the value of comparative education has been asserted in many research papers and books.<sup>4</sup> This is reflected in the wealth of comparative

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<sup>4</sup> E.g. Arnove, Torres and Franz, 2013, Comparative Education: The dialect of the global and the local, Roman and Littlefield.

programmes of study offered by universities. Understanding an issue, concept or event in comparison can help pupils to understand the character and features of that issue, concept or event with greater clarity. Laying the foundations for comparative study at RS GCSE also helps to prepare all students for comparative study at a higher level should they choose and will therefore advance equality of opportunity by serving to remove disadvantages for all.

Some faith groups expressed concern that the proposed changes would breach faith schools' trust deeds which allow them freedom to determine their schools' religious education. In terms of statutory curriculum provision, the latter is unaffected. The subject content for GCSE and A level Religious Studies does not prevent faith schools from teaching their own religious curriculum (either as part of key stage 4 or beyond). GCSE Religious Studies is not compulsory, but in a diverse, multi-faith society, DfE would encourage pupils to understand and learn about other faiths where possible in order to foster greater tolerance and community cohesion. These values help to prevent discrimination or prejudice against those with a protected characteristic. Indeed a number of respondents thought the requirement to study two religions would have positive impact promoting greater understanding and tolerance between those of different religious belief and none, thus serving to foster good relations.

There were also a small number of respondents who thought that the requirement to limit the GCSE to the study of two religions would be disengaging and/or discriminatory for those students whose faith is not taught, and might create difficulties for schools with a majority of students from a range of faiths in deciding what religions are studied. Furthermore, one respondent stated it could have 'a negative effect on community cohesion' as students will be less informed about a wide range of religions.

The Department acknowledges that limiting the number of religions studied to two may mean some students at certain schools will not have the opportunity to study their own religion in depth at GCSE. However, the study of more than two religions will not allow students to explore any religion in sufficient depth or in an academically rigorous way to support progression to A level or be appropriately demanding. The subject content offered by GCSE and A level Religious Studies should be seen in the broader context of the statutory basic curriculum (including the national curriculum) across pupils' complete school years, through which schools will have other opportunities to teach a wide range of religious and non-religious world views.

The foundations for tolerance and community cohesion will be established across pupils' whole school lives. They are embedded in an openness to learning about other religions and an ability to understand and compare the role that faith plays in life and society. GCSE and A level Religious Studies will equip pupils with these skills, which they can then apply to any other religions they encounter in their lives.

## Conclusion

The new GCSE will not fundamentally change the way in which faith schools teach their own religion or their right to set their own religious education curriculum. It also does not have to determine the whole of the teaching at key stage 4 in faith schools. This should be seen as an additional and complementary option, in that it serves to supplement and build on RE curriculum provision in accordance with a faith school's trust deeds.

DfE concludes that the study of two religions is therefore the right approach for GCSE as it will ensure students acquire both breadth and depth of knowledge, providing them with a broad and rigorous study of religions, as well as the basic skills to further their study or understanding of other religions in the future thereby advancing equality of opportunity for all. We do not feel this is discriminatory to any particular faith group, but rather embeds the foundations for tolerance and understanding to help promote equality for members of all religious groups .

## Focus of study on specified world religions

The main content now includes annexes for specifying the knowledge and understanding expected of students studying a particular religion. Students will be required to focus their study two religions, from a choice of: Christianity, Catholic Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism; the study of which are all currently offered by Awarding Organisations.

## Impact

Six respondents (2%) raised concern that students could only study a limited choice of religions and that other religions, such as Baha'i, Jainism and Zoroastrianism, were excluded. It was felt that this would disadvantage students who would not be able to explore their own religion in depth and could send a negative message about the importance and value of these religions.

The Department acknowledges that not all students will be able to study their own religion either because it isn't available as an option of study or because it isn't chosen for study by the school. There isn't scope for the RS GCSE to include content relating to every single religion because of the small numbers of students who would be entered for some religions. The 2011 Census showed that the most common religious affiliations in England and Wales are Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Judaism and Buddhism.<sup>5</sup> The seven religions offered as options for GCSE Religious Studies cover all of these most common religions in England and Wales, ensuring that there are an opportunities for the vast majority of the population's faiths to be studied.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census/key-statistics-for-local-authorities-in-england-and-wales/rpt-religion.html#tab-Changing-picture-of-religious-affiliation-over-last-decade>



There is, however, scope to study other religions in the content and through schools' key stage 4 RE curriculum, as well as other areas of the curriculum. GCSE Religious Studies currently states that all students are required to "demonstrate knowledge and understanding that religious traditions in Great Britain are diverse and include the following religions: Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism; Sikhism, as well as other religious and non-religious beliefs". This requires students to demonstrate understanding of the existence of other religions and alternative views, even if they are not studied in such depth.

## **Conclusion**

DfE concludes that choice of options covers all of the main religions in England and Wales and is as comprehensive as is practically possible within the constraints of the GCSE qualification. The subject content helps to mitigate any adverse impact on pupils of any other faiths or world views by ensuring that students are at least aware of these alternative faiths and views. DfE would expect Religious Studies teachers to be aware of the broad range of faiths in their classrooms and schools and take advantage of opportunities to involve members of any faiths not covered in the GCSE specification in sharing knowledge and perspectives of their faiths. Teachers play a vital role in fostering attitudes of inclusiveness and tolerance across different faiths.

DfE believes that the openness and understanding encouraged by the study of different faiths in GCSE and A level Religious Studies should help to foster a general sense of tolerance and inclusivity that will promote equality for all those with a protected characteristic.

## **5.3 AS and A level Religious Studies**

### **Critical engagement with religious texts**

As part of the revised criteria, students will have the option to develop their knowledge and understanding of a religion through an in depth study of religious texts. As part of this students will be required to understand and examine the content and literary features of the chosen text(s) and related critical scholarship.

### **Impact**

11 respondents (4%) raised concerns that the requirement to study religious texts in a critical manner would disproportionately affect students with religious beliefs, particularly Muslims, Hindus and evangelical Christians. Respondents felt that some students would not be able to engage in the textual studies paper for religious reasons and students that did explore the criticism of their texts could have their faith undermined.

One respondent said, “Colleagues who are themselves Muslims or who teach in schools with high percentages of Muslims and also some Hindus have stated that many of their pupils would not be allowed to study the Qur'an in such a critical manner. Also some Hindus have similar concerns about the historical critical study of their sacred texts. In effect therefore, under the present reforms, there would be no choice of papers for them.” Another expressed concern that religious students who study their own texts will be “bombarded with every form of criticism under the sun which may shake their faith.” However eight respondents, including two from higher education, thought a critical engagement with religious texts would better prepare students for progression to university.

Whilst DfE acknowledges that some religious students may not wish to pursue a critical study of their own religious texts, this does not prevent them from gaining a qualification in RS as they can either study the texts of another religion or study their own religion/ another religion alongside philosophy and ethics. Furthermore the criteria does not limit the study of texts to primary religious texts such as Bible or the Qur'an but allows for students to study a wide variety of religious works that are significant to a particular religion.

A small number of respondents (two) also suggested that the wording of the section on textual studies was unhelpful and could inadvertently prevent students from studying certain texts, for example not all religious texts are translated and are instead read in their original language, therefore there are no issues to do with the translation of these texts for students to explore. DfE has considered the wording to ensure it does not inadvertently exclude certain texts and made some changes. Regarding the above example it was felt that as a text may be translated for individuals outside a particular religious tradition to read it was still a relevant issue.

## Conclusion

The study of religious texts is not meant to undermine anyone's faith or religion or place value judgements on texts, but is meant to encourage an academic analysis of content, context, interpretation and scholarship. This will better enable students to progress to these types of courses at university and help students develop the critical thinking skills which the majority of universities want students to demonstrate<sup>6</sup>. DfE therefore concludes that the nature of the textual studies is justifiable in the context of our rationale for introducing reforms that will better prepare students for higher education.

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<sup>6</sup> “What are the impacts of qualifications for 16 to 19 year olds on higher education? A survey of 633 university lecturers” Cambridge Assessment (April 2012): <http://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/images/116010-cambridge-assessment-he-research-survey-of-lecturers-executive-summary.pdf>



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