

Developing New GCSEs, A levels and AS Qualifications for First Teaching in 2016 – Part 3: Religious studies

Response from the British Humanist Association



5 January 2014

About the BHA

The British Humanist Association is the national charity working on behalf of non-religious people who seek to live ethical and fulfilling lives on the basis of reason and humanity. We promote Humanism, support and represent the non-religious, and promote a secular state and equal treatment in law and policy of everyone, regardless of religion or belief. Founded in 1896, we have around 30,000 members and supporters, and over 70 local and special interest affiliates.

The BHA has a long history of work in education, children's rights and equality, with expertise in the 'religion or belief' strand. We have been involved in policy development around RE for over 60 years. We are a founding member of the RE Council for England and Wales, and our Chief Executive has been a Trustee of that organisation since 2006. In recent years, the BHA has also been on the Department for Education steering groups which developed the 2004 non-statutory national framework (to which we gave our named support); the non-statutory programmes of study and attainment targets for key stages 3-5 in 2007; the abandoned level descriptions and key stage 1/2 non-statutory programme of learning in 2010; and the 2010 non-statutory guidance. We were also on the steering group of the 2013 RE Subject Review. Andrew Copson has also sat on similar bodies with Ofsted, Ofqual and the QCDA. We helped to develop Ofsted's guidance on spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

We provide materials and advice to parents, governors, students, teachers and academics, for example through <http://www.humanismforschools.org.uk/> and our school volunteers programme. We have made detailed responses to all recent reviews of the school curriculum, and submit memoranda of evidence to parliamentary select committees on a range of education issues.

Our support for RE is also reflected by the fact that many standing advisory councils on RE (SACREs) and agreed syllabus conferences (ASCs) have had humanist representatives (in some cases for decades), including as Chairs and Vice-Chairs. Recent years have seen a rise in the number of humanists who are on SACREs, as documents such as the 2010 RE guidance and 2013 national framework have referred to teaching about non-religious beliefs such as Humanism. As a result almost six out of seven English SACREs now have a humanist representative, the vast majority of locally agreed syllabuses include Humanism to some extent, and many do so to a high level of depth.

Summary

We strongly disagree with the proposed GCSE, AS and A level assessment objectives, which might in some ways be more rigorous but use language that restricts assessment to religions and excludes non-religious worldviews. This is not the case with the current assessment objectives, nor does it accurately reflect the inclusive nature of the subject content (which is nowhere near as inclusive as we would like but is much more inclusive than the assessment objectives).

We set out reasons why we think it is important that religious studies is inclusive of non-religious worldviews, and are submitting our response to the Department for Education's consultation on subject content alongside this response. However, regardless of the decisions reached as a result of that consultation, we believe that Ofqual's proposals are inconsistent with what is already being proposed by the DfE. The first subject aim at GCSE level is proposed to be '*develop students' knowledge and understanding of religions and non-religious beliefs*', and ministers have repeatedly assured us that students 'will also be expected to learn about non-religious beliefs as part of the qualification' – something that the current assessment objectives do not allow for.

We also believe that Ofqual needs to be mindful of the equality implications, regardless of what decisions the DfE makes.

We have suggested alternative wording for the assessment objectives.

Our details

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Would you like us to treat your response as confidential? (x) No

Is this a personal response or an official response on behalf of your organisation? (x) Official response

If you ticked 'Official response from an organisation/group', please respond accordingly:

Type of responding organisation (x) Other representative or interest group

Type of representative group or interest group (x) Equality organisation or group

Nation (x) England (x) Wales

How did you find out about this consultation? Our website (x)

May we contact you for further information? (x) Yes

Questions

Question 1: To what extent do you agree or disagree that GCSEs in religious studies should be assessed entirely by exam?

No comment. This question is outside of our remit.

Question 2: To what extent do you agree or disagree that GCSEs in religious studies should not be tiered?

No comment. This question is outside of our remit.

Question 3: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed assessment objectives are appropriate for GCSEs in religious studies?

We strongly disagree with the proposed assessment objectives, which might in some ways be more rigorous but use language that restricts assessment to religions and excludes non-religious worldviews. This is not the case with the current assessment objectives, nor does it accurately reflect the inclusive nature of the subject content (which is nowhere near as inclusive as we would like but is much more inclusive than the assessment objectives).

Why non-religious worldviews should be included

We have provided, as annex 1 to this submission, a three page briefing setting out the reasons why non-religious worldviews such as Humanism are included in Religious Education, but in summary:

- All the usual contemporary justifications for the subject of RE in the school curriculum – its contribution to social cohesion and mutual understanding, its presentation of a range of answers to questions of meaning and purpose, and its role in the search for personal identity and values – can best be served by including humanist perspectives and non-religious students.
- Humanism has long been part of Religious Education and the Religious Education Council has long supported this inclusion. Successive Government documents have recommended the inclusion of non-religious worldviews such as Humanism, and the 2013 Curriculum Framework is as inclusive of teaching about non-religious worldviews as it is of teaching about religions.¹ This is also reflected in locally agreed syllabuses, the vast majority of which include the teaching of Humanism with many having extensive modules dedicated to its study. The REC's vision is that 'Every young person experiences a personally inspiring and academically rigorous education in religious and non-religious worldviews'.²
- It is vital that Religious Education remains relevant to young people and with surveys suggesting that between 31% and 69% are not religious,³ this means including non-religious worldviews. RE struggles to engage these young people when their beliefs are excluded.
- International agreements all recommend the inclusion of non-religious worldviews alongside religious beliefs and in fact the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief specifically recommended it in her last report on the UK.⁴

¹ *A Curriculum Framework for Religious Education in England*, The Religious Education Council of England and Wales, 23 October 2014: <http://resubjectreview.recouncil.org.uk/re-review-report>
See also 'New RE subject framework makes clear: schools should put non-religious beliefs on equal footing', British Humanist Association, 23 October 2014: <https://humanism.org.uk/2013/10/23/new-re-subject-framework-makes-clear-schools-put-non-religious-beliefs-equal-footing/>

² *Aims, Vision and Values*, Religious Education Council for England and Wales: <http://religionseducationcouncil.org.uk/about/how-the-rec-works/aims-vision-and-values>

³ The 2011 Census found 31% of 0-19 year olds having no religion, with a further 8% not stated. The 2013 *British Social Attitudes Survey* records 69% of 15-24 year olds as not belonging to any religion: see the British Social Attitudes Information System, with cross-tabs by age: http://www.britsocat.com/BodyTwoCol_rpt.aspx?control=CCESDMarginals&MapID=RELIGION&SeriesID=12

⁴ A/HRC/7/10/Add.3 *Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Asma Jahangir into the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (June 2007)*, United Nations Human

- The BHA has long played an active part in the RE Council including at the Board level and has been involved in the steering groups of all relevant government and quango reviews for the last decade. Almost six out of seven English SACREs now include a humanist.
- The Independent School Standards require that independent schools, Academies and Free Schools ‘actively promote the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect, and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs.’⁵ Until November 2014, departmental advice recommended that schools meet this standard by using ‘teaching resources from a wide variety of sources to help pupils understand a range of faiths, and beliefs such as atheism and humanism.’⁶

In our response to the Department for Education’s consultation on subject content (which we append to our response to this consultation), we have argued for more inclusive language to be adopted throughout, for it to be possible to systematically study a non-religious worldview, and for an annex on Humanism to be added to sit alongside the seven existing annexes. As set out in that response, there is widespread support for this position, including from the RE Council for England and Wales, the National Association of Teachers of RE, and over 100 philosophers, RE professors, consultants, advisors and teachers, and children’s authors, who have signed a joint letter on this matter.

But regardless of the decisions reached as a result of that consultation, we believe that Ofqual’s proposals are inconsistent with what is already being proposed by the DfE. The first subject aim at GCSE level is proposed to be ‘*develop students’ knowledge and understanding of religions and non-religious beliefs*’, and as Nick Gibb MP wrote to BHA Chief Executive Andrew Copson:

In the same way that students will be expected to develop an understanding of the diverse range of religions represented in Great Britain, they will also be expected to learn about non-religious beliefs as part of the qualification. There will also be scope for students to understand beliefs that are divergent from the principal religions. This will be encouraged either through a specific study of the dialogue between religious and non-religious beliefs or through the consideration of different philosophical and ethical themes... there are clear and explicit statements that include non-religious beliefs within the main, compulsory content and the subject aims.⁷

Yet AO1 states, ‘*Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of religion*’, and AO2 states ‘*Analyse and evaluate questions and issues related to religious beliefs... using and applying knowledge and understanding of religions*’. The assessment objectives are more exclusive than the subject content. The only reference to non-religious worldviews might be the reference to ‘religions and beliefs’ in AO1, but this is ambiguous in its language (it could be taken to mean religious beliefs) and at best, can only be said to be introducing non-religious worldviews by way of comparison with religions.

Rights Council, (amongst others) paragraph 69, 7 February 2008:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/FreedomReligion/Pages/Visits.aspx>

⁵ The Education (Independent School Standards) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2014:

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2014/2374/made>

⁶ *Improving the spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development of pupils Departmental advice for independent schools, academies and free schools*, Department for Education, November 2013: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-the-sm-sc-development-of-pupils-in-independent-schools> A recent revision to this advice deleted ‘and beliefs such as atheism and humanism’; we are currently seeking clarification from the Department as to why this change was made.

⁷ Letter from Nick Gibb MP to Andrew Copson dated 22 October 2014

We also believe that Ofqual needs to be mindful of its legal obligations, particularly the equality implications that we will come onto in questions 12-13, where it would presumably want to conduct its own assessment of its proposals, regardless of what decisions the DfE makes.

What we would suggest, in practice

We would suggest the following changes (with underlined text being introduced and ~~struck through text~~ being omitted):

Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of religion and non-religious worldviews, including:

- *similarities and differences between and within religions and beliefs non-religious worldviews;*
- *the nature of religious and non-religious beliefs and teachings and their impact on individuals, communities and societies.*

Analyse and evaluate questions and issues related to religious and non-religious beliefs, values and teachings:

- *using and applying knowledge and understanding of religions and non-religious worldviews;*
- *constructing well-informed and balanced arguments.*

Our intention here is not to make the systematic study of non-religious worldviews compulsory (something that we would want to see over key stages 1-5 inclusive but not at key stages 4-5 specifically) but to reflect the fact that some degree of study is compulsory as a result of, for instance, the subject aim quoted above, while allowing systematic study of non-religious worldviews to be assessed. However, if Ofqual is not convinced that these changes act in the way that we intend, then alternative possibilities include to omit the word 'religion/s/ous' where possible, or to say something like 'in relation to the specification content'.

Question 4: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed weightings of the assessment objectives are appropriate for GCSEs in religious studies?

No comment.

Question 5: Do you have any further comments relating to the assessment of this subject?

None, beyond the equality implications that we outline in our response to questions 12-13.

Question 6: To what extent do you agree or disagree that AS qualifications in religious studies should be assessed entirely by exam?

No comment. This question is outside of our remit.

Question 7: To what extent do you agree or disagree that A levels in religious studies should be assessed entirely by exam?

No comment. This question is outside of our remit.

Question 8: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed assessment objectives are appropriate for A levels and AS qualifications in religious studies?

We strongly disagree with the proposed assessment objectives, which might in some ways be more rigorous but use language that restricts assessment to religions and excludes non-religious worldviews. This is not the case with the current assessment objectives.

We have set out in our response to question 3 the reasons why we think that non-religious worldviews and Humanism are widely included in RE and so must be in RS as well. We will also return to the equality implications in questions 12-13.

For now we confine ourselves to outlining what we want to see change, in practice:

Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of religion and non-religious worldviews, including:

- *religious and non-religious belief, thought and relevant issues;*
- *explaining the nature of religious and non-religious beliefs and teachings and their impact on individuals, communities and societies;*
- *making connections across different aspects of the study of religion and ~~belief~~non-religious worldviews*

Analyse and critically evaluate questions and issues related to religious and non-religious beliefs, values and teachings:

- *applying knowledge and understanding of religion and non-religious worldviews;*
- *using evidence and reasoning;*
- *constructing well-informed and balanced arguments.*

Once again, our intention here is not to make the systematic study of non-religious worldviews compulsory (something that we would want to see over key stages 1-5 inclusive but not at key stages 4-5 specifically) but to reflect the fact that some degree of study is compulsory as a result of, for instance, the subject aims, while allowing systematic study of non-religious worldviews to be assessed. However, if Ofqual is not convinced that these changes act in the way that we intend, then alternative possibilities include to omit the word 'religion/s/ous' where possible, or to say something like 'in relation to the specification content'.

Question 9: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed weightings of the assessment objectives are appropriate for AS qualifications in religious studies?

No comment.

Question 10: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed weightings of the assessment objectives are appropriate for A levels in religious studies?

No comment.

Question 11: Do you have any further comments relating to the assessment of this subject?

None, beyond the equality implications that we outline in our response to questions 12-13.

Question 12: We have not identified any ways in which the proposed requirements for reformed GCSEs, A levels and AS qualifications in religious studies would impact

(positively or negatively) on persons who share a protected characteristic. Are there any potential impacts we have not identified? If so, what are they?

These proposals would have a significant negative impact on non-religious individuals. As we set out in our response to question 3 and to the DfE's consultation, it is hard to see how RE and RS can remain relevant to young people today, particularly to those with no religion, if non-religious beliefs cannot be systematically studied. These issues are at their most acute with respect to the assessment objectives, which are even less inclusive than the subject content, and a significant step back from what is there currently, which is entirely inclusive.

Question 13: Are there any additional steps we could take to mitigate any negative impact resulting from these proposals on persons who share a protected characteristic? If so, please comment on the additional steps we could take to mitigate negative impacts.

The changes to the AOs that we have suggested in questions 3 and 8 would rectify the situation.

Question 14: Have you any other comments on the impacts of the proposals on persons who share a protected characteristic?

None.