



Submission to the Education Select Committee Inquiry into the English Baccalaureate 10th March 2011

Submission from the British Humanist Association (BHA)

1. About us

1.1 The British Humanist Association (BHA) 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.

1.2 We have been involved in the curriculum subject of Religious Education (RE) for over forty years. There are Humanist representatives in some sort of relationship with 88 standing advisory committees for religious education (SACREs) in England and Wales and the BHA itself was involved in work towards the national framework for RE in 2004 and government guidance on RE in 2010.

2. Summary

2.1 We note that one of the aspects of the English Baccalaureate currently being discussed is the place of Religious Studies (RS) within it.

2.2 While we champion the importance of good quality education about religious and non-religious beliefs and values in all schools, we note that, in its present form, RE is unfit for purpose in many schools. Arguments made in support of its inclusion in the EBacc are weakened by its patchy quality across schools, its restrictive nature at GCSE, and the ability of many schools with a religious character to prescribe confessional syllabuses.

2.3 We urge the Committee, if it considers recommending that RS be included in the EBacc, to recommend also that RE become a nationally determined subject rather than a local one, and be reviewed along with other curriculum subjects as part of the government's review of the whole curriculum.

3. What are the current arrangements for Religious Education?

3.1 Under the Education Reform Act 1988, Religious Education (RE) is not part of the National Curriculum¹ but is determined at local authority level for schools under their control. The local syllabuses produced are variable in their scope and quality.

3.2 The governors of religious academies and voluntary aided schools can set their own RE syllabus and may use the time to provide confessional instruction in the particular religion of the school.

3.3 GCSE level syllabuses are set and examined by the relevant examination board in the same way as other subjects. Legally a GCSE syllabus 'must reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian, while taking account of the teachings and practices of the other principal religious traditions represented in Great Britain.' These traditions are assumed to be Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism.

3.4 However, GCSE syllabuses are offered that allow schools to teach predominantly about one religious perspective and for young people to pass the assessment components of the GCSE without fully engaging with the teachings and practices of other religions or with non-religious beliefs.²

4. RE should have a clear place in the school curriculum...

4.1 Good quality RE can help young people to understand the views and opinions of people whose beliefs and values differ from their own.

4.2 Good quality RE can assist young people in developing informed personal responses to big philosophical questions and ethical dilemmas.

4.3 The subject can develop skills of critical reasoning and debate, preparing young people to engage with and come to compromise with those whose views do not represent their own.

4.4 Good RE has the potential to support other subjects such as History, English Literature, Art, Music, and Geography.

5. ...but the current statutory arrangements for RE should be reviewed and reformed before RS is included in the EBacc

5.1 **RE provision in community schools is patchy:** In 2010 RE was rated as 'inadequate' in one in five secondary schools in England and Ofsted found 'very significant variability in the quantity and quality of support for RE provided to schools by local authorities.'³ Ofsted chief inspector Christine Gilbert said, 'This report highlights two things - first the need for better support and training for teachers and, secondly, the need for a reconsideration of the local arrangements for

¹ It is part of the basic curriculum which comprises RE and the National Curriculum

² For example see OCR, Religious Studies A (World Religions)

http://www.ocr.org.uk/download/kd/ocr_9998_kd_gcse_spec.pdf

³ Ofsted, *Transforming Religious Education* (2010)

the oversight of RE, so schools can have a clear framework to use which helps them secure better student achievement in the subject.'

5.2 'RE' in many 'faith' schools does not have to be objective and may comprise confessional instruction: The current provisions allow many state schools with a religious character to meet their statutory requirement to provide religious education by providing confessional instruction in the particular religion of the school. For example the most recent guidance on RE in Catholic schools in England, states that 'Religious education given to children and young people in Catholic schools must always... contribute to their education in and to the Catholic faith.'⁴

5.4 This opt-out option for 'faith' schools results in many students currently not having access to religious education that explores a wide range of views and opinions, including of people whose beliefs and values differ from their own. This negates one of the key arguments in support of the subject – the promotion of community cohesion.

5.5 Religious education that presents one worldview does not allow young people to develop critical thinking skills to evaluate the views and evidence they are presented with and form their own conclusions. In addition, it is confusing for young people to have conflicting information presented as absolute fact in both religious education and other lessons, such as science.

5.6 Religious education as currently taught in some 'faith' schools can be exclusionary and offensive to those of a different belief from the school. For example, Church of England guidance on the teaching of RE in schools states that 'there is a divide between those with a religious faith and those for whom religion is meaningless' and that, 'the secular assumption that there is no reality beyond the physical world is ultimately sterile.'⁵ In 2004 a Department of Education (then DfES) survey found that 65% of 12-19 year olds described themselves as non-religious. Many of these students will attend state schools with a religious character. Religious education that dismisses students' own beliefs in such a way may lead to students feeling that they have no meaningful perspective to bring to debates on key moral issues or that 'values' or 'morals' have nothing to do with them. This is ultimately damaging for the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of these young people.

6. A way forward

6.1 We share the belief of colleagues in the field that the omission of RS from the EBacc may cause schools to shift focus from the subject and have a negative impact on the quality of RE being taught at KS3. However, given the patchy quality of RE currently, putting RS on the EBacc without reviewing its place in the wider curriculum and the statutory provisions underpinning it, would be a missed opportunity.

6.2 The Department for Education (DfE) is currently undertaking a review of the entire National Curriculum and its inclusion could be met as part of this process.

⁴ The Catholic Education Service Religious Education curriculum directory for Catholic schools (1996)

⁵ Church of England and national Society, Excellence and distinctiveness: Guidance on RE in Church of England schools (2005)

7. Conclusion

7.1 Good quality education about religious and non-religious worldviews is an important part of general education in the Humanities.

7.2 Any inclusion of RS on the EBacc should go together with making RE a nationally determined subject and we urge the Committee to recommend that the current DfE review of the National Curriculum address this issue.

For more details, information and evidence, contact the British Humanist Association:

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