

# Deep and meaningful? The religious education subject report

## Main findings

The RE curriculum often lacked sufficient substance to prepare pupils to live in a complex world. The RE content selected rarely was collectively enough to ensure that pupils were well prepared to engage in a multi-religious and multi-secular society.

A superficially broad curriculum does not always provide pupils with the depth of knowledge they require for future study. In most cases, where the curriculum tried to cover many religions, like equal slices of a pie, pupils generally remembered very little. In cases where the curriculum prioritised depth of study, pupils learned much more.

The RE curriculum rarely enabled pupils to systematically build disciplinary knowledge or personal knowledge.

The content of some secondary curriculums was restricted by what teachers considered pupils needed to know for public examinations at the end of key stage 4. In a significant number of cases, teachers taught examination skills too prematurely. This significantly limited the range and types of RE content taught.

In the secondary phase, most statutory non-examined RE was limited and of a poor quality. A notable proportion of schools did not meet the statutory requirement to teach RE to pupils at all stages of their schooling.

Where RE was weaker, the knowledge of traditions specified for pupils to learn was overly and uncritically compartmentalised. Sometimes, pupils were presented with over-simplistic assertions about religious traditions, which were often based on visible entities, such as places of worship.

What schools taught was rarely enough for pupils to make sense of religious and non-religious traditions as they appear around the world. Curriculums did not identify clearly the suitable mix of content that would enable pupils to achieve this.

There was a profound misconception among some leaders and teachers that 'teaching from a neutral stance' equates to teaching a non-religious worldview. This is simply not the case.

In some schools, leaders were rightly focusing on developing the curriculum before considering assessment. However, even when leaders had systems of assessment in place, these rarely gave them the requisite

assurance that pupils were learning and remembering more and increasingly complex content over time.

Long gaps between lessons hindered pupils' recall. When the timetable was organised so that pupils had regular RE lessons, they remembered more.

Although a few teachers had received subject-based professional development in RE, the overwhelming majority had not. Given the complexity of the subject and the kind of misconceptions that pupils were left with, this is a significant concern.

## **Recommendations**

### **Curriculum**

Schools should:

- ensure that there is a distinct curriculum in place for teaching RE at all key stages. They should make sure that this is rigorous and challenging and that it demonstrably builds on what pupils already know
- carefully select the knowledge they expect pupils to gain to make sense of a complex and diverse world. They should make sure that important content and concepts are clearly identified and sequenced. They should also make sure that curriculums do not contain oversimplifications of traditions, including, where appropriate, non-religious traditions
- balance the breadth and depth of study of religious and non-religious traditions to ensure that these are collectively enough for pupils to make sense of a complex world
- ensure that all pupils have the opportunity to deepen their knowledge in RE over time. Leaders in secondary schools should make sure that the curriculum is designed to meet or exceed exam board specifications (rather than being driven by them)
- make sure that curriculums clearly identify how pupils will develop disciplinary and personal knowledge through the chosen substantive content

### **Teaching and assessment**

Schools should:

- be ambitious for pupils to develop all aspects of knowledge: substantive, ways of knowing and personal knowledge. They should make sure that teachers have high expectations of what pupils will know and remember

- provide opportunities for pupils to review and build on important knowledge over time. They should make sure that pupils use the knowledge that they gained in previous years as the curriculum becomes increasingly more complex and demanding
- ensure that teaching specifically develops pupils' knowledge of the complexity of religious and non-religious traditions
- develop manageable assessment methods that move beyond the simple recall of factual information. They should check that pupils recall and understand the intended curriculum over time and that the domain of their knowledge is expanding

## **Systems at subject and school level**

Schools should:

- ensure that all teachers have the subject and pedagogical knowledge that they need to teach RE well
- check that the time allocated for teaching RE at all key stages is used effectively so that pupils learn a curriculum that is both broad and deep
- organise the timetable for RE so that gaps between teaching are minimised
- ensure that the curriculum for statutory non-examined RE at key stages 4 and 5 is ambitious and consistently implemented. They should make sure that the RE content is clearly identified and builds on what pupils have learned at key stage 3

## **Recommendations for others**

- The government should urgently update guidance for schools about its statutory expectations for RE. The government should also ensure that there is appropriate clarity about what is taught in RE, and when and where it is taught, for those schools where Ofsted inspects the subject. This would help schools and, particularly, leaders and teachers of RE.
- Those involved in writing syllabuses and commercial curriculums should make sure that these enable pupils to build deep knowledge of the chosen religious and non-religious traditions. They should make sure that curriculums identify what pupils should learn and when. They should ensure that it is clear to teachers when pupils will revisit and review important content and concepts.
- Those involved in commissioning and organising professional development should increase access to, and the range of, training available to all leaders and teachers, to improve their subject knowledge.
- Those involved in training teachers and early career professional development should prioritise helping trainee teachers and those who are newer to the profession to gain the subject knowledge that they need.
- Exam boards should recognise that the way in which schools use exam-style questions is not always appropriate. They should make sure that their communication with schools reflects this.

## Schools Week Summary

Ofsted said a “notable” number of schools are still not meeting the legal requirement to teach religious education to all pupils, and has told government to “urgently” update guidance.

The watchdog today published its latest subject report, looking at the strengths and weakness of how RE is taught in schools in England.

It found the RE curriculum in schools is often “superficially broad”, but lacking in depth. “Problems and challenges facing RE persist” 10 years on from Ofsted’s last such report, they added.

Sir Martyn Oliver, Ofsted’s chief inspector, said a “strong RE curriculum is not only important for pupils’ cultural development, it is a requirement of law and too many schools are not meeting that obligation”.

“I hope that the examples of good RE curriculum in our report help schools develop their own practice and support the development of a strong RE curriculum for all,” he added.

The report is based on Ofsted’s findings from visits to 50 schools in England between September 2021 and April 2023.

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### **1. DfE should ‘urgently’ update guidance**

Ofsted found a “notable proportion of schools did not meet the statutory requirement to teach RE to pupils at all stages of their schooling”.

In secondary schools, it said “most statutory non-examined RE was limited and of a poor quality”.

It recommended ministers “urgently” update guidance for schools about its statutory expectations for RE, to ensure “appropriate clarity” about what is taught and when and where this happens. It said this would help school leaders and teachers of RE.

Schools should ensure the curriculum for statutory non-examined RE at key stages 4 and five is “ambitiously and consistently implemented”.

They should also make sure there is a “a distinct curriculum in place for teaching RE at all key stages” which is “rigorous and challenging”.

The DfE has been approached for comment.

## **2. ‘Curriculum substance insufficient for complex world’**

The RE curriculum “often lacked sufficient substance to prepare pupils to live in a complex world” and the “superficially broad curriculum” often lacked depth, Ofsted said.

It noted that, in most cases, “where the curriculum tried to cover many religions, like equal slices of a pie, pupils generally remembered very little”. Whereas “where the curriculum prioritised depth of study, pupils learned much more”.

Schools should carefully select the knowledge they expect pupils to gain to make sense of the world, such as by ensuring “balance the breadth and depth of study of religious and non-religious traditions “.

Ofsted found the RE curriculum “rarely enabled pupils to systematically” build knowledge. It said they should have opportunities to review and build on important knowledge over time.

## **3. Pupils taught exam skills ‘too prematurely’**

The content of some secondary curriculums was “restricted” by what teachers thought pupils needed to know for exams at the end of key stage 4, Ofsted said.

In a “significant number of cases” teachers taught exams skills “too prematurely”, which “significantly limited the range and types of RE content taught”, it added.

Secondary school leaders should make sure the curriculum is “designed to meet or exceed exam board specifications (rather than being driven by them)”.

Schools should also “develop manageable assessment methods that move beyond the simple recall of factual information”.

## **4. Long gaps between lessons hindered recall**

Ofsted also said “long gaps between lessons hindered pupils’ recall” and that pupils remembered more when they had regular lessons.

Schools should organise the timetable for RE so that gaps between teaching are minimised, it said.

## **5. Teachers need professional development**

The “overwhelming majority” of teachers had not received subject-based professional development in RE, Ofsted said.

“Given the complexity of the subject and the kind of misconceptions that pupils were left with, this is a significant concern,” it added.

Schools should ensure all teachers have the subject and pedagogical knowledge that they need to teach RE well, and ensure the time allocated is used effectively, it urged.

Ofsted said those commissioning and organising professional development should “increase access to, and the range of, training available to all leaders and teachers”.

It comes after the inspectorate published its subject report for English last month.