

Annual Subject Report 2010-2011

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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Introduction

This annual subject report is based on evidence collected on visits to the Religious Education (RE) department of twelve schools. It includes consideration of 27 observed lessons and discussions with 140 students. It considers Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. As it is based on a small sample of schools it does not purport to be a reflection of the quality of provision across the county.

Executive summary and questions for headteachers and subject leaders

All schools visited meet statutory requirements by basing RE on the Durham agreed syllabus. Schools are mainly compliant although in some schools students in Year 7 and Year 11 do not receive their full entitlement to RE. Examination results are variable but generally students attain higher in full course than short course. There are many good elements of teaching including positive relationships and the use of a variety of activities to interest and motivate students. In some cases the progress of students is hampered, for example through the lack of challenge at Key Stage 3 and insufficient time allocation at Key Stage 4. Most students are enthusiastic about RE but would like to meet people from differing faith communities and ask them questions about their beliefs and practices. Leaders are committed to the subject and can articulate the value of RE. They are aware of some of the developments affecting provision including the introduction of the English Baccalaureate in some schools.

Senior and subject leaders should reflect upon the following questions.

- Is the current provision, entry policy and intervention for RE at Key Stage 4 enabling students to attain and make sufficient progress in line with their ability?
- How can leaders ensure that the RE curriculum and planning enables students to be appropriately challenged in lessons?
- How can schools give students opportunities to encounter members of faith communities (and those who hold secular worldviews) and consider the impact of religion and beliefs on people today?

Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is good in five departments and satisfactory in seven departments visited.

Achievement

Achievement is satisfactory.

- Results at Key Stage 4 are broadly average although there is an inconsistent pattern of attainment. Results at full course are generally above or in line with the national average but below average for short course RE. Most schools enter more students for short course.
- Students at Key Stage 4 make satisfactory progress. They generally receive support in understanding how to answer exam questions effectively. They are able to give balanced views on a range of ethical issues. They are less secure in demonstrating a coherent understanding of religious perspectives. Some students at Key Stage 4 do not make as much progress as they should. In some cases this is due to the school's policy of early entry for full or short course RE or non-attendance at lessons due to extra teaching in other curriculum areas.
- Most Year 9 school assessments indicate that attainment is average. However, the use of assessment criteria is inaccurate in the majority of schools visited with higher levels awarded for lower level work. Achievement at Key Stage 3 is satisfactory. Students can use technical vocabulary, describe and show understanding of some religious beliefs and practices. Where students make good progress they are able to use the higher order skills of enquiry, evaluation and analysis.
- Students generally have a positive attitude to RE. They particularly enjoy the subject when they are given opportunities to debate issues, use ICT and meet people from faith communities. They are less enthusiastic when work is too easy; when work is repeated from primary school or there is an over-reliance on text books and worksheets. Key Stage 4 students are appreciative of the guidance given for exam success. They are concerned that some poor student behaviour hampers their progress.
- Students can see the value of RE especially in helping them to appreciate diversity although are generally unable to talk about religious diversity across the region. They like the opportunities given to develop their own views on ethical issues. They are, however, less secure in demonstrating understanding about questions of meaning and truth.

Teaching and assessment

The quality of teaching is good in seven of the twelve departments and satisfactory in five.

- Where teaching is good teachers demonstrate a confident level of subject knowledge and a clear understanding of the value of the subject. They use this expertise well to interest and motivate students. Students respond well and relationships with teachers are strong.
- Lessons are well planned using appropriate objectives which challenge students. Key questions are used to develop the skills of enquiry and reflection. Individual lessons and activities clearly relate to a wider focus of learning and enable students to make links to previous learning.
- A good variety of activities and resources are used to make learning interesting and relevant. For example, the use of discussion techniques are used well to enable students to discuss ideas, ask their own questions, and reflect on their own responses to issues relating to religion and belief. Learning is most effective when tasks are well suited to the differing abilities and teaching ensures that all students participate in the learning.
- Teachers take time to ensure students understand key learning and misconceptions are tackled effectively. For example attention is given to ensuring all students understand exam criteria and can apply knowledge and understanding to exam questions.
- Where teaching is less effective tasks lack challenge and do not enable students to develop appropriate knowledge and understanding. There is too much emphasis on the gathering of information on the externals of religion and belief with little exploration of their significance and impact for people today. Some activities set are more suitable for primary pupils than secondary students. As a result students are not engaged in learning, lose interest and make insufficient progress.
- The use of ICT for compelling learning through ICT in lessons is very limited. Where this was used effectively students had the opportunity to use a variety of sources to examine an issue and present their findings and perspective. This helped to motivate students, particularly boys.
- Assessment is inconsistent. Teachers mark work regularly and give some comments for improvement. At Key Stage 4 these are generally of a high standard and relate to specific exam criteria and grades and enable students to make progress. At Key Stage 3 these comments are often too general and do not give advice that students can respond to. In the majority of schools the use of levels for setting tasks and marking is inaccurate.

Behaviour and safety

Students' behaviour and safety in lessons are good.

- Student behaviour in lessons is generally good. Students respond well to the positive atmosphere created by teachers. There are some instances of disruptive behaviour by a small number of students.
- Students state they feel safe in RE lessons. They appreciate that all beliefs and views are treated with respect.

Curriculum

The curriculum is satisfactory in eleven departments and good in one department visited.

- In the schools represented in this report very few parents withdraw their children from RE. The school informs parents of their right of withdrawal through the school prospectus.
- The statutory requirements of the locally agreed syllabus are generally met. There is some non-compliance in individual schools in either Year 7 or in Year 11 when RE is not taught.
- Ten schools of the twelve visited follow an externally accredited course in accordance with agreed syllabus requirements. A strength of provision is the opportunity for students to be entered for accreditation at full or short course. Several schools regularly review such provision to ensure they best meet the needs of their students. For example, two schools are trialling entry for all students at full course in order to raise the profile and status of RE. In some instances early entry is having a negative impact on student performance. Two schools have not followed accredited courses due to staffing issues. This has now been addressed.
- The statutory core religions at Key Stage 3 are generally taught and several departments have produced coherent schemes of work that include philosophical and ethical questions as well as the beliefs and practices of religions today. However, several departments lack this balance and breadth with too much emphasis given to examining the external features of religion. Work does not build sufficiently on learning from the primary school. As a consequence students do not develop a coherent understanding of the faiths studied.
- The opportunity to enrich learning through engagement with faith members, fieldwork or visitors is very limited. As a result students have little understanding of the diversity of religious beliefs in the local region and the impact of faith on individual believers and communities.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management are good in six schools and satisfactory in six schools.

- Leaders are committed to the subject and are well informed of current developments in RE. Where leadership and management is good provision is regularly reviewed using a broad evidence base. This is used to identify specific actions to bring about improvement. Some departments, however, do not use subject specific criteria, for example Ofsted criteria, to evaluate provision. Development plans do not sufficiently focus on specific actions to bring about improvement within RE but identify only whole school issues.
- Few departments use detailed data analysis to evaluate the performance at Key Stage 4 of individuals and groups of students and identify intervention strategies.
- Most departments are well organised. Detailed schemes of work are produced which indicate appropriate engaging activities. Whole school policies are integrated into schemes of work to help students develop skills and develop as learners. For example, one department has embedded the use of functional skills and SEAL within each unit of work. The majority of departments are not planning effectively for the differing needs of students.
- Some leaders support non-specialist teachers of RE through regular meetings, training sessions and schemes of work. Other leaders give few opportunities for subject training. This is leading to a lack of understanding about good learning in RE amongst some non-specialist teachers.
- Some departments are working hard to raise the profile of RE within the school and with parents. For example, one department regularly contacts parents to outline the RE course and show its value. Multi faith conferences are organised within school so that students can meet people of faith and ask questions.

Strengths

- Students behave well in RE; teachers create a positive atmosphere where all views are treated with respect.
- Leaders and teachers of RE are committed to the subject and understand its value.
- Schools ensure that students have the opportunity to be externally accredited for their learning in RE.
- A variety of activities and resources are used which interest and motivate students.
- Students are given opportunities to debate ideas, listen to the views of others, ask their own questions and reflect on their own responses to issues relating to religion and belief.

Areas for development

- Teachers need to ensure that students can make sufficient progress at Key Stage 4 by regularly reviewing curriculum provision and time allocation, scrutinising exam data in detail and using this to develop specific intervention strategies.
- Teachers need to ensure they use the levels of attainment accurately. They should be used for planning appropriate activities, assessment tasks and differentiating work so that pupils of all abilities are challenged.
- Teachers should plan the curriculum at Key Stage 3 to be coherent, broad and balanced. All curriculum planning should be based on agreed syllabus requirements and should include elements of ethics, philosophy and beliefs and practice.
- Teachers need to develop more opportunities for the use of ICT to enhance learning.
- Teachers need to develop opportunities for all students to meet people from differing faiths and beliefs, especially from the north east region.