

COMMISSION REPORT

Religious Education Teaching and Training in England: current provision and future improvement

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Introduction

Religious education is a statutory subject of the basic curriculum of all maintained schools in England and Wales. In voluntary aided schools religious education is taught according to trust deeds or governors' policies. In community and voluntary controlled schools religious education is taught according to locally agreed syllabuses, and is supported by local standing advisory councils (SACREs). SACREs consist of representatives from four groups; the Church of England, 'other' faiths and denominations, teachers' associations and the local authority. Though varying in effectiveness, SACREs provide a unique opportunity for these four diverse groups to engage in dialogue and make a positive contribution to curriculum development in RE.

There have been significant developments in RE over recent years that have led to improvements in teaching and learning of the subject. For example, a partnership project in one local authority involving the interfaith centre, local communities, and members of two RE subject associations, linked schools in different local authorities to show how dialogue between pupils from different faith/belief and cultural backgrounds could produce positive results for individuals and communities. Other successful projects brought to the Commission's attention included those on dialogue among children from different faith/belief backgrounds, how to make links between RE and the local community, transition from Key Stage 2 to 3, engaging primary aged children in stories and artefacts from religious traditions, as well as research / publications on RE and intercultural understanding. There are many more.

As a subject, RE is well represented by active professional associations, whose members make a vital contribution to teacher confidence and competence. Ofsted reports that higher education institutions also contribute well to teaching and learning in RE, via the provision of PGCE secondary RE, which is generally in good health, and through the provision and publication of research underpinning developments in RE.

Terms of reference

The Religious Education Council (REC)'s Teaching and Training Commission was established by the REC in part fulfilment of its Partnership arrangement with the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). In building upon the Non-Statutory National Framework for RE, the Commission was set the following objectives:

1. To diagnose current limitations on and strengths in teacher confidence and competence in religious education (RE) in both community and 'faith' schools in England, based on evidence gathered in relation to initial teacher training (ITT) and continuing professional development (CPD).
2. To recommend remedial initiatives to address identified weaknesses in ITT and CPD for RE, including:
 - a. identification of examples of existing models of good practice across the range of primary and secondary ITT. Proposals to be set out to show how these might be rolled out to provide comprehensive cover for all intending primary teachers and secondary specialists;
 - b. identification of examples of existing models of good practice in CPD provision locally, regionally and nationally, together with proposals as to how access might be affordably extended to such supports for teachers from all schools. Relevant cost and quality considerations to include attention to the possibilities of greater regional collaboration than hitherto.
 - c. development of appropriate new models for CPD provision especially, with costed and detailed proposals to provide training for the vast majority of teachers of RE within the next five years.

In conducting its research and in writing this report, the Commission worked to both the current statutory arrangements for RE in England and the stated purposes of RE contained within the Non-Statutory National Framework for RE. These are that religious education develops pupils' knowledge and understanding of Christianity, other principal religions, other religious traditions and other world views. It offers opportunities for personal reflection and spiritual development.

Teacher confidence and competence

Strengths

Religious education has a great strength in the expertise and commitment of those with specialist qualifications and experience in teaching the subject. Evidence presented in this report suggests that such teachers are highly committed to the subject's aims and worth, and that they share a desire to improve its effectiveness. These teachers work hard to raise the quality and status of RE provision in their schools and colleges, and to ensure that the subject engages and has a positive impact upon learners. Teachers, through SACREs and Agreed Syllabus conferences, are able to contribute directly to the development of the syllabus in their area, leading to an increased sense of ownership and commitment to the RE curriculum, and in turn, increased professional confidence and competence.

According to the primary and secondary teachers surveyed for this report, confidence in RE was highest and they were most effective where:

- they had been recipients of high quality initial teacher training and/or in-service professional development;
- they were well supported by senior managers in schools;
- they had access to specialist subject support;
- a wide range of different types of CPD was on offer in relation to their needs.

Weaknesses

Despite the advances made by RE over recent years, there is constant evidence of some persistent weaknesses in the subject, particularly in community schools. In both primary and secondary phases, voluntary aided schools fare better in terms of resources and time for RE, particularly in the 16 percent of schools that are Roman Catholic, where all the schools surveyed provided more than five percent of curriculum time for RE and all but three provided more than £1 per pupil annually for RE resources.

In the Primary phase:

- RE is rarely the focus for whole school development in primary schools and consequently teachers do not know enough about the range of religions and belief systems included in syllabuses to teach the subject effectively.
- Teachers are lowest in confidence in RE where they have had little subject specific training in their record of professional development.
- Teachers have had little or no training in how to apply appropriate pedagogies in RE.
- Many teachers have been inadequately prepared for changes to syllabuses following the publication of the Non-Statutory National Framework for RE. This has led to challenges for co-ordinators and RE teachers in community and aided schools concerning how best to plan, teach and assess effectively, for example, in relation to level descriptions, and how to use the range of resources effectively.
- Primary ITT courses generally provide minimal input on RE from Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and other providers, compounded by lack of exposure to good

practice in the school-based portion of their training. There was rarely any knowledge of whether school-based mentors had any RE specialism as part of their own training. This is an historic shortcoming which has created a cycle of under-performance.

- Few primary school teachers have any post-16 qualification in RE and there is a consequent unevenness in quality of RE compared to most other subjects.
- Well over half of RE subject leaders also lack any post-16 qualification in RE and many quickly move on to other areas of responsibility. This is leading to lack of direction and encouragement for their colleagues to improve their subject knowledge and skills through appropriate training. This in turn is resulting in a lack of high quality teaching and low expectations.
- Few community or voluntary controlled primary schools provide more than £1 per pupil in their annual budget for RE resources and even fewer provide the recommended 5 percent of curriculum time.

In the Secondary phase:

- Teachers with no formal training in RE are lowest in confidence where they find themselves teaching RE despite having little or no previous experience in doing so.
- Many teachers of RE have been inadequately prepared for changes to syllabuses following the publication of the Non-Statutory National Framework. This has led to challenges for co-ordinators and RE teachers in community and aided schools concerning how best to plan, teach and assess effectively, for example, in relation to level descriptions.
- Many RE subject leaders report that they are in charge of departments containing several 'non-specialists' and that this significantly limits the maintenance or raising of standards. With the exception of citizenship, RE is the subject where schools have the fewest teachers who are suitably qualified to teach the subject and this is having a negative impact on standards.
- HMI reports over many years reveal that subject leadership is generally weaker than in most other subjects. While there has been a general improvement in the leadership and management of RE, weaknesses remain in key areas such as the provision of specialist teachers, and the quality of self-evaluation and monitoring. This is also reflected in poor planning, in the use of inappropriate teaching methods, in the low expectations of teachers, and in assessment. In many schools such weaknesses in the management of the RE department have been undetected and uncorrected by senior staff. Weak leadership and management deprive RE classroom teachers of opportunities to improve and develop their expertise. In over one fifth of schools Ofsted judged that there is inadequate monitoring and evaluation of either RE teaching or performance.
- The pressure on staffing has become intense, as more and more young people engage in and opt for study of religions and philosophies at GCSE, A and AS level. Schools and colleges are responding by attempting to attract good teachers to meet the need, or by using non-specialists to cover the gaps, but often fail though insufficient numbers of adequately trained teachers.
- Many schools are currently failing to support those newly engaged in teaching RE with the sufficient depth and quality of professional development required to provide high

quality teaching and learning. When high quality trainees complete ITT courses they are not always supported effectively into the professional life – with some loss of impetus.

- As in the primary sector, few community and voluntary controlled secondary schools provide more than £1 per pupil annually for RE resources or the recommended 5 percent of curriculum time.
- There is a continuing problem of non-compliance in Key Stage 4 amongst nearly 20 per cent of secondary schools according to the 2004/5 Ofsted analysis. Although there has been some recent improvement in the proportion of schools meeting their statutory requirements in relation to RE, this is in danger of being undermined by limitations in staffing and by some schools feeling they can reduce time for RE without sanction under the differently focused Ofsted inspection process. At post-16 well over a third of schools with sixth forms were found to be non-compliant by Ofsted in 2004/5.

In Initial Teacher Training:

The Commission notes the following main areas of weakness in relation to training for **primary** phase teachers:

- the historical and continuing shortage of primary teachers with some expertise in RE leads to insufficient opportunity within trainees' school-experience for specialist mentoring and the observation of good practice;
- the lack of subject knowledge and understanding on the part of those beginning teacher training is due in part to their own background experience being affected by the legacy of lack of compliance amongst schools with Key Stage 4 and Post-16 legal requirements for RE;
- the insufficient input within ITT on the range of appropriate pedagogies for RE;
- the current lack of consistency in terms of standards for pupils' progress in RE in relation to national, local and trust deed guidance.

The Commission notes the following main areas of weakness in relation to training for **secondary** phase teachers:

- HMI reports indicate that a persistent problem with secondary RE training is the difficulty faced by providers in finding sufficient placements offering high quality mentoring and modelling good practice in the planning, teaching and assessment of RE;
- the lack of subject knowledge and understanding for those beginning teacher training as influenced by such factors as:
 - insufficient RE in their own educational experience where schools have failed to comply with Key Stage 4 and Post-16 legal requirements;
 - the growth of ethics and philosophy of religion, rather than study of discrete religions and texts, as option choices within A and AS level Religious Studies, leaving those students with only limited understanding of religion(s);
 - the fact that RE trainees are drawn from a wide range of disciplines, such as the human sciences and philosophy;

- RE trainees' planning, teaching and assessing are often weaker than for those specialising in other subjects. In understanding how to plan for pupils' progress in RE, trainees need to take account of a variety of RE syllabuses and variations in guidance on appropriate standards for each key stage;
- In **both primary and secondary** phases there is insufficient guidance on educating for spiritual, moral, social and cultural development for prospective teachers in subjects other than RE. Currently, there are no ITT standards that relate specifically to spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.
- There is also scope for additional work in providing opportunities for specialist trainees in RE to consider the relationship between their own faith/beliefs and the role of the RE teacher in community and/or 'faith' schools.

In Continuing Professional Development

The Commission's evidence demonstrates that while there is a significant amount of CPD on offer to teachers and that this is being provided from numerous sources (local authority advisers (and SACREs), unitary awarding bodies, diocesan and other faith/belief groups, independent national organisations and other independent consultants) it is not well-targeted, carries little status and is often incoherent. Moreover, several factors act as blocks to teachers' participation in CPD in RE:

- less than a quarter of those working for local authorities / SACREs who responded to our survey reported that there was a full-time adviser / inspector in RE in their authority;
- although RE subject leaders have a long list of training needs, many reported difficulties in obtaining sufficient funding for them to undertake the identified training. Phrases such as RE being 'a Cinderella subject', 'a poor relation' or 'sidelined' were frequent in teachers' responses to our survey. Many noted that there were specific 'priorities for numeracy and literacy' which took precedence and that 'funds do not allow' for training in RE;
- a worryingly high proportion of teachers responding to our survey mentioned 'Quick fix' training solutions such as those offered on websites as their only realistic means of accessing professional development;
- the shortage of specialist RE leaders in primary schools leads in some cases to insufficient prioritising RE training for subject leaders and their colleagues.

In addition, the Commission noted insufficient opportunities currently offered within existing CPD programmes nationally to address the following weaknesses in RE:

- lack of basic subject knowledge on the part of trainees and teachers as well as understanding of the proven pedagogies and their potential impact on pupils' progressive learning in RE;
- insufficient depth in levels of subject knowledge to engage theologically and philosophically with children in ways that are informed by the vitality of living religions and philosophies of life;
- need for more subject specialists who will promote the subject's contribution to pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and to social and community cohesion;

- need to boost teachers' awareness of variety of resources available to support good RE in different contexts;
- lack of confidence in how to use ICT effectively in RE for many teachers;
- lack of attention to the pupils' voice and experience in some RE classrooms and the need to relate materials to their interests and concerns, in line with the scope of the Non-Statutory National Framework for RE and including pupils with particular learning needs or difficulties;
- lack of consistent opportunity for incremental professional development ensuring that teachers have a range of experience before they become subject leaders.

In general, the lack of commitment to RE by senior leaders in some schools, illustrated in some cases by continuing non-compliance with legal requirements for RE, acts as a block to teachers' training in the subject. This results in lost opportunities for teachers to understand the potential of the subject to contribute powerfully to the depth and breadth of a young person's broad education and capacity for critical discernment where beliefs and values are concerned.

List of Recommendations

Underlying priorities

1. Training and support in RE for trainee, beginning and practising teachers needs to be improved if young people are to be confident of the own identity and well prepared for the rich cultural, religious, philosophical and ethnic diversity in Britain and the wider world and to play their part in building a more cohesive society.
2. Headteachers and senior managers need to be better prepared to assist and support their staff in acquiring the knowledge, understanding and skills required to promote the highest quality teaching and learning in the subject at all levels.
3. High quality RE teaching requires both an in depth knowledge and understanding of religious and other belief systems, and a thorough grounding in pedagogies proven to be effective for the subject. Such pedagogies will need to take account of the how children might learn FROM religion and well as ABOUT it. In terms of ITT and CPD, this in turn demands sufficient opportunities and sufficient depth in the training undertaken to allow for study of a range of methods and the opportunity to trial and evaluate them.
4. Progress in RE should be more firmly linked to standards and achievement. If pupils are to gain as much as they could from their experience of RE, teachers need to understand how to make judgements about levels of attainment and how they are connected to effective planning throughout the primary and secondary phases. In addition to this, schools, together with their school improvement partners, need to be actively encouraged to understand how effective RE can make a significant contribution to pupils' academic and personal development.
5. In order for these priorities to be met, RE needs to be given more prominence when inspectors make judgements about the balance and quality of the curriculum being provided by schools.

Recommendations

A. For initial teacher training

DfES should work together in partnership with the REC to support a range of initiatives in ITT. (See Part E of this Report for more details)

The Commission recommends that the following **low-cost initiatives** be undertaken, developed or extended in order to improve or supplement current provision for ITT:

1. Guidance for providers of ITT and TRS degrees:

Guidance should be commissioned to:

- address the underprovision of opportunities for primary ITT trainees to observe and teach RE in schools where mentors/tutors have considerable experience and/or expertise in the subject;
- address the underprovision in terms of sufficient specialist staff and programmed time to meet the needs of primary ITT;

- address the underprovision of specialist courses in religions and beliefs on ITT programmes/courses
- address the underprovision of training in pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development in general primary ITT courses;
- address the need to raise awareness of RE teaching as a prospective career, by, for example, providing opportunities for trainees to work, where possible and appropriate, with 'gifted and talented' and/or post-16 students in schools, and encouraging HEIs offering undergraduate theology and religious studies (TRS) degrees to include a 'religion and education' module within the degree options.

2. Understanding planning and assessment in RE

In order to assist trainees' understanding of effective planning and appropriate assessment of standards in RE, guidance should be commissioned by the DfES and QCA, with its partners in the REC, to encourage local authority agreed syllabus conferences and faith communities to include progressive levels of attainment such as those exemplified in the Non-Statutory National Framework for RE within their next revised agreed or aided schools' syllabus.¹

3. Standards for qualified teacher status (QTS)

The TDA should include in the guidance accompanying its revised standards for qualified teacher status (QTS) specific reference to the ability of all primary and secondary trainees to:

- examine how their own beliefs and values may influence their teaching;
- provide opportunities for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development;

and of all primary trainees and secondary RE specialist trainees to:

- understand the main features and purpose of the Non-Statutory National Framework for RE and its position within the current statutory arrangements for RE including agreed and aided school syllabuses;
- organise visits to places of religious interest.

In its standards for primary teachers, the TDA should continue with its plans to include specific opportunity to include teaching of RE as part of their school experience.

4. Inspection

Ofsted inspection arrangements should ensure that:

- in its next revision of the inspection handbook for ITT providers, specific reference is made to the preparation of trainee teachers for providing the opportunities listed in point 3 above ;
- attention is paid to the provision of training for RE in its inspection of Primary ITT providers.

The Commission also recommends that DfES and TDA provide **additional funding and support** for the following initiatives:

¹ cf. DfES, 2007, *Curriculum Review: Diversity & Citizenship* (The Ajegbo Report), ref. DFES-00045-2007, p.10.

1. **Further and extended training opportunities, including bridging and booster courses**, with e-support, that help teachers from non-traditional degree backgrounds gain the knowledge, skills and depth of understanding required to teach the subject effectively. These will include:
 - a two year route PGCE as favoured in several other shortage subjects;
 - an expanded programme of Booster courses for those who already have some, but not sufficient subject knowledge;
 - a ‘diploma’- style longer course, e.g., a pre-PGCE or GTP distance learning (DL) course for those who have not undertaken any formal study of religions, plus financial support to address needs of trainees;
 - an intensive online subject knowledge course for late entrants.
2. The setting up of **an on-line support community**, developing from booster and bridging courses and continuing post-qualification, in order to sustain these developments.
3. Continued **support for school-based mentors/tutors** through a blend of face-to-face courses/conferences and online provision.
4. Financial support in terms of training fees and expenses for **faith/belief communities or representatives** thereof, to enable them to expand their capacity and contribution beyond their own institutions, particularly in engaging trainee teachers in examining:
 - the content of individual religions and beliefs, the diversity that exists both among and within faith/belief communities, and
 - the interface between trainees’ own beliefs and the responsibilities of the RE teacher in both community schools and those with a religious character.

B. For continuing professional development

Without high quality CPD and support for SACREs, the impetus generated by publication of the Non-Statutory National Framework for RE will be greatly impeded. DfES, in partnership with the REC member bodies should therefore work to support a range of professional development opportunities related to schools’ and individual teachers’ needs. (See Part E of this Report for more detailed, costed proposals.)

The Commission recommends that the following initiatives be undertaken, developed or extended, in order to improve or supplement current provision for CPD in religious education:

Policy

1. Development of Advanced Skills Teachers (ASTs) and Leading Teachers in terms of specific support for RE in community and ‘faith’ schools.
2. Further RE programming on Teachers TV such as video footage of RE lessons that can be used for analysing and evaluating teaching and learning.
3. Extended online support for trainers and mentors of new teachers, for example, through RE-Net.

4. Identifying and encouraging 'training schools' with expertise in RE to share good practice.

In order for the initiatives listed above to have the desired impact on pupils' learning in RE, DfES, together with REC partner organisations, should take the following steps:

5. support a project ongoing within the REC to develop 'Subject Standards' for CPD in RE, reflecting the phases of professional development for teachers;
6. direct School Improvement Partners (SIPs) to include RE in their checklist of targets for improvement to be agreed with schools and ensure SIPs are aware of the place and scope of religious education in both community schools and aided schools with a religious determination;
7. support the proposal for the inclusion of the role of RE in training for headteachers and senior managers when they examine the schools' contribution to community cohesion and pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development;
8. support the proposal for local authority agreed syllabus conferences and faith communities to include progressive levels of attainment such as those exemplified in the Non-Statutory National Framework for RE within their next revised agreed or aided schools syllabus;
9. publish plans for any professional development elements of a national strategy for RE sufficiently early for schools to consider training opportunities within their professional development planning cycle.²

Provision

The following proposals for training and projects for RE improvement should be referenced to the Non-Statutory National Framework for RE, in terms of skills, breadth of study, and expected standards of pupils' performance at different ages, as articulated in a range of agreed and aided school syllabuses.³

Where appropriate successful completion of courses should result in an award or certification to encourage a greater impact on teaching and learning.⁴ In order to ensure effective dissemination or implementation in school, courses should contain an element of school-based evaluation of the impact on teaching and learning.

1. Two day appetizer/refresher – intensive courses for beginning teachers or those needing a (re-)introduction to the principles and practice of good RE.
2. Ten day courses on effective leadership of primary RE.
3. Ten day courses for secondary teachers with other specialisms (TWOs).
4. 'Expert teacher' and Masters level courses for primary and secondary teachers.
5. Specialist RE input into short courses for returners, overseas trained teachers and trainees following PGCE in Humanities.

² TDA regulations for performance management, 2006, for implementation in September 2007.

³ See Introduction on p.6 for the legal context in which RE is arranged.

⁴ cf. Ofsted, 2004, *Making a difference: The impact of award-bearing in-service training on school improvement*, HMI 1765.

6. A substantial programme of daytime courses with school-based assignments and e-support, modelled on the five, ten and twenty day GEST funded courses of the mid-1990s, with partnership between HEIs and LAs.
7. Short, non award bearing training courses with a focus such as visits to religious communities.
8. A variety of ICT-based routes to suit different needs, eg, distance learning (or hybrid) MA and other courses.
9. Specific RE development programmes run by faith/belief groups, to encourage their members to consider RE teaching as a career and to introduce them to the principles and practice of the RE teacher. Each programme will be informed by the principles enunciated in the aims, objectives and standards of the Non-Statutory National Framework for RE and meet the needs of the faith/belief groups involved.
10. Professional development for headteachers and senior managers, e.g., inclusion of RE issues in *Leading from the Middle* (LftM), *Leadership Pathways* and *National Professional Qualification for Headship* (NPQH) training as well as in-service training.
11. A programme of twilight clinics and school visits by a regional network of RE advisers or consultants, including opportunities for intensive one-to-one support for teachers, such as coaching to improve classroom planning and practice for both community and aided schools.
12. Supported action research for teachers working with pupils as a means to improve the quality of RE in schools and effecting change in teachers' practice.
13. A project to produce a comprehensive overview of CPD provider capacity and potential in each region of England.
14. Development of distance learning packs to boost subject knowledge in RE, drawing on HEI-level expertise in religions, theology, philosophy and ethics.
15. A strategy for encouraging and enabling individuals from ethnic minorities and those from faith/belief communities to become RE teachers.
16. Development of guidelines for an 'Expert RE Teacher' portfolio.

The full report (100pp) can be ordered price £7.50 from:

REC PO Box 60501, LONDON W2 7ZG or,

by email from: info@religiouseducationcouncil.org

(please make cheques payable to RE Council)

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National Association of Standing Advisory Councils on RE
National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE)
National Council of Hindu Temples (UK)
National Society (Church of England) for Promoting Religious Education
National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United Kingdom
REEP: The Religious Education and Environment Programme
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)
Roman Catholic National Board of RE Inspectors and Advisers
Shap Working Party on World Religions in Education
Sikh Education Council
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