


Religious Studies at GCSE

SWINDON SACRE 23.7.19

The Picture over time....

- For nearly a decade, there had been an increase in the number of students taking GCSE Religious Studies.
- The increase in numbers over that time was partly due to schools recognising they could improve their overall standing in the league tables by having more GCSE success and therefore adding GCSE RE to the total taken by their students; either full or short course
- The increase was also partly due to the interesting and approachable content in the specification which was about moral issues and the responses of the religious communities to those issues.

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- The basis for the measurement of schools' success at GCSE has changed, so that Religious Studies has to compete with other non-Ebacc subjects for space on the timetable
 - The results from short course GCSE no longer count towards performance tables and so many schools have dropped it from their curriculum
 - There are few, if any, consequences for Schools who flout the law on the provision of RE.
 - The picture now is of RE in serious decline in terms of numbers taking GCSE and in general provision for all students at this level
 - We are aware of the report from the commission on RE; this is one of the Chairman's comments about their findings

The Chair of the Commission on RE said:

“Nonetheless, over the course of the two years of our work, it was clear to me and my fellow commissioners that the situation for RE was extremely precarious and that without positive action from the Government the subject risked collapse in many schools. The current situation is in our view not sustainable and we would regard refusal to act at all as an abdication of responsibility. ”

Numbers

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017 ¹	2018	% change 2008 to 2018	% change 2017 to 2018
Full Course	166,628	170,303	176,867	209,479	226,782	251,063	269,494	283,756	284,057	269,839	241,749	45.1%	-10.4%
Short Course	289,065	282,168	274,381	252,316	230,451	169,088	118,481	86,679	71,299	53,071	34,087	-88.2%	-35.8%
Combined	455,693	452,471	451,248	461,795	457,233	420,151	387,975	370,435	355,356	322,910	275,836	-39.5%	-14.6%




Why the difference in interest levels?

- Students do not find the new GCSE specifications as interesting as the old ones.
- The content was Moral Issues with reference to religion: Believing in God, Matters of Life and Death, Marriage and the Family, Community Cohesion, Rights and Responsibilities, Environmental and Medical Issues, Peace and Conflict, Crime and Punishment (Edexcel but similar in the specifications from other boards).
- SACREs, and other interested communities, argued that the content was light in terms of religious teaching and argued for change.
- The new specifications have half of the course on beliefs and practices from the religions studied (Christianity +one other) and so students are required to learn about salvation, atonement, non-liturgical and sacramental aspects of worship. For Islam, there is a list of key vocabulary from the Arabic e.g. malaikah, usul-ad Din, tawhid...

- Whilst we all find it interesting to explore new language and concepts, for many of our teenagers they cannot see a value in what doesn't feel relevant or useful.
- For teaching staff, there comes an element of rote learning rather than discussion, especially if there is little time
- Many schools wish to focus on the most efficient way to gain good results and position on the performance tables, which is interpreted as maximum time for English, Maths, Science and less on another literacy-based subject. Hence, R.S. GCSE is timetabled out.
- We would argue that there is progress in literacy through the reading and writing and discussion aspects of our subject. However, this argument is not always persuasive

On the one hand.....

- We live in an increasingly diverse society and whether students are in the middle of a multi-cultural city or not, it is vital to understand the communities around us
- Good quality RE delivers an important element of that education
- This is recognised by the Government, and specifically mentioned in Damian Hind's response letter to the Commission
- The Report of the commission emphasises this value when it says....



Studying religious and non-religious worldviews gives young people the opportunity to develop the knowledge, understanding and motivation they need to engage with important aspects of human experience including the religious, spiritual, cultural and moral. It provides an insight into the sciences, the arts, literature, history and contemporary local and global social and political issues. The young people we have spoken to have told us that RE enables them to have better friendships and to develop greater respect and empathy for others. Learning about worldviews helps young people to deal positively with controversial issues, to manage strongly held differences of belief and to challenge stereotypes. In an increasingly diverse society, understanding religious and non-religious worldviews has never been more essential than it is now.

And on the other hand.....

Many schools are finding the full course GCSE too challenging and dry

As with most of the new exam specifications, the exam is content-heavy

Many schools are abandoning RE at exam level e.g. Redland Green, Gordano, Cotham

SMRT as a Church school, with a Christian ethos is coping with the specifically religious aspects but we can recognise how difficult this is in secular schools

New Specifications

- Christianity features as an essential element, with one other world religion and reference to non-religious world views. The proportions between the time spent on these elements varies across courses and choices of the schools themselves.
- The discussion of issues is now restricted and you can see the specification content for the different exam boards in the documents

What can we do?

Some suggestions.....

- Continue to monitor what is happening in our Secondary Schools and represent what is happening in Swindon at a higher level in terms of political influence
- Support one another in RE departments
- Recognise when, and if Ofsted pick up on a lack of RE
- Continue to push for RE commission's recommendations as Try to ensure quality RE is taught by specialist RE teachers