

NATRE response to DfE announcements 7 February 2013

- Plans to introduce EBCs halted
- GCSEs to be maintained and reformed
- Introduction of new performance measure

The National Association of Teachers of RE (NATRE) welcomes the recent decision to halt plans to introduce English Baccalaureate Certificates (EBCs). We are very glad that the Department for Education (DfE) has listened during the consultation period and has recognised the introduction of EBCs to be ‘a bridge too far’. NATRE viewed the EBCs to be a flawed and divisive concept. This new qualification risked creating a two-tier system between those disciplines within the EBC and those outside. NATRE, along with many others, viewed this potential two-tier system as arbitrary and damaging. The introduction of EBCs also threatened to disadvantage schools that guided students to follow GCSE courses that were in the students’ best interests, rather than pursuing a higher position in the league tables. NATRE supports an education system that recognises the need for both a wide academically rigorous curriculum, as well as one that enables pupils to have the opportunity to allow their talents and interests to flourish.

NATRE also welcomes the maintenance of the GCSE system. We hope that the Ministers within the DfE will begin to restore the reputation of this important qualification for the sake of those students that have worked or are still working hard to earn them. It is now vital for Ofqual and the DfE to work closely with subject associations to review current GCSE specifications, ensuring the development of academically rigorous courses. We also hope that the DfE will work closely with Ofqual to build stronger regulation into the new specifications in order to avoid, what many see as, the ‘race to the bottom’ caused by the current system.

NATRE wishes to urge the DfE to continue to maintain and value the short course GCSE in RS. This is because the short course has provided flexibility for schools as it offers a means through which the students who have studied core RE can gain accreditation, whilst at the same time enabling those who have a keen interest in RS to take their studies further by opting for the full course GCSE. In addition, the short course allows schools to meet their statutory requirement to create high quality learning opportunities for all students at Key Stage 4 to explore religions and beliefs in a contemporary context.

However, there are some worrying developments occurring within some schools with regards to the status of the core RE which is causing NATRE concern and we believe should also cause alarm to the DfE. In particular, the fact that the short course in RS no longer counts towards the school average point score has contributed to the decision in many schools to drop this option, which has led to a fall in entries of around 10% in 2012. In some cases, this has meant that RE is no longer being studied by students at Key Stage 4 at all and, in others, teachers have been required to teach a full course syllabus in around a third of the guided learning hours recommended by the specification. We will continue to lobby the DfE on these developments to request further research into the patterns of RE provision at Key Stage 4.

NATRE supports DfE in its introduction of the new performance measure that recognises achievement across their best eight subjects. We believe that it is correct in stating that this new measure will 'incentivise schools to offer a broad, balanced curriculum, with high quality teaching and high achievement across the board'. We are very pleased that RS GCSE will contribute to this new school performance measure. We hope that this change will help to ensure that schools will value, resource and promote excellent teaching in Religious Studies. We also support this new measure because it values the achievement of all students, not just the few.

We now urge the Department for Education to review the place of the 5 A* - C English Baccalaureate (EBacc) measure in performance tables. There is mounting evidence that the 5 A* - C EBacc measure has already had a detrimental effect on the provision of high quality teaching of Religious Studies across the country, and the maintenance of this much cruder measure will undoubtedly cause further damage. NATRE seeks further clarification about which performance measure will take precedence in performance tables and RAISE Online.

NATRE will be studying the new draft National Curriculum documents with interest during the consultation period. In addition, we will continue to work with and support the Religious Education Council (REC) as it conducts its own Review of the RE curriculum. NATRE urges the Secretary of State to keep the promise he made in the House of Commons in the Autumn of 2010 to include RE in the review of the curriculum by supporting the REC financially to complete this important piece of work. It is vital that materials are produced for RE that take account of the National Curriculum documents, as did the Non-Statutory National Framework for RE in 2004.

NATRE is pleased that changes have been made to Government policy that not only seem to offer new support for Religious Studies, but which also protect a broad and balanced curriculum for all students in our schools. We thank all those NATRE members, and all the other supporters of our subject, who took the time to take part in the various consultations, in lobbying the Government to recognise the importance of Religious Studies for all young people.

Ed Pawson
NATRE Chair
11 February 2013