

An analysis of a survey of teachers on the impact of government policy on student opportunity to study GCSE RS

A Ninth Survey – July 2021

Introduction

This is an analysis of the data gathered from a questionnaire on impact of government policy including accountability measures and the English Baccalaureate on Religious Education. It relates particularly to the study of Religious Studies GCSE and seeks to make the case for more attention to be paid by the Department for Education (DfE) and its ministers to the level of provision and quality of Religious Education in all schools and for there to be a National Plan for RE as recommended by the Commission on RE in 2018.

This ninth survey was conducted during the spring term of 2021 via a number of teacher networks supported by the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE), and RE Today Services. The survey was publicised via social media networks and via the electronic networks of other RE organisations including AREIAC, AULRE, and NASACRE. Replies were received from 335 teachers. Respondents did not all respond to every question. Responses that are significantly different, according to school type of the respondent, have also been discussed.

Methodology

An on-line data gathering tool (Survey Monkey) was used to set a series of questions on the provision of RE in secondary schools. This is similar to surveys conducted in previous years and, where applicable, this report includes the previous data as a comparison. Questions were asked to collect key information about how the provision and support for RE might have changed in key stages three and four and about the respondents' views regarding the reason for the changes. It should be noted that due to the nature of the survey, it can be argued that respondents are more likely to be in schools where teachers of RE are employed since those who are not committed to RE would be less likely to take the time to complete the survey.

Conclusions

PROVISION:

- 1) 92.8% of schools report offering discrete RE lessons at Key Stage 3. Others report that RE is combined with other subjects or is taught on a carousel programme. (Table 16a)
- 2) This data suggests that the past 12 months has been a rapid period of change for RE with almost one in five reporting an increase in provision.
- 3) Whilst one in five respondents reported that some parents withdraw pupils from Religious Education in their school, this is fewer than in 2019 when the figure was almost one in three. Of serious concern is the fact that there appears to be an increase in school-led withdrawal, which is outside the terms of the legislation. In a third of the cases reported, pupils had been withdrawn for a curricular reason, such as the school prioritising specific provision for a SEND pupil or to provide extra time for a different subject. In almost one in ten cases, the parents stated they did not want their child to learn about any religion, something specific within RE or about Islam specifically.
- 4) Christianity and Islam are the most frequently taught religious worldviews at KS3 with 64% and 59% responding that they teach these systematically and 58% and 52% thematically. Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, a non-religious worldview such as Humanism and Sikhism are all taught in both ways by around 40% of schools.

GCSE

- 5) **Entries -GCSE Religious Studies Full Course** continues to be well supported in the schools of our respondents. However, 16% of them reported that they made no entries for the Full Course in 2021 (the same was reported in 2019) (**Table 7**). In England overall, there was a small fall in entries for GCSE full course.
- 6) **Entries – GCSE Religious Studies Short Course**. In contrast however, the removal of GCSE Short Courses from the list of qualifications that contribute points to performance tables has inevitably led to a rapid decline in entries for this qualification. *More than 90% (80% in 2019) of respondents reported they will have no entries for GCSE Religious Studies at Short Course in 2018 or 2019 (Table 7).*

Timetabling of and time for GCSE:

- 7) Where Religious Studies is an optional subject at Key Stage 4, our respondents report that in more than one in three schools, students then receive no Religious Education at all in Key Stage 4 – even though it is a statutory subject for all pupils in this key stage. (**Table 16b**) The number of students either studying GCSE or a lesson of core RE now represents one in two schools. Other schools appear to have combined provision with other subjects and offer 40 minutes or less time for RE at this key stage. **Table 12**
- 8) The trend towards offering GCSE Religious Studies courses over three years has been reversed and there has been a return to teaching the course over two years. More than 3 in 4 schools now teach GCSE in this way. However, that does mean that a quarter of schools are teaching GCSE over three years.
- 9) There has been a decrease in the number of schools attempting to deliver this course over *less than the recommended teaching time (Table 11)*. This practice now accounts for around 1 in 10 schools when previously 1 in 5 attempted this feat. 87% of schools now follow or exceed the time recommended by Ofqual of 120-140 guided learning hours.

RE AS A SPECIALISM:

- 10) Subject specific training is essential for the delivery of high-quality provision in any subject. 38% of the schools that responded to this question reported that they had received no subject specific training in school in the last academic year. 63% reported that they had attended no training outside of school. Although it is understandable that out of school training would be less available during the pandemic, the availability of online training makes the 'in school' figure rather surprising. The Ofsted framework for inspection states that school leaders, including governing boards will be held to account during an inspection where lack of training for teachers has a negative impact on pupils. (Table 14)
- 11) In 84% of schools the number of specialist teachers of RE either remained stable or (in 23% of cases) increased (**Table 3a**). In some schools however the number of specialists employed is falling. This was reported almost one in five of respondents.
- 12) Around 7 in 10 of respondents reported that RE was taught by teachers who spent most of their timetable teaching another subject (a slight decrease from 2019). In 30% of cases more than 1 in 5 lessons is taught by these teachers. Part of the reason for this is lack of RE specialists in the workforce and the failure of the DfE Teacher Supply Model to recognise the importance of specialism to high quality provision. (Table 4)
- 13) Around two-thirds of teachers had received some training on dealing with contentious issues, but this means a third had not. Of these, two thirds would like to attend training if offered.

1. Types of school

Responses were received by teachers in the following types of school. Note that some respondents ticked more than one category.

Table 1 – Representation of school types in our responses.

Type of school	No.	%
Schools where the Agreed Syllabus is required	93	28%
Schools and Academies with a religious character	52	15%
Academies without a religious character	168	50%
Independent School	19	6%
Other: Schools in NI, Scotland and one 6 th form college	3	1%
TOTAL	335	100%

It should be noted that due to the means by which we contact schools, the data in their survey is likely to result in a more favourable picture of Religious Education than nationally. Schools where there are no specialist teachers of RE or no provision for the subject, will be much less likely to have responded.

2. Has there been an increase or decrease in the amount of RE that was taught in 2020-2021 compared to 2018/2019?

	2020-21 (2018-19)	
Report (all school types)	Count	% of total
Decrease	46(139)	15%(24%)
Increase	56(106)	19%(18%)
No change	196(343)	66%(58%)

Table 2(a) above and 2(b) below

School Type	2020-21 (2018-2019)						
	Increase		No change		Decrease		
	Qty	%*	Qty	%*	Qty	%*	
Community Schools	15 (26)	18% (21%)	53(64)	63% (51%)	16 (35)	19% (28%)	
Schools and Academies with a religious character	10 (24)	21% (19%)	33(92)	69% (73%)	5 (10)	10% (8%)	
Academy without a religious character	28 (43)	19% (16%)	96(142)	63% (54%)	25 (76)	17% (29%)	
Others (Grammar, Ind, Scot.NI etc)	13 (20)	20% (17%)	46(75)	72% (62%)	5 (25)	8% (21%)	
*NOTE: Percentage is the % of that school type and NOT % of all schools							

This data suggests that the past 12 months has been a rapid period of change for RE. It is pleasing that almost 19% respondents reported an increase in the level of provision and 15% reported a decrease. A decrease was reported in far fewer schools than in the last survey, when almost a quarter of schools reported that less RE was being taught than in the previous year. This applies to both Community Schools and Academies.

3. Has there been an increase or decrease in RE subject specialist staff for 2020-21(2018-19)?

Report	Number of responses	% total
Decrease	47(167)	16%(28%)
Increase	70(78)	23%(13%)

No change	181(344)	61%(58%)
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Table 3a (above) Table 3b (below)

Table 3a shows that there is a reverse to the situation two years ago. Although, about 6 in every 10 schools did not report a change the number of specialist RE staff, The net increase is therefore 7%. Two years ago, there was a net decline of 15%. In relation to schools with a decrease, there was very little difference in types of school. See table 3b below. It is pleasing to note that almost one in four Academies increased their specialist staff. More than one in three Schools and Academies with a religious character also increased their specialist staff.

Changes to staffing levels	2020-21					
	Increase		No change		Decrease	
School Type	Qty	%*	Qty	%*	Qty	%*
Community Schools	20	25%	50	59%	14	16%
Schools and Academies with a religious character	16	33%	24	50%	8	17%
Academy without a religious character	35	23%	92	61%	25	16%
Others (Grammar, Ind, Scot.NI etc)	2	12%	15	88%	0	0%
*NOTE: Percentage is the % of that school type that responded to the survey and NOT % of all schools						

4. What proportion of the RE provision in your school is delivered by teachers whose main time is spent in another curriculum area?

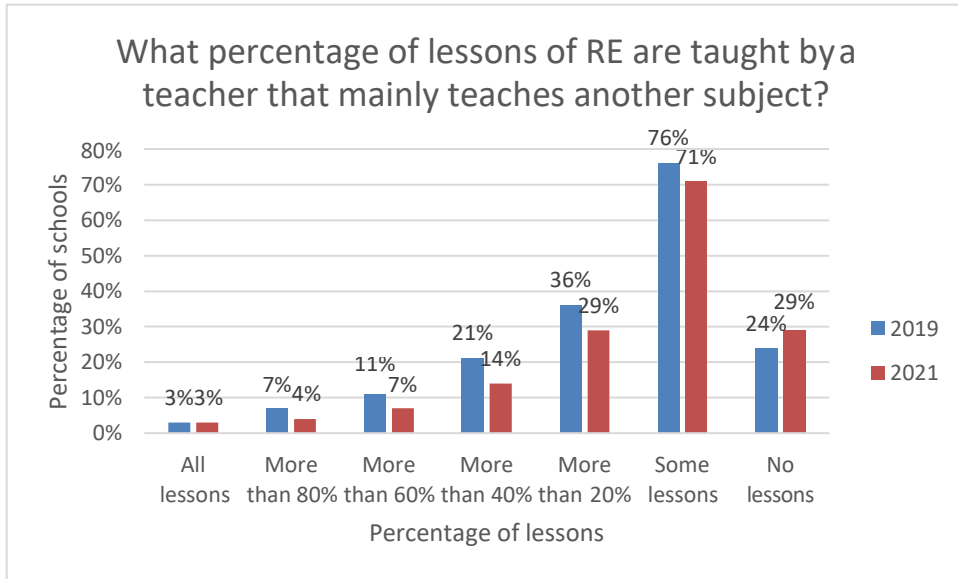


Table 4

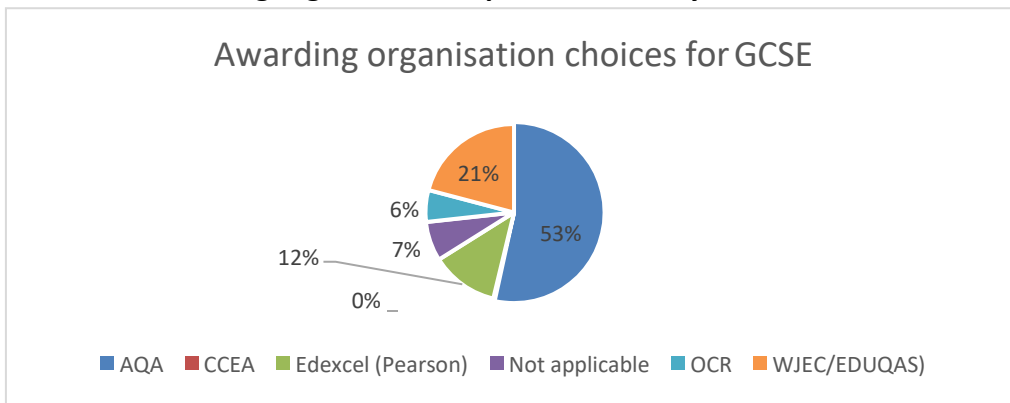
Table 5 (left) shows that in just over 7 of 10 schools of respondents reported that some RE was taught by teachers who spent most of their timetable teaching another subject. However, in all categories, fewer teachers who mainly teach another subject have been used. This is a step in the right direction, but there is a long way to go to ensure pupils receive their entitlement.

This finding is consistent with the data provided by the Department for Education’s own School Workforce Survey which found that three times as many lessons of RE as History are taught by those with no post-A level qualification in the subject.

5. Is there a subject leader specifically for RE in your school? 9% said No 91% said Yes

As mentioned earlier, this is not a surprising result given that schools with a subject leader are far more likely to be in touch with NATRE and complete this survey.

6. Which awarding organisation’s specification do you teach for GCSE?



More than half of the schools that responded to this survey have chosen AQA as their awarding organisation for GCSE. When the GCSE was reformed in 2016, AQA were the first organisation to have their specification approved.

7. Entries for Year 11 students for the GCSE Short and Full Course Religious Studies

Table 7 – What proportion of the Year 11 cohort has been or will be entered for GCSE short (left) and full course(right)?

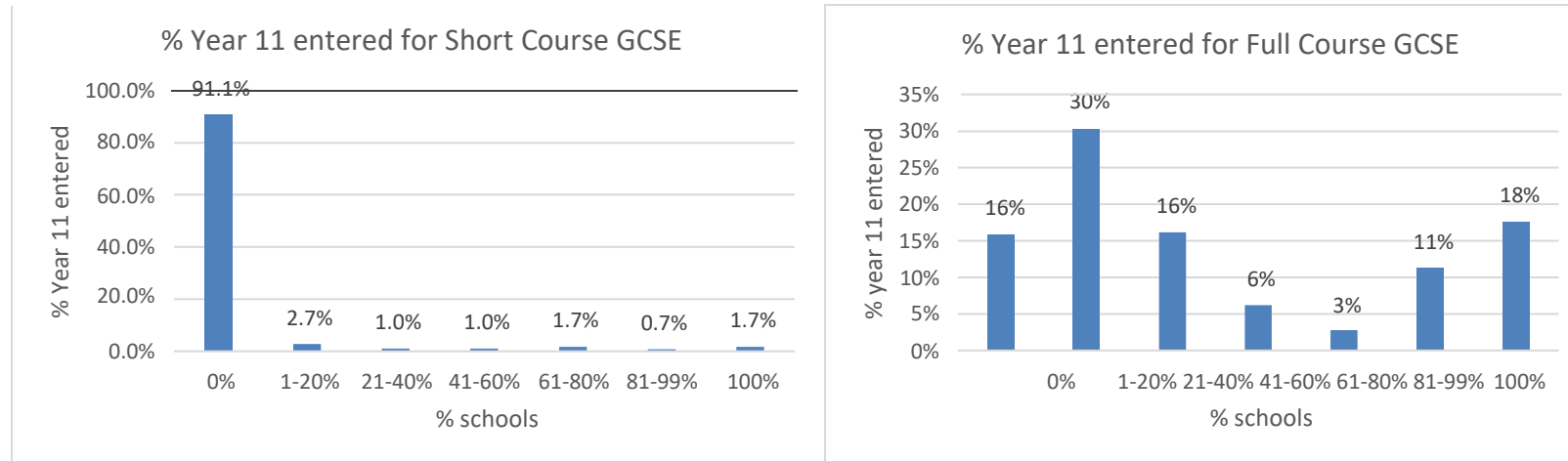
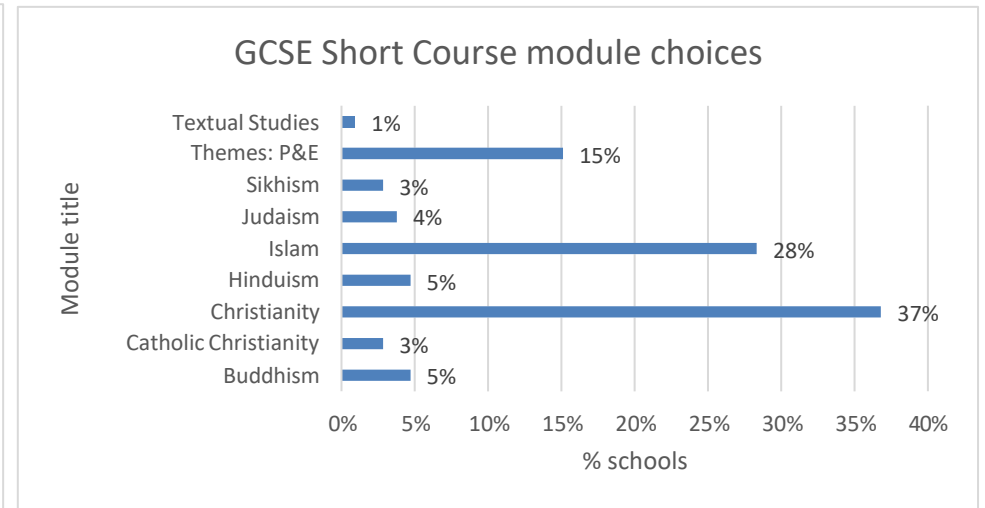
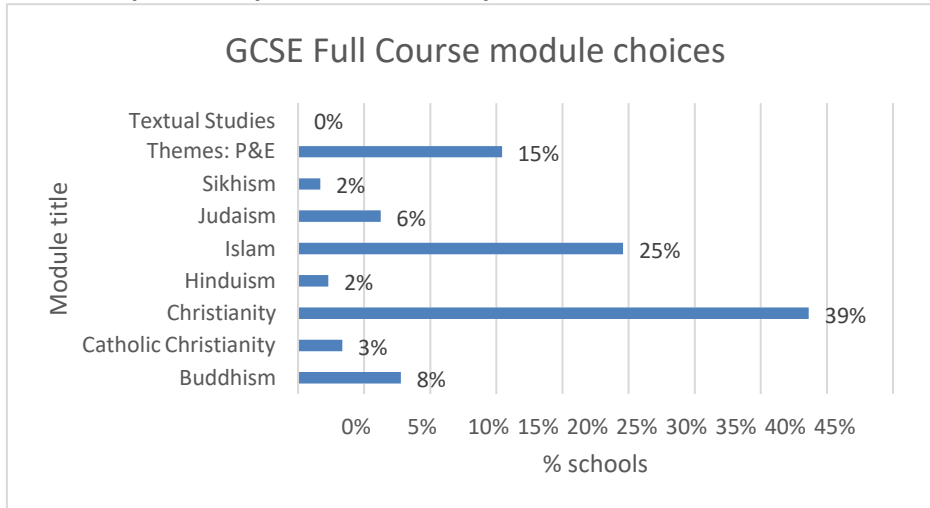


Table 6 shows that entries to the short course Religious Studies have continued to fall. The number of schools entering no students at all for this course is now 83%. Schools responding to the survey reported two reasons for this. Firstly, the impact of the English Baccalaureate meaning that there is less time on the key stage 4 timetable and secondly the removal of short course from the list of qualifications which counted in a school's average point score from 2014.

The short course grew in popularity more than ten years, particularly because it provided a formal accreditation for the core RE provision which all students should receive throughout their school careers, including key stage 4. For those students who do not wish to take a full course, it proved a powerful motivator to take their studies in RE seriously and rewarded those who worked hard with a GCSE grade. GCSE short course is awarded at the same standard as full course, but covers half the content, hence it is worth half a GCSE.

In contrast, the full course remains popular with almost one in five schools in this survey entering all students in the cohort. 84% of respondents enter at least some pupils for this course.

8. Which options do your students study for GCSE Full course?



The most frequently chosen option for GCSE full course is the study of Christianity, followed by Islam, Philosophical and Ethical themes and Buddhism. The same pattern is true for the short course except that Hinduism accounts for the same proportion of entries as Buddhism.

9. Where there has been, or is expected to be, a drop in GCSE Full Course entries; what is the main reason?

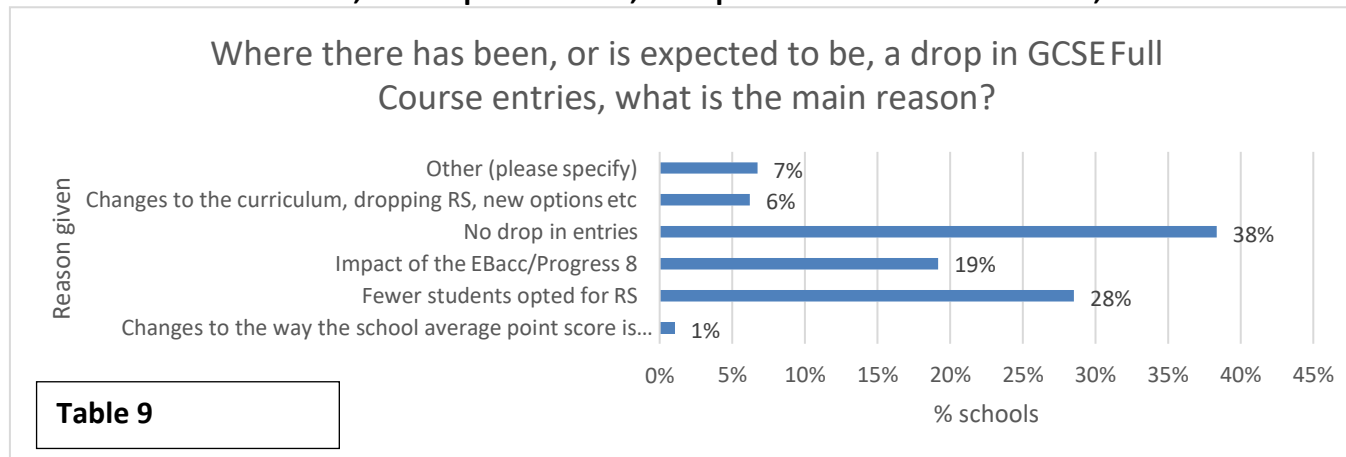


Table 9

The most frequently reported reason for a drop in entries was fewer students opting for RS. This accounted for 28% of responses. Some schools explained their answers saying the a less favourable place in options tables made RS less attractive especially when other GCSEs had been introduced such as Sociology. On the other hand, almost 4 in 10 schools reported no drop in entries.

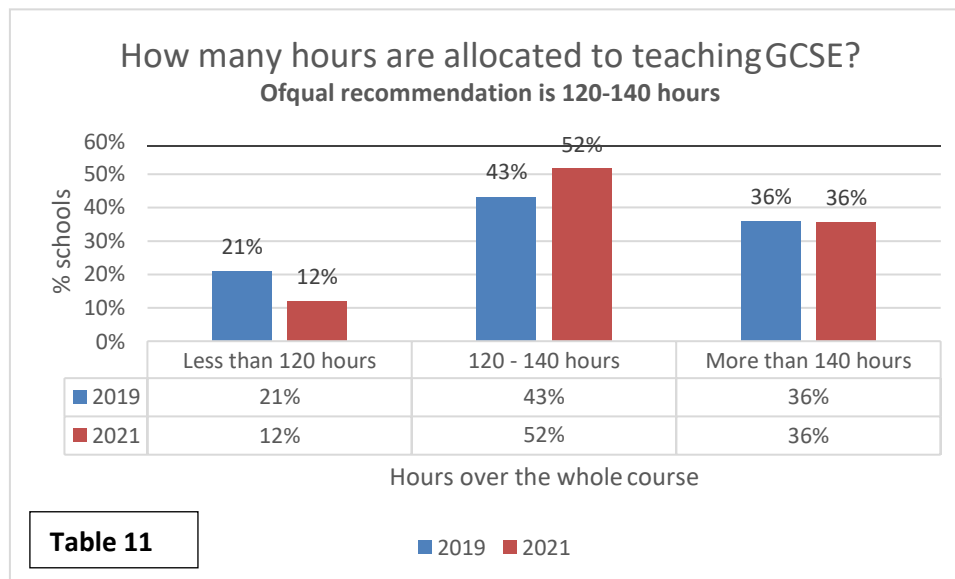
10. Changes to the way the GCSE full course is delivered

Table 10

How is the GCSE Full Course delivered?	2018-19	2020-2021
1/3 of time over 3 years (starting in Year 9)	76%	36%
1/2 of time over 2 years (starting in Year10)	24%	64%

In the two years leading to the last survey, we reported a significant trend towards teaching the GCSE full course over three years instead of two, as had previously been the norm. This trend has now been reversed and two thirds of schools now deliver GCSE over two years.

11. How much time is offered for GCSE RS examination courses?

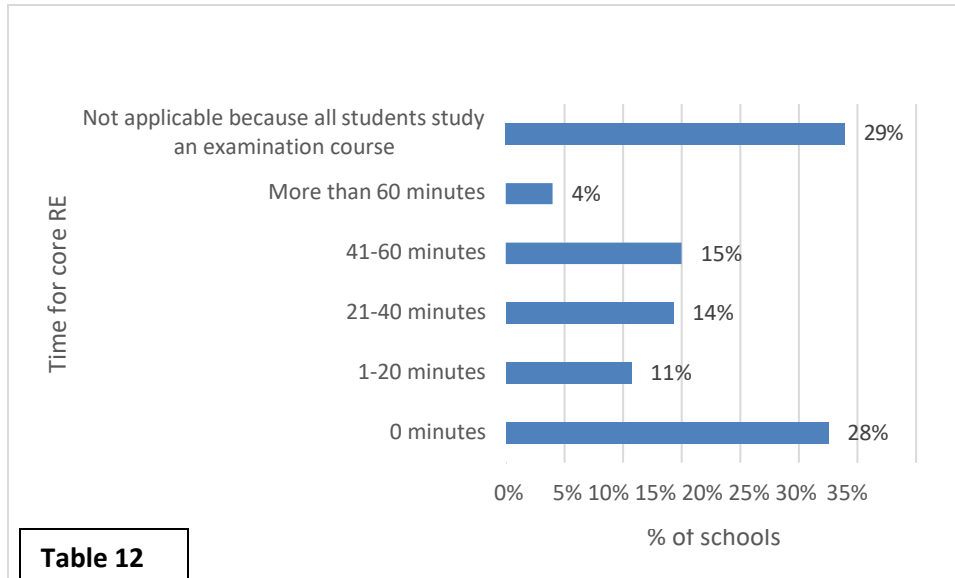


GCSE Full Course specifications are designed to be taught over a period of 120-140 learning hours. This is one of the criteria used by Ofqual when approving a specification for teaching to ensure that each GCSE is, as far as is possible, of comparable demand. Some schools are not providing sufficient time to allow the course to be taught in sufficient breadth and depth.

The number of schools adopting this practice has decreased since 2019. The most recent survey shows 88% schools offer at least the specified time whilst in 2019, only 79% did so.

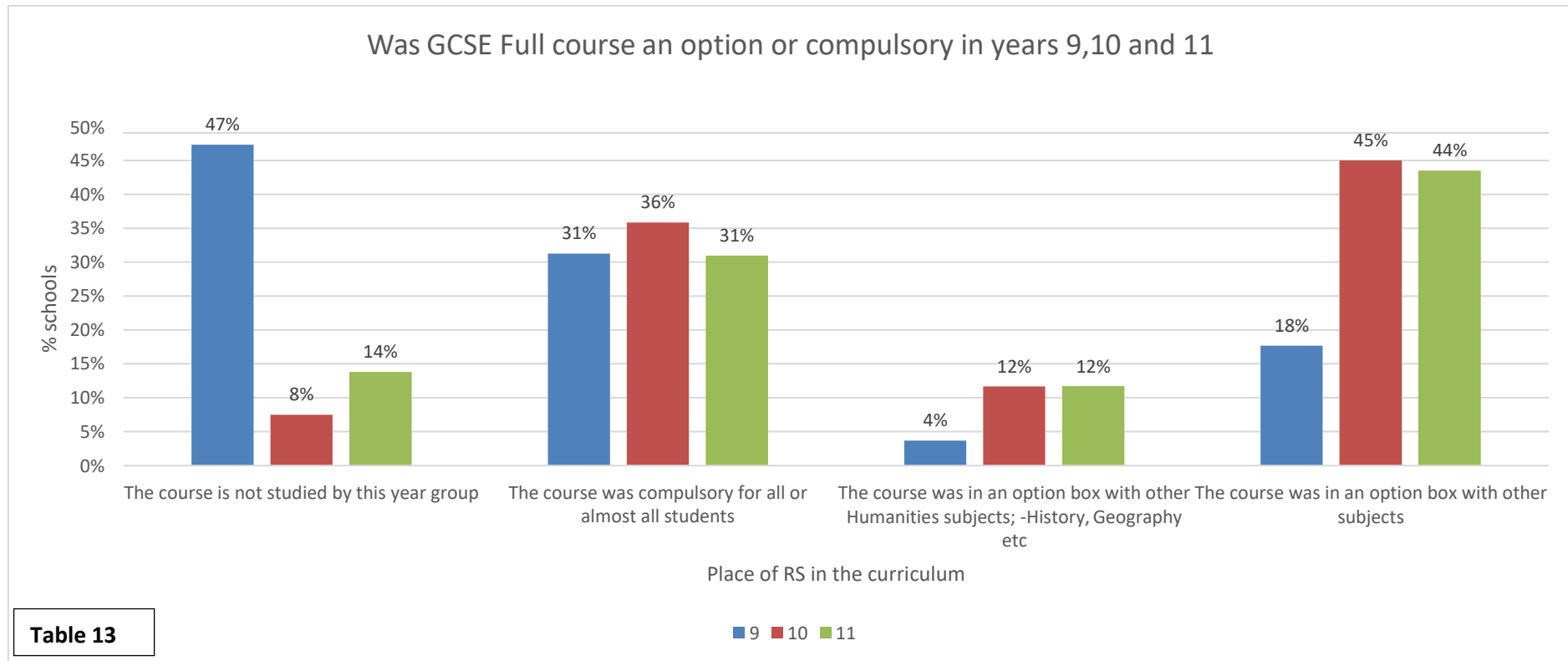
It is interesting to note the information quoted in Ofsted's recent research review which referred to issues of time having an impact on standards in Religious Education.

12. How many minutes of RE per week do students who do not study an examination course receive during key stage 4?



The positive aspect of this data is that 58% of schools reported that pupils either all study a GCSE at KS4 or have approximately one lesson per week for core RE. Unfortunately, however, 3 in every 10 schools report offering no provision outside their option system which means their curriculum will not be compliant with the law which requires all pupils in all year groups to study Religious Education. This applies to both Agreed Syllabus Schools and Academies. This requirement appears in the funding agreement academies.

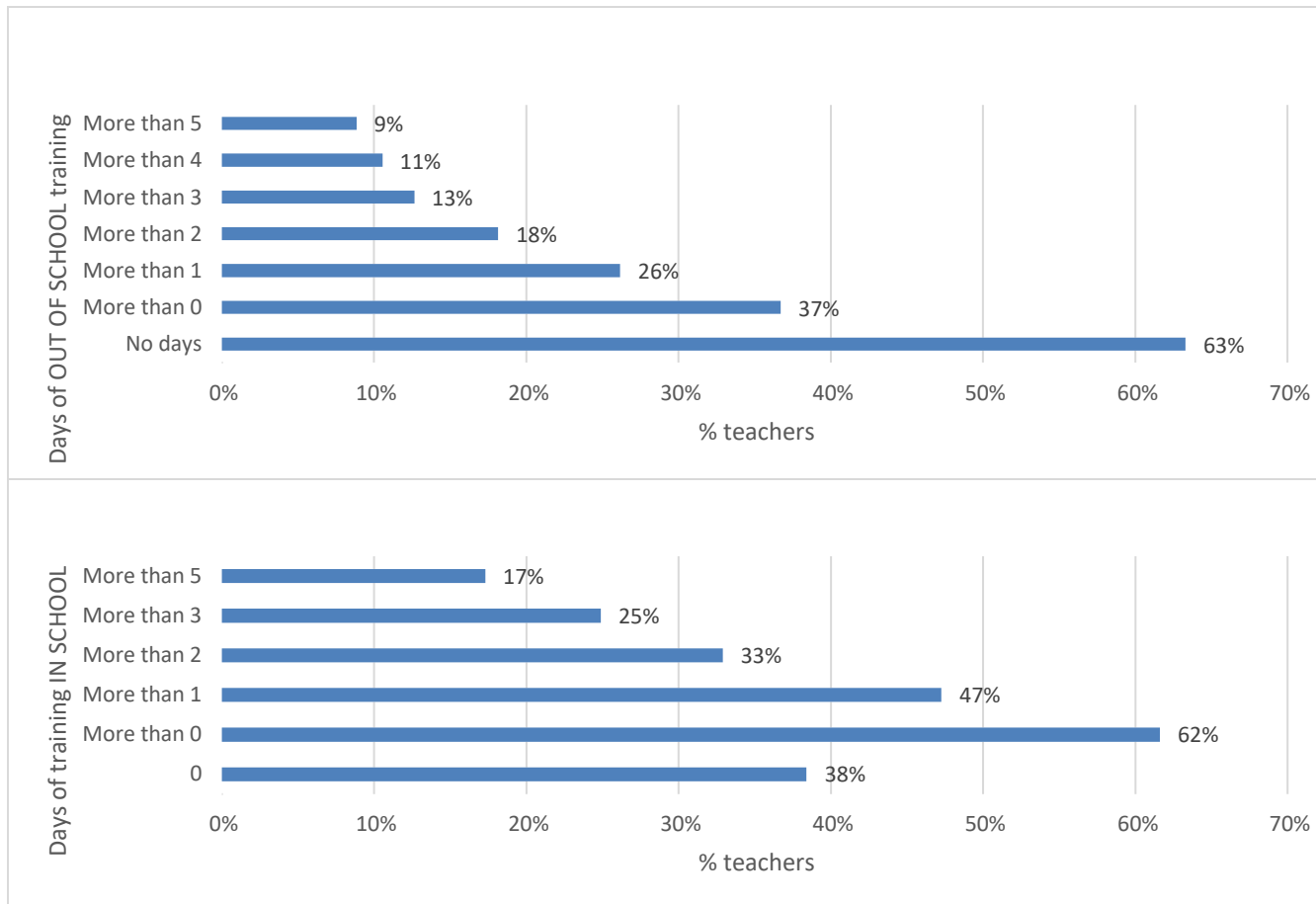
13. Where GCSE is offered, is it an option or compulsory?



Around 30% (45% in 2019) of our respondents reported that GCSE RS is compulsory for all pupils at Key Stage 4. This is common practice in schools with a religious character. In more than more than a half of schools, GCSE Religious Studies is an option either with the Humanities subjects or other subjects. Note that the evidence in table 9 above is that in almost a third of the schools that make RS an optional GCSE, there is no other provision for the subject and pupils who do not opt for GCSE RS, effectively end their Religious Education at the end of year 9 (age 13) or even year 8 (age 12).

14. How much training in Religious Education did teachers receive in the academic year 2018-2019?

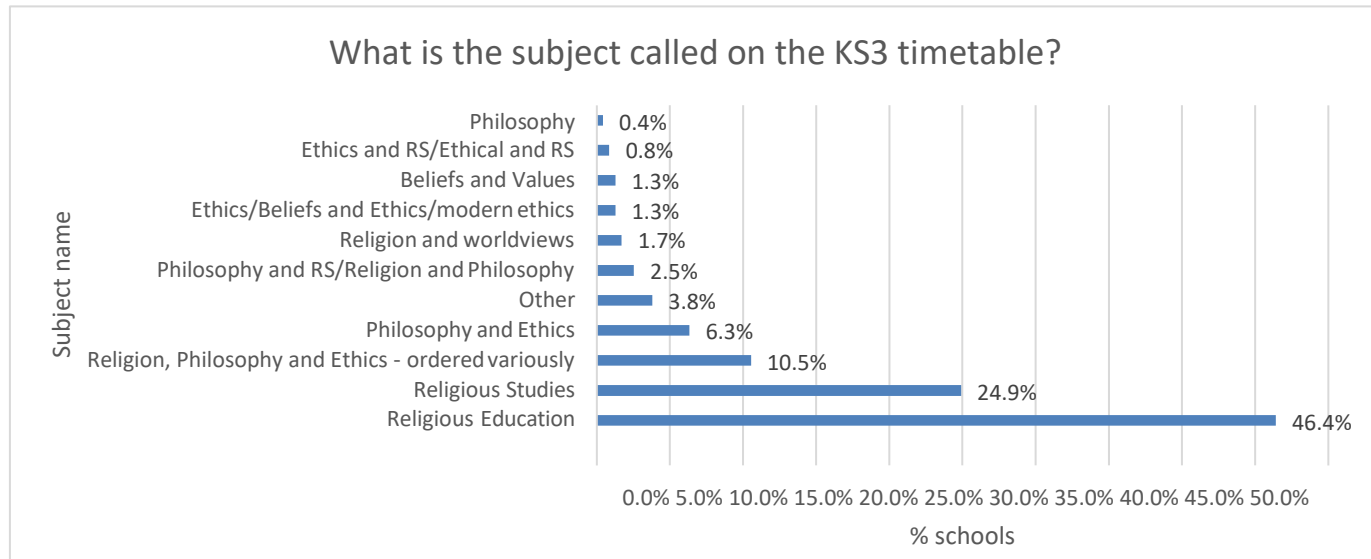
The responses to this question would indicate that the pandemic has had a significant impact of teachers' access to training, out of school. 63% of respondents reported that they had received no subject specific training out of school in the last academic year (Table 13a). In contrast, this figure was 38% in 2019. In addition, 38% reported that they had attended no training in school (Table 13b). In 2019, that figure was 48% so schools did make efforts to compensate for that fact that out of school training was not widely available. It is not clear whether respondents included online training as in-school or out of school training.



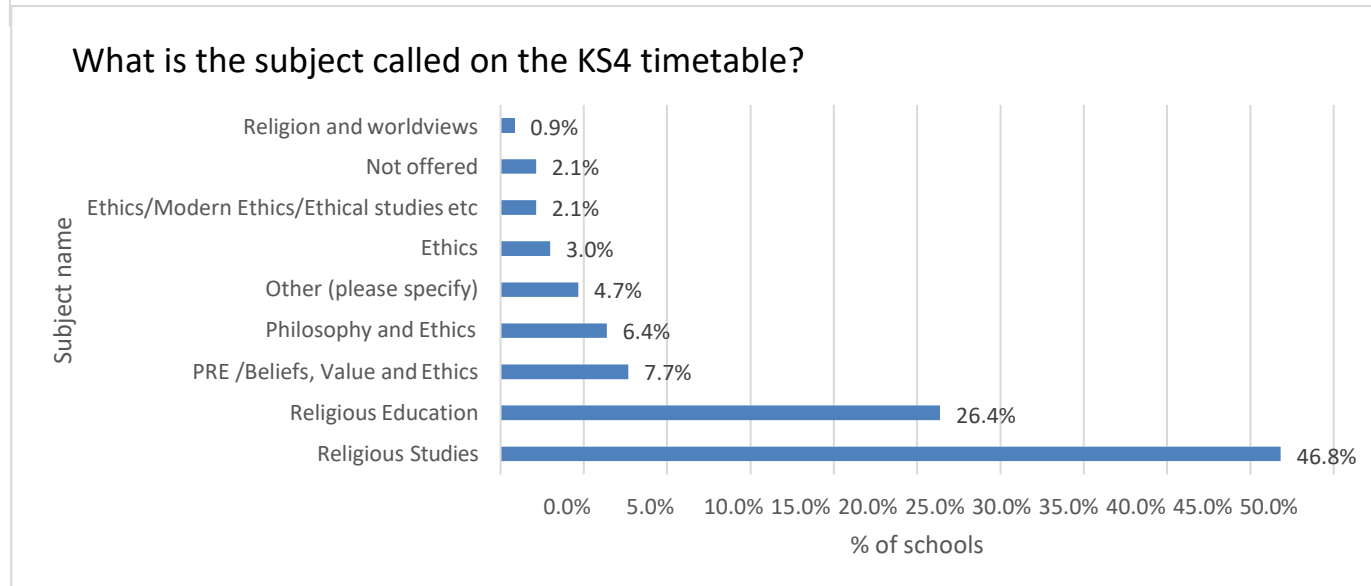
Teachers need to keep up to date with their subject; research, pedagogies and develop their subject knowledge. It is not only students that will need a recovery curriculum to help them catch up on missed learning, but teachers too. If this deficit is not addressed, it will surely have an impact on outcomes for students. The language of Ofsted framework for inspection makes it clear that school leaders, including governing boards will be held to account during an inspection where lack of training for teachers has a negative impact on pupils.

Table 14a above
Table 14b below

15. What is the subject called on the school timetable?

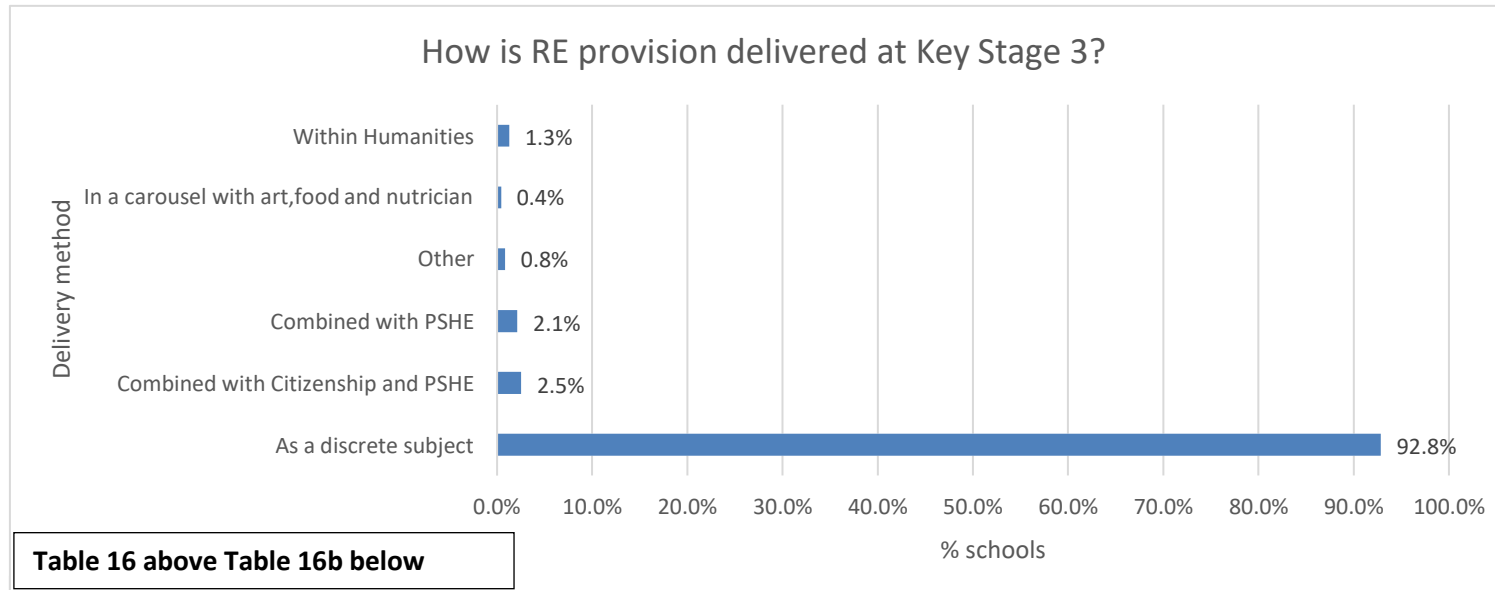


The name for the subject in legislation; Religious education, remains the most frequent response to this question in relation to Key Stage 3. In second place comes Religious Studies after which RPE, PRE and EPR (Religion, Philosophy and Ethics (in different orders) is chosen. It is interesting to see the name for the subject proposed by the Commission on RE (2018) beginning to be used, albeit in a small number of schools.

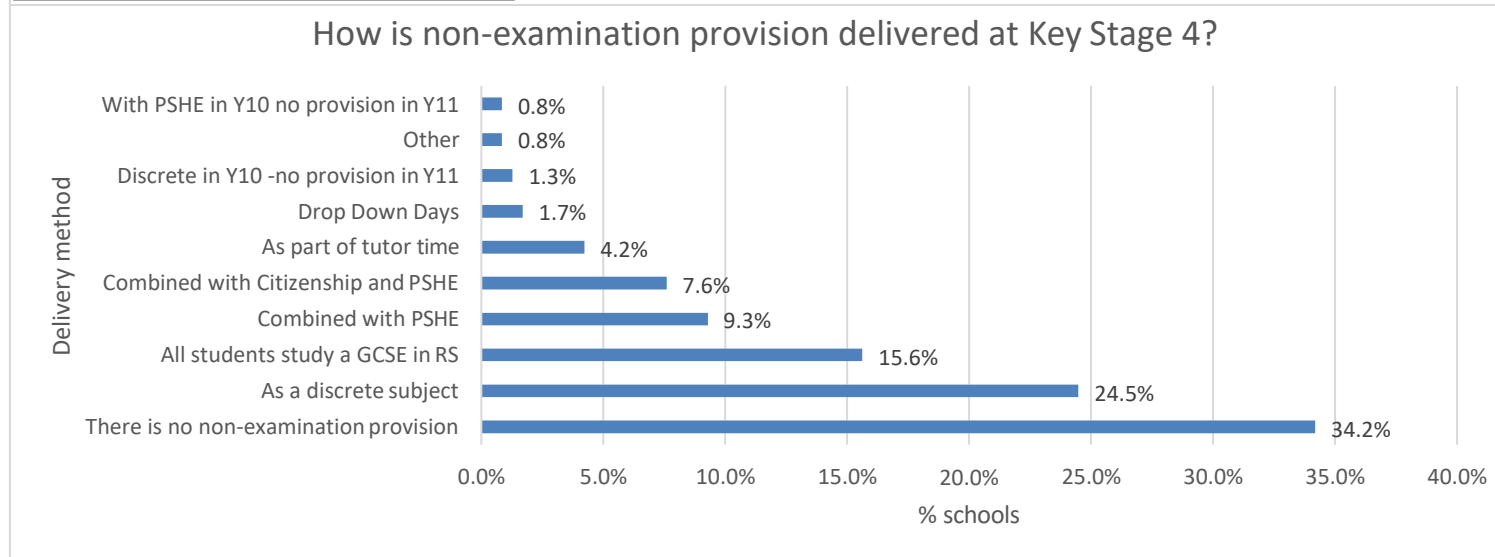


At Key Stage 4, almost half of the schools that responded to this question on the survey choose to use the name of the examination course most frequently offered at Key Stage 4; Religious Studies. The second most frequent response was Religious Education.

16. How is provision made for RE at Key Stage 3 and 4?

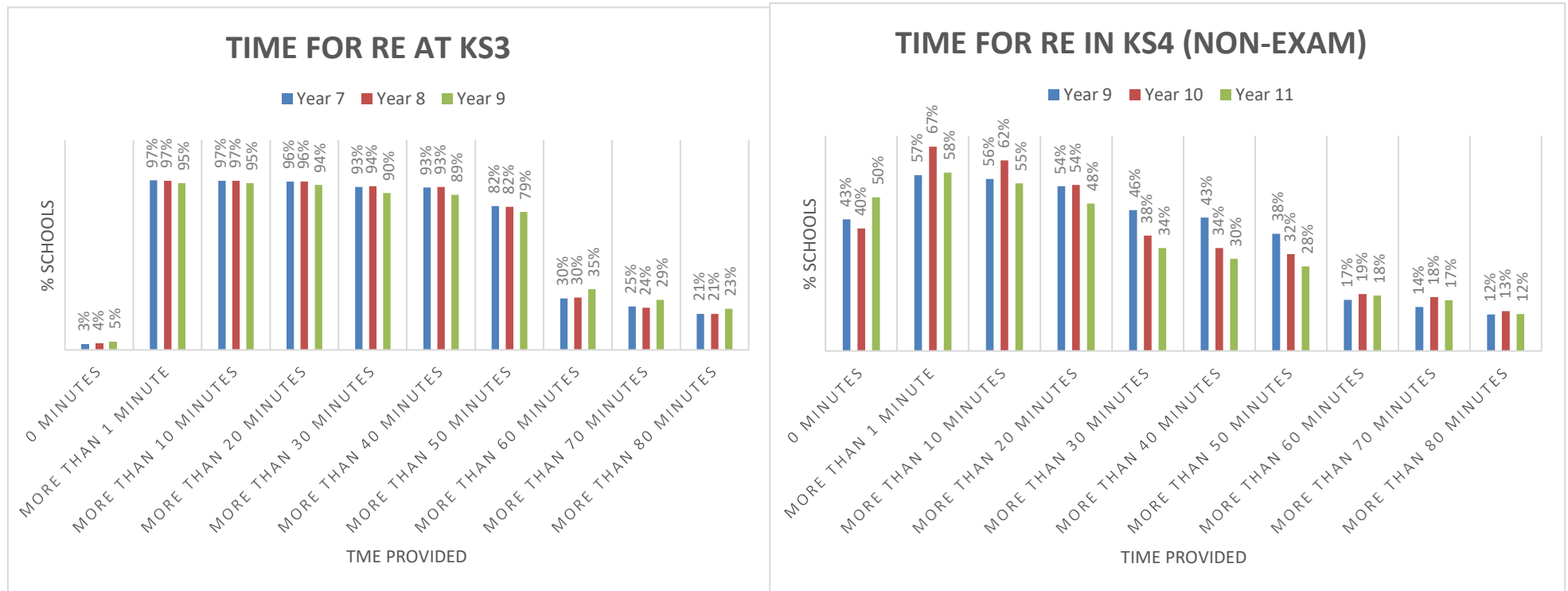


Delivery of RE as a discrete subject was the most frequent response to this question with more than 9 in 10 schools teaching RE in this way.



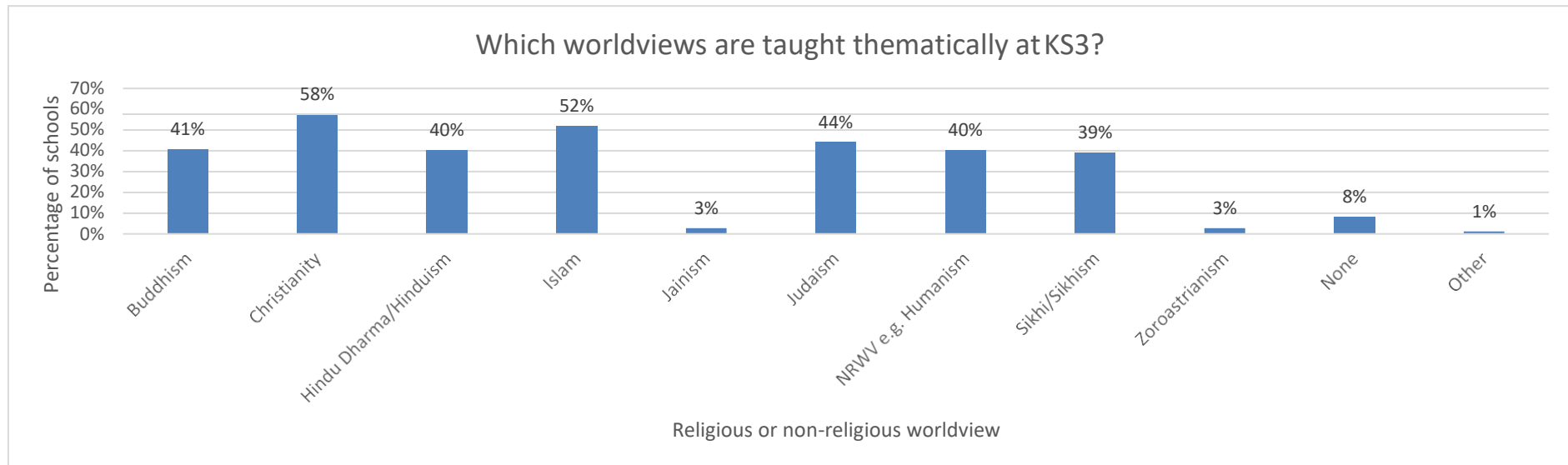
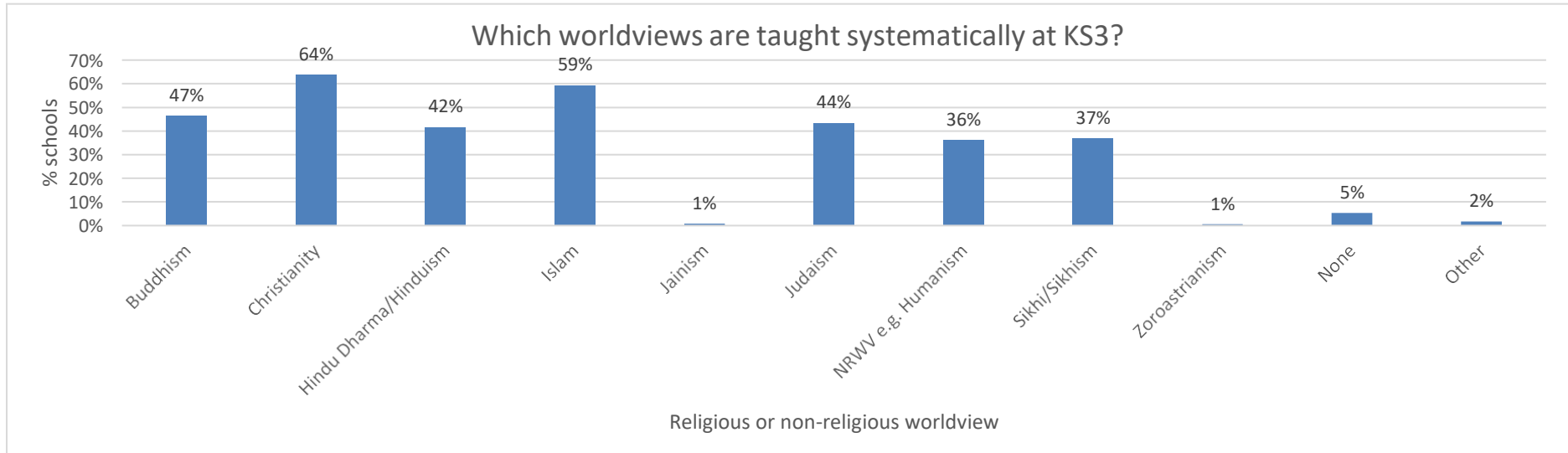
At key stage 4, the picture is more varied. More than a third of schools report that there is no non-examination provision at all (often called “core RE.” Almost a quarter of schools offer RE in a lesson that combines the subject with others or use drop down days or tutor time to provide RE.

17. Time for Religious Education at Key Stage 3 and 4



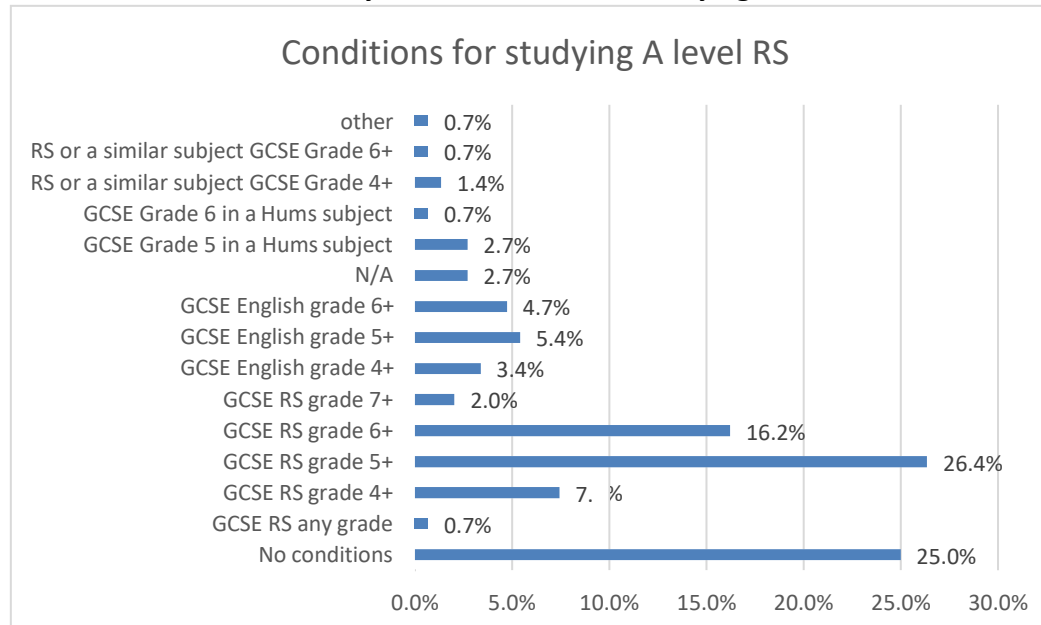
In most schools, more than 40 minutes or one single lesson is offered for RE at key stage 3 with between 3-4% offering no time at all. At key stage 4 however, the situation is very different. Between 43% and 50% offer no time at all for RE outside examination provision. This figure excludes those schools where all pupils study for the GCSE. Where year 9 is part of KS4, the time offered is similar to that reported for KS3, but in year 10 and 11, the number of schools offering more than 40% or one single lesson drops to between 30% and 40% of schools.

18. Which religious and non-religious worldviews are taught?



The level of provision for studying each religious or non-religious worldview is similar whether it is taught systematically or thematically. Christianity and Islam are most frequently taught and Buddhist, Hinduism, a non-religious worldview such as Humanism, Judaism and Sikhi/Sikhism also well represented at similar levels to each other.

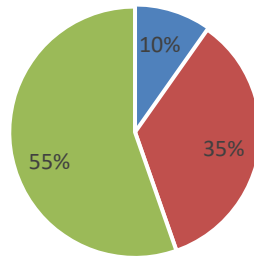
19. What conditions does your school make for studying A level RS?



One in four schools places no conditions on studying A level at all and a similar number require a GCSE at grade 5 or above. Around a half of schools require a GCSE of grade 4 or above and others require GCSE English or a specific grade in a similar subject, especially when GCSE RS was not studied.

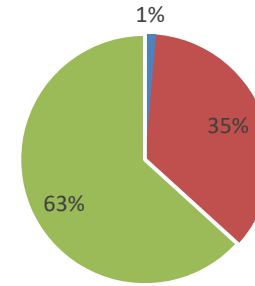
20. Number of A levels studied

In the current academic year 2020/21 how many A-levels do the majority of A-level students study at the start of the year 12?



■ Four subjects ■ Not Applicable ■ Three subjects

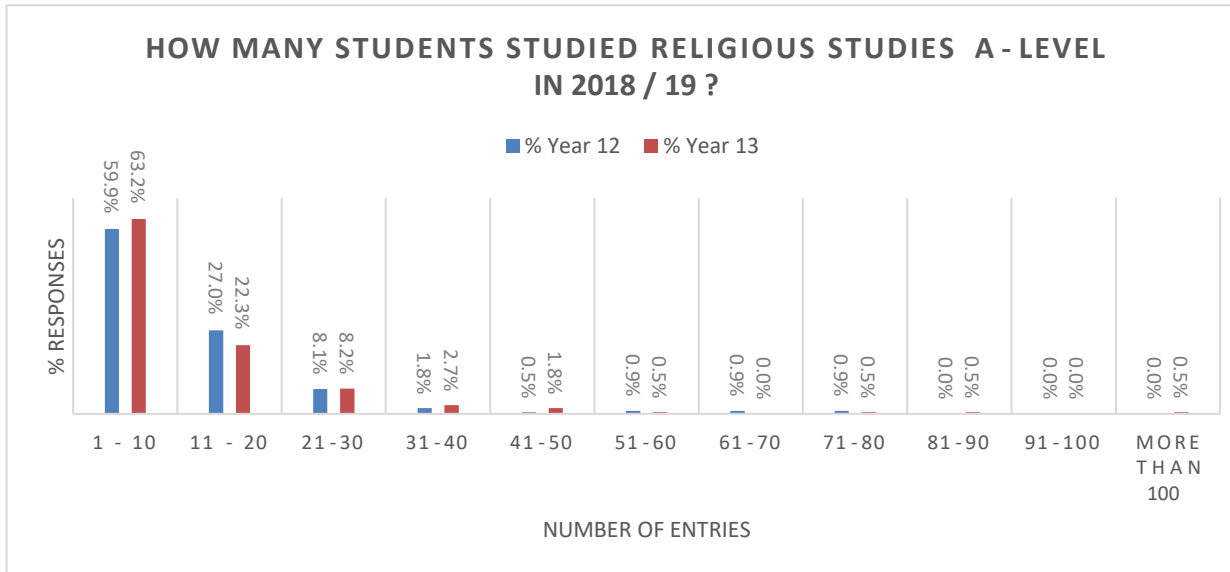
In the current academic year 2020/21 how many A-levels do the majority of A-level students study at the start of the year 13?



■ Four subjects ■ Not Applicable ■ Three subjects

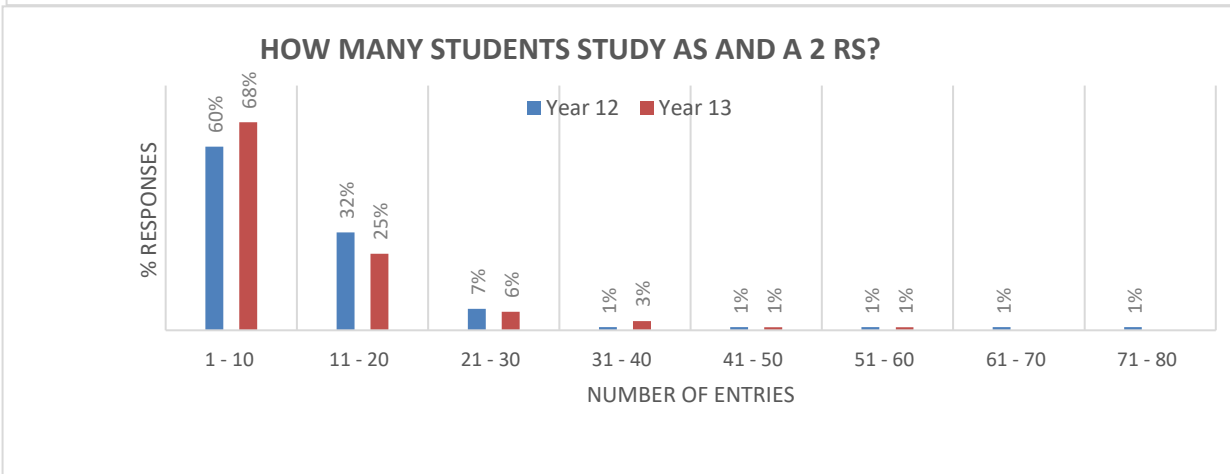
A level reform in 2016, removed the possibility of students studying an AS course and it contributing to the A2 grade. Since this change, it has become the norm for most students to study three A levels. Only 10% now study four A levels in Year 12 and this reduces to 1% in year 13.

21. How many students study A level Religious Studies?



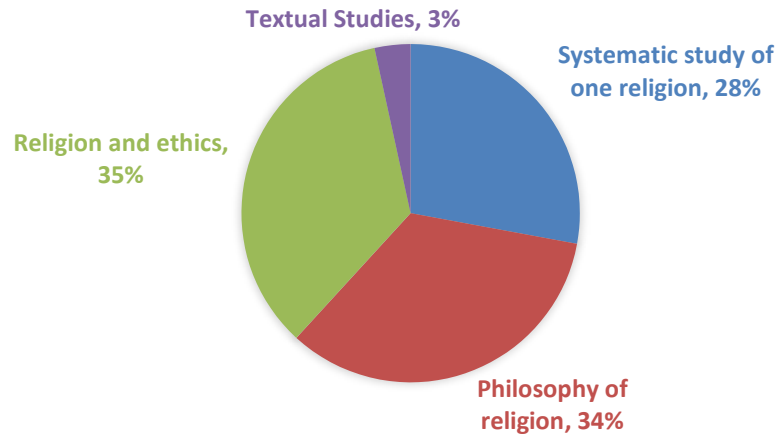
The data in these two tables reflect the slight increase in A level entries between 2019 and 2021.

1 in 3 schools reported group sizes of more than 10. In 2019, only just over 1 in 4 schools reported these figures.



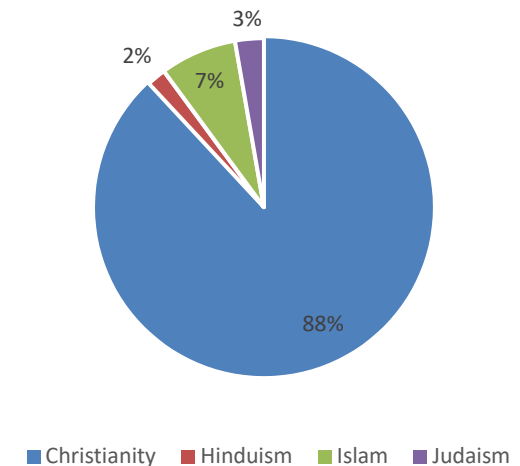
22. Module choices at A level?

WHICH THREE MODULES DO SCHOOLS SELECT?



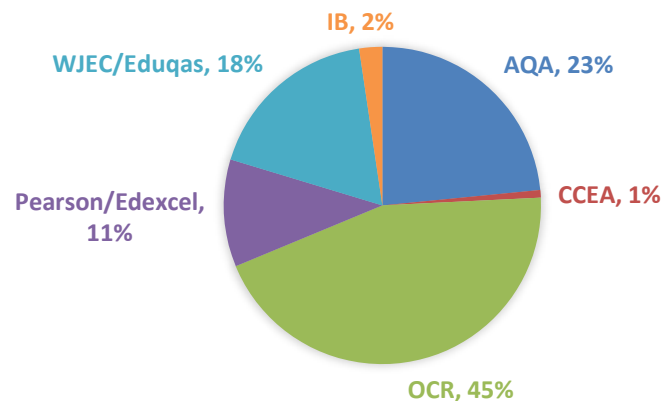
The overwhelming majority of schools offer the following three modules, systematic study of a religion, philosophy of religion and religion and ethics. Textual studies, accounts for only 3% of entries in our sample.

Which religion was chosen for A level study?



AQA and WJEC/Eduqas account for a similar proportion of A level entries, with 23% and 18% of the entries overall respectively.

% SCHOOLS WHO OFFER A LEVEL RS SELECTING THIS AWARDING ORGANISATION



23. Higher education destinations of A level RS students

66 schools reported on the destination of A level pupils and listed 424 who had gone on to study the listed degree courses. Of these, the proportion studying the following subjects was as follows:

30% Other Humanities

13% Philosophy

11% Arts

10% Theology/RS

10% Law

8% other sciences

7% Medicine/Dentistry

7% English

1% Ethics

1% Languages

0.5% Mathematics

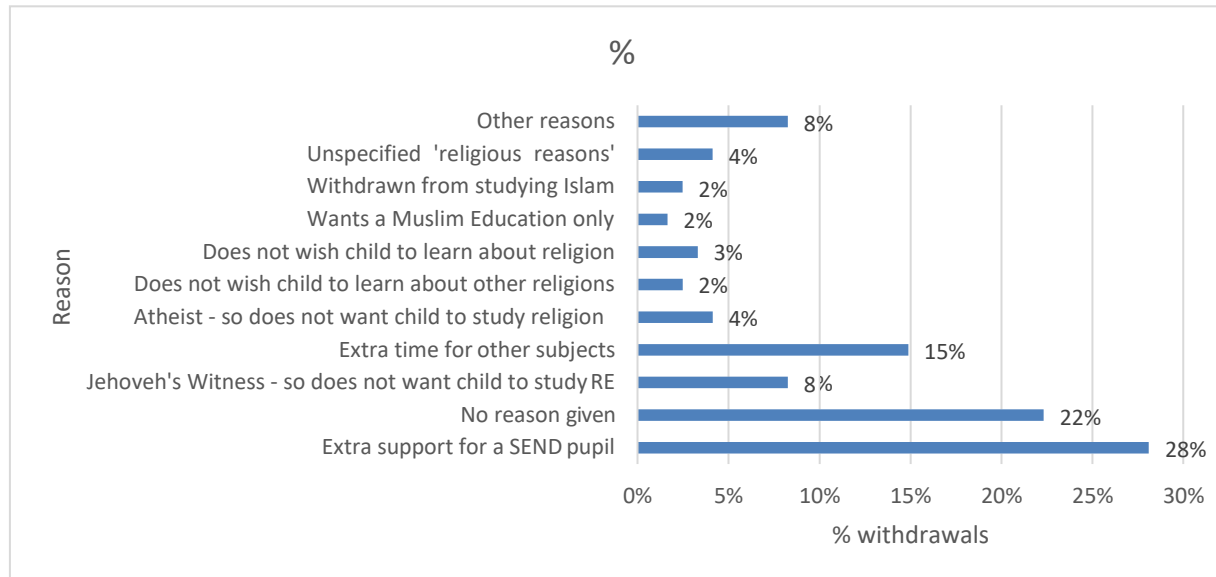
61% went on to study at a Russell Group University

39% at another University

24. Are any pupils withdrawn from RE by their parents?

80% Schools said that no pupils are withdrawn from RE
 20% Schools said that some pupils are withdrawn from RE

25. Why were pupils withdrawn (where this information was provided)?



One in five respondents reported that parents withdraw pupils from Religious Education in their school.

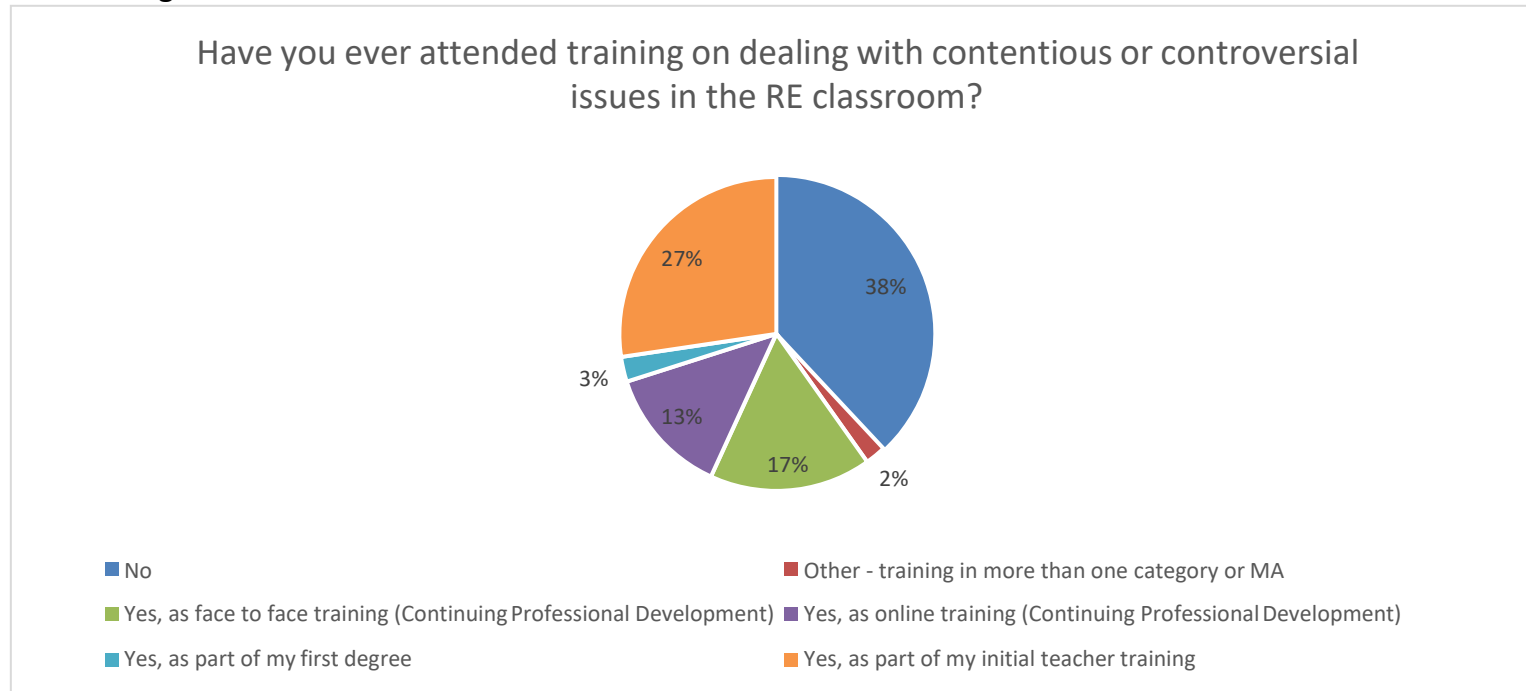
Many of the reasons given were individual and could not be categorised. A number of themes emerged. For example, in a third of the cases reported, pupils had been withdrawn for a curricular reason, such the school prioritising specific provision for a SEND pupil or to provide extra time for a different subject. These decisions fall outside the scope of the law.

In another one in six cases, the family religion or belief was cited as the reason for the withdrawal.

In almost one in ten cases, the parents stated they did not want their child to learn about any religion, something specific within RE or about Islam specifically.

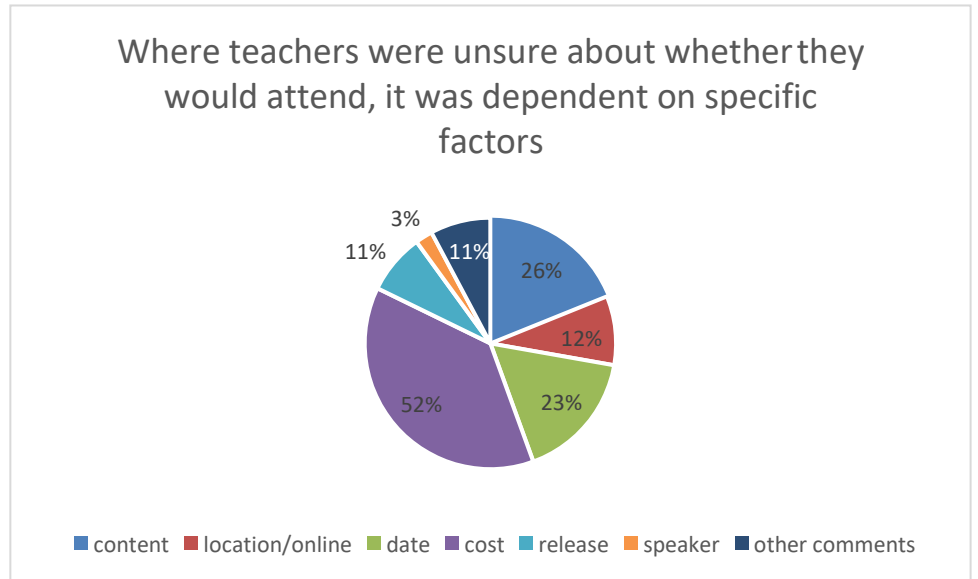
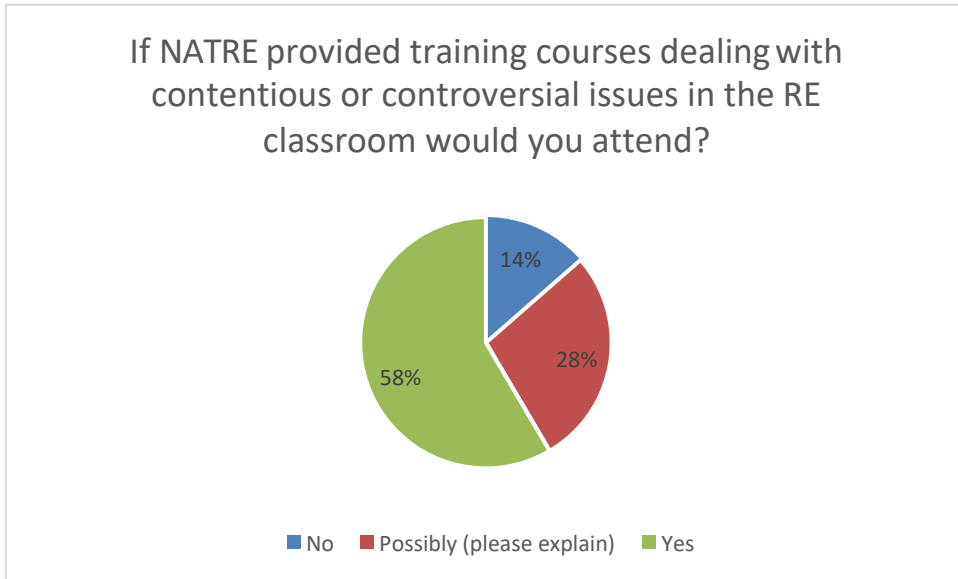
NATRE is concerned to see that there appears to be a sharp increase in the use of the right of withdrawal by schools – especially when this denies children with special educationally needs and disabilities (SEND) their legal entitlement to a religious education.

26. Training in contentious or controversial issues



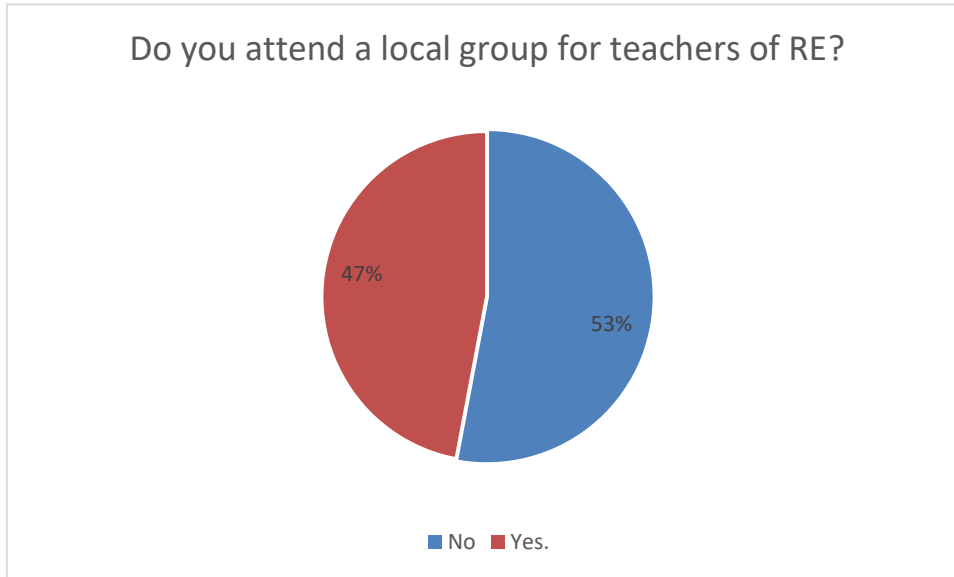
Around two-thirds of teachers had attended contentious issues training but around a third of these had not had any training in this area since qualification. Around one third of teachers had received no training at all in this area. Almost two thirds of teachers stated they would attend training if it were offered but for a further third, this was dependent on several factors. The biggest barrier to those teachers attending training was cost (several said it should be free), the next most commonly stated condition was the content and whether or not it was relevant to their context, finally, the date and time of the training was regarded as important.

27. Would teachers attend training on contentious or controversial issues if NATRE were to offer it?



Unsurprisingly, the most significant issue was cost with many teachers suggesting that it should be provided free of charge. This issue was mentioned by more than half of this group. The content and date were also suggested as important factors by around 1 in 4 teachers.

28. Local groups



Of those teachers who stated that they do not belong to a local group, two thirds asked to be put in touch with one.

Additional Comments by teachers:

1. Next year RE takes a distinct turn at my school after 21 years there and teaching RE an hour a week at KS3 and 3 hours a week at KS4. The name has changed to start with, I had to battle for everything, and this was the one the principle chose from my suggestions: Religious, Social and Moral Studies (RSMS). They have merged RE with PSHE and only given me 50% of the timetable. I wrote a huge document and created a plan (Communicated with Lat when doing this for ideas) which was agreed upon by the principle where 'RE' is taught in the Autumn & Spring Terms and the PSHE in the summer term, keeping the lessons discreet. So I managed a 2/3's split rather than 50/50. Arguing that I need to get the students the same GCSE grades as other subjects, and this is prep for that and that I need to be able to 'sell' RE to them before the options process. PSHE is going to also be delivered during tutor day and collapsed timetable days. Hist & Geog are going to 3 hrs a fortnight!!GCSE has changed also. No longer 3 years of 3 hours a week, but 5hrs over 2 weeks, but that is all option subjects. RE is in the pot with the other subjects and students 'encouraged' to take the EBACC, which doesn't leave many options for them.
2. With only one specialist teacher of RS within school the workload is very high. Time given at KS3 is NOT enough to give more than the basics.

This is a shame as a more worldview perspective would improve understanding. At KS4 students choose RS as a full GCSE. However, the rest of the KS do not receive any other input. As the numbers are slowly increasing [23 students this academic year] not including the pandemic years - the subject results have been top quality. Students have requested an A Level in philosophy for the past four years but unfortunately this has been turned down by SLT and the school has lost students to other sixth Forms

3. My concern is the value that other adults place upon RE within the school setting. I believe this mainly comes from a lack of understanding of its importance and value within the school setting. I believe headteacher's should have training to undertake on the importance of the subject to be taught by specialists and at all key stages; this is due to some important issues which need maturity due to the sensitive nature. I have certainly felt a the subject becoming less important over the last few years.
4. I leave my post after 15 years as the only RE Specialist. I am not being replaced. RE will be headed up by a History teacher and taught by 3 NQT History teachers who are unaware that they will be teaching the subject at both KS3 and GCSE full cohort in KS4
5. The school have just employed a full-time specialist RE teacher for the academic year 2021/22 The school from September 2021 will revert back to a 3 year KS3 so in year 9 pupils will be taught RE as a separate subject instead of combined with PSHE. The school looks to offering GCSE RE as an option again in the near future now a specialist teacher is reemployed but in recent years uptake has been poor, hence why it is not currently offered/taught.
6. RE is given a lot of respect in our school. The Head really values the contribution that RS has and to protect the RS provision I was given oversight of form to ensure that PSHE provision was covered. In a non-faith school, we have 6 full time teachers and deliver RE and citizenship to approx 260 students in each year group.