

Pearson response to the DfE Consultation Religious Studies GCSE and A level subject content

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A brief introduction to Pearson

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A summary of the Pearson response

Pearson welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this consultation on proposed content for reformed Religious Studies GCSEs and A levels. We also welcome the opportunities that we as an awarding organisation have been afforded to feed in to the process of shaping these content criteria, drawing on our extensive research with Higher Education Institutions, stakeholder groups, teachers and learners.

At **GCSE**, we are broadly supportive of the requirement to study two religions. We do however have significant concerns about the detail proposed in Annex A, particularly in terms of its relationship with the 'analyse and evaluate' requirement of AO2, and overlap with KS3.

At **GCE**, we support the requirements for learners to develop the knowledge, understanding and skills outlined in paragraphs 17 to 20 of the subject content. We believe that these proposals will facilitate progress to undergraduate study of Theology and Religious Studies, or a related discipline, addressing Higher Education representatives' concerns about students' lack of in-depth understanding about religion and religious beliefs. However, we cannot support the division of knowledge, understanding and skills into three approaches. The approaches are far from mutually exclusive, and the proposed structure has the potential to impact significantly on take-up of the subject by marginalising the popular and respected philosophy of religion and religious ethics pathways.

Detailed response: section 5

1) Is the revised GCSE content in religious studies appropriate? Please consider whether:

- there is a suitable level of challenge
- the content reflects what students need to know in order to progress to further academic and vocational education
- the amount of content in the qualification is appropriate and comparable to other reformed GCSEs and, if not, whether you have any suggestions for removing or adding content
- the number of optional pathways through the qualification is suitable and these present comparable levels of challenge
- there is the right balance between breadth and depth of study.

We support the expectation for all students to study two religions in GCSE Religious Studies and the majority of teachers we have consulted also support this new requirement. This will provide students with a broad understanding of religion and religious beliefs and practices. This expectation also reflects the current practice in the majority of centres teaching the Pearson Edexcel GCSE in Religious Studies. We support the inclusion of two optional pathways through the GCSE qualifications and we think these pathways meet the needs of different groups delivering the GCSE RS qualification to their KS4 students.

In its current form, we cannot however support the core knowledge and understanding listed in Annex A, which makes up 100% of the content studied in Part One of the GCSE RS qualification. We think Annex A as it stands contains a number of fundamental issues and we would like to propose improvements to the core knowledge and understanding. The majority of teachers and subject experts that we have consulted echo our concerns about Annex A.

Our view is that the core content as proposed focuses solely on developing students' knowledge of religion, and that this would enable students to meet objectives 1 and 2 in paragraph 4. However, the core content does not provide the opportunity for students to develop a deep understanding of religion. This means students would not be able to meet objectives 3 to 6 in paragraph 4, nor would they be able to demonstrate the skills required in Ofqual's proposed AO2 - particularly 'analyse' and 'evaluate' - in relation to the core content. This is due to a number of reasons: Firstly, the core content in Annex A contains a huge breadth of knowledge about religions and much of it is covered within KS3 RE courses. This means that teachers will be unable to develop a deep understanding of the religion studied in the time

given for Part One of the GCSE, and the subject content risks being highly repetitive for students. **We therefore suggest the number of required bullet points is reduced.**

Further to this, the required knowledge is not contextualised or conceptualised, and therefore it is difficult to know the level to which it has to be taught. An example of this is in the Christianity 'Practices' section, where students must learn about 'different forms of worship including liturgical, informal and individual' and 'the role of pilgrimage and celebrations'. We would recommend that at GCSE level, this section should instead focus on applying knowledge of pilgrimage and celebrations previously taught at KS3, so that students understand what Christians do to put their beliefs and values into practice and the impact of this and their faith on their daily lives. There are a few instances of where the content is presented in a more appropriate way - for example, in the Christianity 'Forms of expression and ways of life' section, students are required to understand 'the significance and meaning of at least three forms of art'. Here it is clear that students need to make a judgement about the extent to which religion in art impacts on the lives and faith of Christians. **We therefore recommend that the bullet points are reworded to make the breadth and depth requirements clear.**

Currently, much of the proposed core content does not allow for assessment of the 'analyse' and 'evaluate' elements of AO2. To analyse and evaluate elements of this annex would be far beyond what is expected of a GCSE-level learner. For example, it is not appropriate to expect a GCSE candidate to be able to evaluate 'one of the Church's great visual artists, for example Raphael, Michelangelo or other Catholic devotional artists', nor to be able to evaluate core beliefs such as the Buddhist Noble Truths or the Christian belief in the 'Oneness of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit'. **We appreciate that knowledge of these fundamental beliefs and teachings is important; however we would recommend that the bullet points are reworded so that students are required to understand the impact and significance of religious beliefs and teachings on individuals, communities and societies.**

The religions included in Annex A have not been presented in a comparable way and this may lead to different outcomes across specifications. An example of this can be seen in the 'Forms of expression and ways of life' sections in Christianity and Catholic Christianity. The Catholic Christianity section is highly prescriptive and the content is not contextualised, whereas the Christianity section is worded in a more open way and makes it clear that the students need to develop the skill of

evaluating the significance of art forms on Christians. We think the wording in the Christianity section may lead to a more in-depth understanding of forms of expression. **We therefore recommend that the bullet points are reworded so that the requirements for breadth and depth of knowledge and understanding are comparable across the all the religions included in the annex.**

Finally, we believe that the core content does not currently enable GCSE specifications to meet all of the aims and objectives in paragraphs 3 and 4. Specifically, the core content does provide the scope to study non-religious beliefs, however knowledge and understanding of non-religious beliefs will only be developed if theme 'i' from Part Two is studied - and there is no requirement for specifications to offer this theme. **Therefore we suggest that the reference to 'non-religious beliefs' is removed from paragraph 3.**

2) Is the revised A level content in religious studies appropriate? Please consider:

- whether the content reflects what students need to know in order to progress to undergraduate study.

3) Is the revised AS qualification content in religious studies appropriate? Please provide evidence to support your response

We support the requirements for students to develop the knowledge, understanding and skills in paragraphs 17 to 20 of the subject content. We believe that these paragraphs outline what students need to know and be able to do in order to progress to an undergraduate study of Theology and Religious Studies, or a related discipline. We believe these requirements will address Higher Education representatives' concerns about students' lack of in-depth understanding about religion and religious beliefs. We strongly support the requirement for all AS and A level specifications to develop students' ability to interpret religious texts and/or other sources of authority, and this requirement is also supported by the majority of teachers we have consulted.

We support the intentions of the aims and objectives in paragraph 3 and believe they reflect what students need to know and be able to do in order to progress to undergraduate study. However, we do require clarification as to whether awarding organisations will be required to directly assess all the aims and objectives, particularly in relation to bullet points 1 and 4 in paragraph 3. We believe it would be challenging to directly assess some of the attributes and abilities referenced in

the aims and objectives in an examined assessment. **Our recommendation is that awarding organisations should not be required to assess these aims and objectives directly.**

We do not support the division of knowledge, understanding and skills into three approaches. This is because the three approaches in this section are not mutually exclusive. A student studying a religion from a philosophical approach at AS or A level could develop a critical understanding of religious beliefs and how religious texts are interpreted. In addition, the study of the nature and existence of God or ultimate reality could appropriately be studied from a philosophical approach and/or a textual studies approach. We recognise that stakeholders believe that philosophy of religion and religious ethics pathways need to be accompanied by a stronger understanding of religious beliefs and we believe that it is possible to address this issue by strengthening the knowledge and understanding requirements for philosophy of religion and religious ethics, so that these pathways are rooted in the study of religious beliefs. Our research has indicated that if we are required to follow the structure set out in the revised subject content, then the respected and popular philosophy of religion and religious ethics pathways will be marginalised and this will result in a dramatic decline in entries for AS and A level Religious Studies. **We strongly recommend that awarding organisations should be able to develop, combine or cross reference the required content and approaches in any way appropriate to the specification as long as the overall criteria are met, and that a statement should be included in the subject content to this effect.**

We do not support the content included in paragraph 9 as it stands. This is because a systematic study of religion is a highly specialised area of study and will be of limited appeal to students. Aspects of the content appear to crossover with KS3- and GCSE-level study of religion. For example in bullet point 3, it is stated that AS and A level study should include practices including prayer, medication, ritual, festivals and celebration. This is similar to the wording in the GCSE Religious Studies Annex A, which includes a section of practices. **We suggest this bullet point is removed from the subject content.**

Paragraph 4 states that the subject content section sets out the minimum range of content for AS and A level specifications. We believe this statement is unhelpful because it does not set out the expected minimum range and it implies that awarding organisations will be able to develop additional, non-core content. We believe the proposed content equates to 100% of a feasible AS and A level

specification in Religious Studies. **We recommend that the reference to a 'minimum range of content' is removed, or otherwise clarified.**