

Religious education falling out of favour with GCSE pupils

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According to research from the Religious Education (RE) Council, the numbers of students taking Religious Studies GCSE has fallen for the first time in 18 years.

The analysis – produced by the RE Council and National Association of Teachers of Religious Education – showed that while the number of students taking the full Religious Studies GCSE has increased by 10.6% (representing more than 239,000 16-year olds), that growth has been wiped out by an almost 30% drop in the number of pupils taking the short course, which is worth half a GCSE. This is equivalent to an overall drop of 9%.

The RE Council, which has been agitating for 'strengthened' RE provision in schools ascribes this drop to the Government's refusal to include Religious Studies in the new E-Bacc, a performance measure linked to five GCSE subjects.

The Government policy of no longer recognising GCSE short courses as a benchmark of a schools performance was also causing some schools to stop promoting them, claimed the RE Council.

The Council's chairman, John Keast, was concerned at the decline in the short course, saying it showed "fewer teenagers are being given the chance to experience good quality religious education."

However, there is a suspicion among some educationalists that the Religious Studies short course is so easy and requires no homework that many teenagers were including it simply because it was an almost guaranteed addition to their pass rate with very little effort required.

The Church Times reports that RE specialists and church leaders are worried by the decline in Religious Studies. It quoted Ed Pawson, who chairs the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education as saying: "RE is a core part of Britain's education system but, as this year's results show, while the need for religious literacy has never been greater, it is becoming harder for schools to provide good RE."

A "national curriculum-style review" of religious education carried out by the RE Council is due to be published next month, and the proponents of RE are to argue for the reinstatement of the GCSE short course as a contribution to school-performance outcome.

Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Society, said: "These are powerful vested interests that are arguing for a greater emphasis on religion in schools, and they have the ear of the Government.

"But it is time that we asked some fundamental questions about the lack of objectivity in the provision of religious education in schools.

"Mainstream 'faith leaders' are also abusing their place in the education system in a desperate effort to revive their flagging membership. The Church of England and the Catholic Church are quite openly using their schools for proselytising – and the Government thinks this is not only

acceptable, but a good thing."

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