

Response from National Secular Society to the Education Committee's call for evidence into the English Baccalaureate.

8 March 2011

1. The National Secular Society is Britain's only organisation working exclusively towards a secular society. The Society promotes the separation of religion and state, and seeks a society where law and the administration of justice are based on equality, respect for Human Rights and objective evidence without regard to religious doctrine or belief.
2. We welcome the opportunity to comment on the proposed English Baccalaureate (EBac). The National Secular Society remains neutral on the desirability of an English Baccalaureate qualification; we intend to limit our response to our area of expertise and comment only on the choice of subjects included in the EBac, in particular the decision to omit Religious Education (RE).
3. The NSS welcomes the decision not to include RE as one of the core EBac subjects. A stated aim of the EBac is to recognise the success of those students who attain GCSEs or iGCSEs at grade A*-C across a core of academic subjects.
4. We maintain that the current arrangements for the provision of RE precludes it from being considered as a core academic subject.
5. The Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, has stated that the subjects included in the EBac should be considered as "essential academic knowledge that students should be able to master". Religion is clearly an important political and ideological phenomenon and the NSS can appreciate the potential value of a serious academic subject that teaches a variety of worldviews. However, we see no evidence to suggest that RE as presently arranged, meets this description. The fact that many schools are still permitted to teach confessional RE seriously undermines any argument that RE should be considered a rigorous academic subject. Indeed, the Russell Group of universities concurs that RE is not one of the subjects that they expect students to have if they are to go on to leading universities.
6. Proponents of the inclusion of RE point to the popularity of this subject. It is true that RE has gained in popularity, with the number of students studying it to GCSE level climbing from 113,000 to 460,000 over the last 15 years. However, there is evidence to suggest

that this rise in popularity is largely down to the fact that many schools and students alike regarded RE as being a 'soft' subject in which obtaining a good grade is relatively easy. This has been seen as mutually beneficial for both pupils and schools keen to climb league tables. Another reason for this 'popularity' is the fact that many faith schools remove the element of choice and *require* pupils to study RE at GCSE level.

7. The NSS has long opposed current arrangements for RE provision that make it a compulsory subject, outside of the National Curriculum, with a curriculum determined by Agreed Syllabus Conferences (ASC) and monitored by Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (SACREs). We also oppose the provisions that permit some faith schools to teach RE in accordance with the tenets of the faith of the school.
8. We maintain that any syllabus for a subject that covers religion and belief should be taken out of the hands of the religious establishment. Religious groups and representatives should have no privileged input and any syllabus should be nationally determined by independent educationalists without a confessional religious agenda.
9. SACREs do not require any non-religious representatives. Where non-religious representatives are members of the SACRE, they are the only representatives denied the power to vote. Such a system suggests there is a covert objective of RE – to promote the belief systems of the individual members of the SACREs. The correct objective of RE should instead be to provide pupils with a balanced and objective academic knowledge of religious beliefs and non-religious worldviews. Until this is the situation we see no grounds that merit its inclusion in the EBac.
10. In voluntary aided schools and academies with a religious character, the RE syllabus is permitted to be confessional. This means that such schools are free to teach their own denominational syllabus in accordance with the tenets of the faith of the school, which need not even mention the existence of any other denomination or belief. This permission to proselytize clearly demonstrates that RE should not be regarded as an objective academic subject and in itself provides a compelling reason to omit it from the EBac.
11. The current arrangement for RE has resulted in 'patchy' provision. A 2010 Ofsted Report entitled *Transforming Religious Education*¹, published on June 6th 2010, criticized the quality of RE provision at both primary and secondary levels. RE was rated as "inadequate" in one in five secondary schools in England. Ofsted also suggested many teachers were unsure of what they were trying to achieve in the subject. The Report recommended a 'review of the current statutory arrangements for the local determination of the RE curriculum, to ensure that these provide the best means of promoting the high quality and consistency of RE in schools'.
12. In 2005 a report by the QCA² found that – in terms of breadth and balance – only a third of schools had a 'good' RE curriculum.
13. The 2007 Ofsted report *Making sense of Religion*³ recommended that the RE syllabus should explore the "social reality of religion". Unfortunately the latest non-statutory guidance offers no such advice. The Ofsted report recommended that "We should

¹ <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Browse-all-by/Documents-by-type/Thematic-reports/Transforming-religious-education>

² <http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=2174430>

³ <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Browse-all-by/Education/Curriculum/Religious-education/Secondary/Making-sense-of-religion>

dispense with the notion that we should encourage pupils to think uncritically of religion as a 'good thing'. Religion is complex and its impact is ambiguous. Pupils are aware of this ambiguity and must be given the opportunity to explore the issues openly".

14. Another stated aim of the EBac is to provide an incentive for schools to drive the take-up of individual subjects that will provide students with a properly rounded academic education. We see no compelling reason to incentivise the take-up of RE when every maintained school in England is already obliged to teach it and many faith schools already make it a compulsory GCSE subject for all pupils.
15. Many advocates of RE have claimed that its inclusion in the EBac is essential for community cohesion. As RE is *already* a compulsory subject, we hope the committee will not find favour with this false argument.
16. Even if RE were not compulsory, the fact that many faith schools are permitted to teach confessional RE casts serious doubt over the claim that RE is the ideal vehicle for good community cohesion. Even in community and voluntary aided schools, we question the appropriateness of using RE as a tool for achieving community cohesion. Doing so often leads to a biased presentation of the positive aspects of religion that ignores or glosses over the much more visible negative ones – mainly about armed conflict and terrorism. The bias also evades religious and moral questions such as attitudes to homosexuality, women's rights and start and end of life matters, where religious positions are often at variance with Human Rights.
17. While the non-statutory framework on RE also provides for "secular philosophies" and "secular world views" to be included within the syllabus, this is often ignored by ASCs and SACREs.
18. We maintain that cohesion is best served by children and young people recognising shared values and what they hold in common. Such work could be successfully covered by other educational provision such as school assemblies (with the collective worship element removed) or citizenship classes rather than RE, which inevitably emphasises difference and fits people into a particular religious categories which has a tendency to create barriers. Moreover, children are categorised according to the religion of their parents, often before they are old enough to make up their own minds. If community cohesion is the goal, the emphasis should be taken off religion which is so often the cause of division in society.
19. We conclude that there is no rational case for the inclusion of RE and we fully support the decision to omit it. We believe the current poor provision of RE is short-changing pupils. Any decision to include RE as part of the EBac would only serve to increase this disservice to young people, who deserve better from our education system.