

Majority of Britons see religious studies as unimportant

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The British public considers religious studies one of the least important subjects which secondary schools teach, according to a YouGov [poll](#).

The National Secular Society has responded by reiterating its call for "fundamental reform" of the way religion and belief issues are taught in schools.

YouGov asked a sample of the British public how important they considered 18 subjects. The poll placed religious studies 15th, ahead only of Drama, Classics and Latin.

More than half of respondents said RS was either 'not very important' or 'not at all important', with more than a quarter saying the latter. Just 12% said it was 'very important'.

In contrast 60% of people said citizenship was either 'very important' or 'quite important' and 85% said the same about sex and relationship education, which came fifth on the list. Last week the NSS [told](#) the Government that young people's access to sex education should not be restricted on religious grounds.

RS was far behind the other traditional humanities: history gained the support of 84% of people and geography 83%. 'Religious education' was not included on the list.

The NSS's education campaigner, Alastair Lichten, said: "While there is value in learning about different worldviews and their influence in society, these findings should prompt questions about the hubris of those that overstate the importance of religion in society and wish to elevate its status."

In December the NSS [called](#) for a new national entitlement for religion and belief education to ensure pupils learn about a diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews and an end to local determination of the way it was taught. This was in response to a report by the Commission on Religious Education which [said](#) RE in England faces "a perilous future" unless it is subject to "strategic, urgent intervention".

Mr Lichten said: "All children and young people should be entitled to a basic, broad and balanced education about different worldviews. But with little enthusiasm for religious studies, as this poll reveals, it's questionable whether a specific timetabled subject called 'religious education' is the best way to achieve that."

In July Luxembourg's Government set a precedent in this regard when it announced plans to [replace](#) religious education lessons with 'life and society' classes. Mr Lichten said this was an "interesting" approach, adding: "We could have a strong 'worldviews' strand within citizenship studies. Such a subject could integrate well with politics and philosophy – which were not included in the poll."

On Friday the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC), [warned](#) that a shortage of religious education teachers could contribute to religious stereotyping and discrimination. Less

than two thirds of the targeted initial teacher training spaces for RE in England have been filled this year.

Mr Lichten said: "We agree with the REC that 'specialist teachers are crucial for keeping young people properly informed'.

"We also have to consider whether the fact that one in three schools can apply a religious test when hiring RE teachers, may discourage recruitment. If an RE teacher is a 'specialist' in helping pupils learn about religion, *not how to be religious*, then there should be no justification for such discrimination.

"Part of the purpose of education is learning to live together. That has to include understanding of how different worldviews affect the society we share. However, 'religious literacy' is often held up as a panacea, or used as code encouraging a positive or aggrandising view of religion. In actuality, there is no convincing evidence either ignorance of or hostility to religion correlates with bigotry towards religious people."

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