



Department  
for Education

# **Reformed GCSE and A level subject content consultation**

**Government consultation**

**Launch date 7 November  
Respond by 29 December**

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## 1. Executive summary

- 1.1. The government is reforming GCSEs and A levels to ensure that they prepare students better for further and higher education, and for employment. GCSEs are being reformed so that they set expectations which match those of the highest performing countries, with rigorous assessment that provides a reliable measure of students' achievement. The new A levels will be linear qualifications that ensure that students develop the skills and knowledge needed for progression to undergraduate study.
- 1.2. Reforms to these qualifications are already underway. [GCSE subject content](#) in English literature, English language and mathematics was published in November 2013, and the new qualifications will be taught from September 2015. [GCSE subject content](#) in ancient languages, geography, history, modern foreign languages and science, to be taught from September 2016, was published in April 2014.
- 1.3. At AS and A level, [subject content](#) in art and design, biology, business, chemistry, computer science, economics, English language, English literature, English language and literature, history, physics, psychology, and sociology was published in April 2014. These new qualifications will be taught from September 2015.
- 1.4. We are now developing a further set of GCSEs, AS and A levels to be taught from 2016. We have already [consulted](#) on proposed subject content for GCSEs in art and design, computer science, dance, music, and physical education, and AS and A levels in dance, music, physical education, modern foreign languages, ancient languages, mathematics, further mathematics and geography, with final content due to be publishing final content this winter. We are currently [consulting](#) on GCSEs in citizenship studies, cooking and nutrition, drama, and design and technology; and AS and A levels in drama and theatre. We are now consulting on proposed subject content for religious studies GCSE and AS and A level, which is the final subject that will be taught from 2016 and the focus of this consultation.
- 1.5. The main change to the religious studies GCSE content is the expectation that all students must study two religions. However, students will have the option to spend up to three quarters of their time studying one religion (if textual studies is taken into account). This will ensure all students have a well-rounded education that leads to a rigorous qualification thorough grounding in religion, religions and belief. A number of changes have also been made to the religious studies A level to re-balance the breadth and depth of the subject content to support students progressing to higher education.

- 1.6. Ofqual has [consulted](#) on proposals for the final phase of reform and will announce its decisions shortly. It is planned that reformed GCSEs and A levels in remaining subjects will then be introduced for first teaching from 2017.

## 2. Coverage of this consultation

- 2.1. This consultation seeks views on proposed subject content for religious studies GCSE and A level, which will be introduced from September 2016.
- 2.2. The proposed subject content requirements are designed to become regulatory documents which set out the minimum knowledge, understanding and skills needed for GCSE and A level qualifications. They provide the framework for awarding organisations to create the detail of qualification specifications.
- 2.3. This consultation covers:
  - proposed content for religious studies GCSE
  - proposed content for the AS and A level in religious studies.
- 2.4. Whilst responsibility for specifying the subject content of GCSEs and A levels lies with the Department for Education (DfE), responsibility for determining the assessment arrangements lies with Ofqual, the independent regulator. Ofqual is therefore consulting in parallel on GCSE and A level assessment arrangements for religious studies, including the assessment objectives. In order to understand how students will be expected to engage with these subjects it is important to consider both the content and the assessment objectives. The Ofqual consultation can be found [here](#).

### **3. Background and context for the consultation**

#### **GCSE reform**

**3.1.** The primary purpose of GCSEs is to evidence the progress and achievement of students of all abilities against demanding and fulfilling subject content. GCSEs must also enable progression to further vocational and academic study. The new qualifications will remain universal qualifications which are accessible, with good teaching, to the same proportion of students who currently sit GCSEs at the end of key stage 4. At the level of a pass (currently indicated by a grade C), there must be an increase in demand to reflect that of high-performing jurisdictions. At the top end, the new qualifications should prepare students properly to progress to A level or other study.<sup>1</sup>

#### **The GCSE reform process to date**

**3.2.** DfE consulted widely with subject experts, education experts, schools and teachers to develop the GCSE content for reformed GCSEs in English Baccalaureate (EBacc) subjects. We published GCSE subject content in English language, English literature and mathematics in November 2013, for first teaching from September 2015. We then published GCSE subject content in ancient languages, history, geography, science, and modern foreign languages in April 2014, for first teaching from September 2016.

**3.3.** The former Secretary of State announced the second stage of GCSE reform in April 2014. GCSEs in art and design, citizenship studies, computer science, dance, design and technology, drama, music, physical education, and religious studies will be reformed for first teaching from September 2016. We consulted on proposed subject content for art and design, computer science, dance, music, and physical education from July to September. We are also seeking views upon proposed subject content for GCSEs in citizenship studies, cooking and nutrition, drama, and design and technology, with a consultation that is due to close in November. We are now consulting on proposed subject content for religious studies GCSE, which is the final subject that will be taught from 2016 and the focus of this consultation. We will publish a Government response to all of these consultations and the final content in the winter.

**3.4.** The Department has led on developing content for religious studies, using expert drafters and working in close consultation with subject organisations. As part of the development process the Department has worked closely with the Religious Education Council of England and Wales to draft the content, as well as awarding

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<sup>1</sup> For more information please refer to Ofqual's response to its consultation earlier this year on how standards should be set for new GCSEs: <http://ofqual.gov.uk/news/setting-standards-new-gcses-2017/>

organisations and Ofqual. The organisations consulted for religious studies are listed in **Annex 1**.

- 3.5.** The religious studies GCSE and A level content has undergone an extensive period of informal consultation with subject experts, religious groups, higher education experts, awarding organisations and Ofqual in the run up to formal consultation. This consultation builds on the informal engagement, which included detailed discussions about the proposals and draft content, since the religious studies content development process began.

## A level reform

- 3.6.** The primary purpose of A levels is to prepare students for undergraduate study. The purpose of AS qualifications is to enable students to broaden the range of subjects they study post-16, and to support progression to further study or employment. Reforms to AS and A levels are intended to ensure that they continue to meet this purpose, in particular, responding to concerns from higher education institutions that students lack some of the skills necessary for undergraduate success.<sup>2</sup> The new A levels will be linear thus allowing more time for teaching and for students to develop a deep understanding of their subject. The process for reform gives universities a greater role in the design and development of the new qualifications.

## The A level reform process to date

- 3.7.** A review of A level subject content was conducted between April and July 2013 by the four awarding organisations for A levels in England. The review was independently chaired by Professor Mark E. Smith, Vice Chancellor of Lancaster University. As a result of this review [subject content](#) in art and design, biology, business, chemistry, computer science, economics, English language, English literature, English language and literature, history, physics, psychology, and sociology was published in April 2014. These new A levels will be taught from September 2015.
- 3.8.** Responsibility for reviewing subject content for the remaining facilitating subjects, modern foreign languages, ancient languages, mathematics, further mathematics, and geography, which are to be taught from September 2016, was remitted to a

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<sup>2</sup> 2012 Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute, Fit for Purpose? The view of the higher education sector, teachers and employers on the suitability of A levels, <http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/2012-04-03-fit-for-purpose-a-levels.pdf>, Cambridge Assessment, What are the impacts of qualifications for 16 to 19 year olds on higher education? A survey of 633 university lecturers, <http://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/images/116010-cambridge-assessment-he-research-survey-of-lecturers-executive-summary.pdf>.

new independent body, the A level Content Advisory Board (ALCAB).<sup>3</sup> ALCAB provided recommendations on these subjects and we consulted on them from July to September. We will publish final subject content this winter.

- 3.9.** In April 2014, the former Secretary of State announced that a further set of A levels would be reformed for first teaching from September 2016. These are: dance, design and technology, drama and theatre, music, physical education, and religious studies. We consulted on proposed subject content for dance, music, and physical education from July to September and are seeking views on proposed subject content for the A level and AS in drama and theatre currently. We are now consulting on proposed subject content for religious studies AS and A level, which is the final subject that will be taught from 2016 and the focus of this consultation. We will publish a Government response to all of these consultations and the final content in the winter.
- 3.10.** The religious studies AS and A level has been developed through the same process as for GCSEs, with an additional requirement to draw on advice of experts from higher education institutions to ensure that the proposed content facilitates progression to higher education and builds upon the revised GCSE content.
- 3.11.** The organisations consulted for religious studies are listed in Annex 1.

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<sup>3</sup> It was decided that A levels in modern foreign languages, mathematics, further mathematics and geography required more significant change and development time and that these subjects would be reformed for first teaching in 2016. Following a request from the Department, the Russell Group of universities set up ALCAB to review subject content in these subjects, together with ancient and classical languages.

## **4. Proposed changes to GCSE and A level subject content**

- 4.1.** This section outlines the proposed changes to current religious studies GCSE and A level subject content. The full subject content can be downloaded from the consultation page on GOV.UK.

### **Religious studies GCSE**

- 4.2.** To ensure the new GCSE in religious studies provides students with a well-rounded education that leads to a rigorous qualification, for the first time the content sets the expectation that all students study two religions. This will ensure all students have a thorough grounding in religion, religions and belief. The qualification will ensure that all students who achieve a GCSE in religious studies are able to demonstrate that they have an understanding of more than just one religion. This is in line with other reformed subjects, for example history, where students would not achieve a GCSE if they had only studied one period of history, and would need to show a deep and broad historical understanding.
- 4.3.** These changes reflect current practice in the majority of schools, including many faith schools, who prepare their students for life in modern Britain by teaching their pupils about more than one religion. The content is structured in such a way that ensures all students spend at least half of their time studying two religions. However, students will also have the option to spend up to three quarters of their time studying one religion (if textual studies is taken into account) and the remaining quarter studying a second religion. Schools will also have the freedom to decide which two religions are most appropriate for their students to study.
- 4.4.** The content also sets out the expectation that students recognise the diverse range of religious and non-religious beliefs represented in Great Britain and the fact that the religious traditions of Great Britain are, in the main, Christian. This will help to ensure that students develop respect and tolerance for those with different religions and beliefs.
- 4.5.** These expectations are set out in the content in Part One: 'Study of religions'. This means that, in future, all RS GCSE students will spend at least half of their time studying two religions. All students will also be expected to engage with and respond to questions about religions and beliefs, whether they come from a religious background or not. Detailed content for each religion that students can choose to study is set out in the annexes that have been prepared by representatives from religious groups on the Religious Education Council of England and Wales. The content for each religion includes the topics (beliefs and teachings of religion, and sources of wisdom and authority) that all students are expected to study in relation to their two chosen religions, as well as additional topics (practices, and forms of expression and ways of life) that students will study

if they choose to study one religion in further depth.

- 4.6.** In addition to studying two religions, students will also have the opportunity to engage with thematic studies in Part Two: 'Textual studies and religion, philosophical and ethical studies in the modern world'. This will be taught within the context of two different perspectives from one religion or two religions, depending on the choice of the school. Textual studies will include an investigation of primary religious texts from the chosen religion and should encourage students to engage in sufficiently challenging material. On the advice of subject experts, Ofsted and Ofqual, students are also expected to demonstrate an understanding of religious teachings in responding to philosophical and ethical debates rather than simply providing personal response, ensuring they are grounded in religion. This part of the content also provides scope for the study of critiques of religion and of non-religious beliefs in addition to their studies of religions. Students are required to include a study of different philosophical and ethical arguments and their impact and influence in the modern world, building on their knowledge and understanding from the study of religions.
- 4.7.** Further detail about the main options that awarding organisations can offer to religious studies GCSE students is set out in **Annex 2**.

## **Religious studies AS and A level**

- 4.8.** One of the main concerns raised by academics from higher education was that the A level does not currently provide the right breadth and depth of study to support students progressing to higher education. A number of changes have been made to address this balance. The content previously allowed students to choose one or more of up to eight quite specific areas of study, which led some students to focus very narrowly on a particular area. These eight areas of study have therefore now been consolidated into three – the systematic study of religion; textual studies; and philosophy, ethics and social scientific studies – to broadly reflect the main areas of study at higher education. Students can choose two of these areas of study to ensure that they have sufficient breadth of understanding whilst still ensuring depth of study.
- 4.9.** The content for each of the areas of study is now specified in detail, including prescribing and increasing religious content. The content also now prescribes the minimum core knowledge, understanding and skills expected of students. Furthermore, all students will now be expected to study the beliefs and teachings of at least one religion in depth through a systematic study of that religion and/or a detailed analysis of its texts. This will ensure sufficient breadth and depth of religious understanding and comparability between the different routes.
- 4.10.** Academics also provided feedback on the broad academic skills students needed to develop to progress to higher education. To reflect these comments, there is

now greater emphasis in the content on students gaining a holistic understanding of the subject including how religious belief and practice impacts on the lives of individuals and society, and the interaction between the areas studied. There is also a greater focus on understanding change over time and critically engaging with the ideas and arguments of academics, scholars and thinkers.

- 4.11.** To encourage greater respect and tolerance students will also be expected to engage in debate in a way that is respectful of the right of others to hold a different view.

## Who this is for

- Schools; colleges; organisations representing school teachers and lecturers; subject associations; parents; young people; higher education; further education; academies; employers/business sector; school governors; local authorities; headteachers; teachers; and awarding organisations.

## Issue date

The consultation was issued on 7 November.

## Enquiries

If your enquiry is related to the policy content of the consultation you can contact the team on:

- 0370 000 2288.

or email:

- [RSGCSEandAlevel.CONULTATION@education.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:RSGCSEandAlevel.CONULTATION@education.gsi.gov.uk)

If your enquiry is related to the DfE e-consultation website or the consultation process in general, you can contact the DfE Ministerial and Public Communications Division by email: [consultation.unit@education.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:consultation.unit@education.gsi.gov.uk) or by telephone: 0370 000 2288 or via the [DfE Contact us page](#).

## Additional copies

Additional copies are available electronically and can be downloaded from [GOV.UK DfE consultations](#).

## The response

The results of the consultation and the Department's response will be [published on GOV.UK](#) early in 2015.

# About this consultation

## 5. Consultation questions

### Questions:

This consultation document makes five proposal(s):

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

## 6. Equalities Impact

- 6.1. In accordance with the Equality Act 2010, public bodies must have “due regard”, when making decisions, to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation; advance equality of opportunity; and foster good relations, in relation to relevant protected characteristics. It would therefore be very helpful to understand if, in your view, there is any potential for the subject content to have a disproportionate impact upon any student with relevant protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010. It would be particularly helpful to understand if you have evidence to support any concerns you may have about such impacts.

## Questions:

4. Do you think that any of the proposals have the potential to have a disproportionate impact, positive or negative, on specific students, in particular those with 'relevant protected characteristics'? (The relevant protected characteristics are disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.) Please provide evidence to support your response.
5. How could any adverse impact be reduced and how could the subject content of GCSEs and/or A levels be altered to better advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a protected characteristic and those who do not share it? Please provide evidence to support your response.

We would like to hear your views on our proposals.

## Respond online

To help us analyse the responses please use the online system wherever possible. Visit [www.education.gov.uk/consultations](http://www.education.gov.uk/consultations) to submit your response.

## Other ways to respond

If for exceptional reasons, you are unable to use the online system, for example because you use specialist accessibility software that is not compatible with the system, you may download a word document version of the form and email it or post it.

### By email

- [RSGCSEandAlevel.CONULTATION@education.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:RSGCSEandAlevel.CONULTATION@education.gsi.gov.uk)

If your enquiry is related to the policy content of the consultation you can contact the Department on 0370 000 2288

Email: [RSGCSEandAlevel.CONULTATION@education.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:RSGCSEandAlevel.CONULTATION@education.gsi.gov.uk)

if your enquiry is related to the DfE e-consultation website or the consultation process in general, you can contact the Ministerial and Public Communications Division by e-mail:

[consultation.unit@education.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:consultation.unit@education.gsi.gov.uk) or by telephone: 0370 000 2288

or via the Department's 'Contact Us' page

### By post

- Alex Smith, Floor 2, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith St, Westminster, London SW1P 3BT, UK.

## **Deadline**

The consultation closes on 29 December 2014.

## **Annex 1: Subject experts consulted in the development of proposed subject content**

Working closely with the Religious Education Council of England and Wales, views of a range of subject experts were gathered as part of the subject content development process. These included representatives from the following organisations:

Al-Khoei Foundation

Association of RE Inspectors, Advisers and Consultants (AREIAC)

Association of University Lecturers in RE (AULRE)

Avanti Schools Trust

Board of Deputies of British Jews

British Humanist Association (BHA)

British Sikh Education Council

Catholic Education Service (CES)

Church of England Board of Education

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints

Culham St Gabriel's Trust

Free Churches Education Committee (FCEC)

Hindu Council (UK)

Hockerill Educational Foundation

Independent Schools RS Association (ISRSA)

ISCKON Educational Services

Muslim Council of Britain

National Association of Standing Advisory Councils on RE

National Association of Teachers of RE (NATRE)

National Board of RE Inspectors and Advisers (NBRIA)

National Society for Promoting Religious Education ISKCON

National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Great Britain

Network of Buddhist Organisations

Network of Sikh Organisations

Pagan Federation

Religious Education Council of England and Wales

The Buddhist Society

The Stapleford Centre

The Oxford Foundation

Tony Blair Faith Foundation

TRS-UK

## Annex 2: Religious Studies GCSE model

### Option 1

Part One: 50% Study of religions		Part Two: 50% Thematic studies
<p><b>25% Study of a first religion</b></p> <p>Two topics:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Beliefs and teachings</li> <li>2. Sources of wisdom and authority</li> </ol>	<p><b>25% Study of a second religion</b></p> <p>Two topics:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Beliefs and teachings</li> <li>2. Sources of wisdom and authority</li> </ol>	<p><b>ONE of the following:</b></p> <p><b>50% Textual studies</b> Four themes – two perspectives from one or two religious traditions <b>OR</b></p> <p><b>50% Religion, Philosophy and Ethics in the modern world</b> Four themes – two perspectives from one or two religious traditions <b>OR</b></p> <p><b>25% Textual studies and 25% Religion, Philosophy and Ethics in the modern world</b> Four themes – two perspectives from one or two religious traditions</p>

### Option 2

Part One: 75% Study of religions	Part Two: 25% Thematic studies
<p><b>50% Study of a first religion</b></p> <p>Four topics:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Beliefs and teachings</li> <li>2. Sources of wisdom and authority</li> <li>3. Practices</li> <li>4. Forms of Expression and ways of life</li> </ol>	<p><b>25% Study of a second religion</b></p> <p>Two topics:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Beliefs and teachings</li> <li>2. Sources of wisdom and authority</li> </ol> <p><b>ONE of the following:</b></p> <p><b>25% Textual studies</b> Two themes – two perspectives from one or two religious traditions <b>OR</b></p> <p><b>25% Religion, Philosophy and Ethics in the modern world</b> Two themes – two perspectives from one or two religious traditions</p>



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