



**Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP,  
Secretary of State for Education  
20 Great Smith St,  
London,  
SW1P 3BT**

**September 21<sup>st</sup> 2023**

Dear Secretary of State,

I am reaching out on behalf of the Religious Education Network, which comprises university, school and college departments, religious education providers, SACREs, and academics. We wish to express our growing apprehension regarding the status and current direction of religious education in England and Wales.

Religious Studies, as an academic discipline, plays a pivotal role in shaping a well-rounded and informed society. It is a subject of profound importance in promoting cultural literacy and understanding. In our increasingly diverse and interconnected world, knowledge about various religions and belief systems is crucial for fostering tolerance and respect among individuals from different backgrounds. By studying the beliefs, practices, and histories of various religions, individuals can develop a more comprehensive appreciation of the cultural tapestry that makes up our society and the vital importance of spirituality in all our welfare and mental health. Furthermore, understanding the role of religion in various regions of the world is essential for comprehending international affairs, conflicts, and cultural dynamics. It is not just a subject; it is a pathway to a more empathetic and culturally aware society. It is precisely due to this significance we register our concerns about the current direction of Religious Studies in the UK. The Bloom report (Does Government 'Do God?', 2023), instigated by the Government, on the place of faith and Faiths in modern Britain, makes all these points strongly.

**Over time, Religious Studies (RS) has been devalued in terms of its perceived importance in education, leading to a decline in students participating in formal examinations and a dwindling number of qualified educators:**

1. At GCSE it is important to acknowledge a significant decline of 18%, equivalent to approximately 50,000 candidates, since 2016.
2. Short course RS has experienced a dramatic decline since 2014, amounting to approximately 100,000 entries lost. Additionally, the entry figures have decreased by 7,000 from 2022 to 2023, which represents a further decline of about one-quarter within a single year.
3. RS A Level examinations have experienced a continuous decline in entries since the A level reforms in 2016, with a substantial 35% decrease recorded since that pivotal year. AS level entries have dwindled significantly, dropping from approximately 40,000 in 2016 to fewer than 1,000. 2023 entries experienced a notable decrease of 13% since 2019, as reported by the JCQ. In England, the overall decline since 2019 stands at 9%.
4. According to UCAS, as of March this year, University recruitment for Religious Education (RE) had decreased by one-third compared to the previous year, placing it just slightly ahead of other less common subjects, like drama, music, and classics.

These GCSE statistics can be attributed to a number of significant government decisions to exclude Religious Studies from the EBac, and to exclude short course RS from performance tables. These decisions are major obstacles for schools as the previously well-received short course used to serve as a pathway to AS and A Level. The same is true for the A level statistics: these can be attributed to several factors, primarily stemming from the impact of examination reforms initiated by Michael Gove in 2016.

**The general devaluing of the subject has had a wider impact:**

1. The application numbers for higher education programs related to this field have inevitably declined, leading to challenges for several university departments and Religious Studies teacher training departments.
2. In some primary teacher training courses, as little as three hours of preparation for RE is allocated.
3. Insufficient curriculum time with non-specialist teachers is routine.
4. The attempt to re-frame the subject as 'Religion and Worldviews' is misguided and neither supported by Religious Education Network members nor likely to address the fundamental problems given above.

These factors paint a concerning future for Religious Studies, and for Religious Education in general, prompting a call for action. Recognizing its importance acknowledges its role in promoting tolerance, critical thinking, and global awareness—essential qualities for a harmonious world – it is also a service subject for others.

We therefore support the many representations you have already received about the situation of religious education and urge you undertake a comprehensive review of the status and funding of this crucial subject.

Yours faithfully,

Richard Coupe

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*The REN supports the existing legal status of Religious Education and the highest quality of teaching and learning in this subject*