

Assessment and Progression in Religious Education Part 1: Navigating Options

This new guidance provides information on assessing progress in RE in an educational context that has moved beyond levels. Part 1 offers guidance on navigating options through an examination of the strengths and weaknesses of current beyond-levels approaches. Part 2 presents a new model for RE assessment and progression that takes the best parts from existing models and balances the requirements for knowledge and skills.

Both documents follow on from the 'Purpose of Study' statement of the 2013 [National Curriculum Framework for RE](http://www.reonline.org.uk/national-curriculum-framework-for-re/) (NCFRE) and build on the curriculum design guidance produced by the Expert Advisory Group for RE in 2014-15 (<http://www.reonline.org.uk/religious-education-in-the-new-curriculum/>). The work is the result of collaborative working with teachers and consultants at a series of assessment summit meetings held by Culham St Gabriel's.

Why we need new guidance?

We have now moved beyond levels.

The Review of National Curriculum (2010-2014), led by Professor Tim Oates, was highly critical of the previous levels-based system. Levels have now been removed nationally to encourage new assessment models that focus on the knowledge-based curriculum, where students should learn *fewer things in greater depth*¹. However, the removal of levels left an *assessment vacuum*, which is currently being filled by a variety of new models and frameworks.

This guidance therefore aims to help teachers navigate the different choices available to them and work with a framework that moves beyond the 'levels' or 'can-do' method to focus on assessing rich, deep learning and understanding of key knowledge in RE.

Criticisms of Levels

- Lack of precision in reporting because the level descriptions were so general;
- Best-fit judgment which failed to take account of major gaps in children's knowledge;
- Contributing to superficial coverage of the curriculum because the levels-based system (especially the use of sub-levels) encouraged children to move on to new curriculum content without secure grasp of key areas of a subject;
- Prioritising soft skills over deep secure understanding of key concepts and knowledge;
- Failing to give children, or their parents, clear and accurate information about their strengths and weaknesses.

¹ For RE we should be wary of understanding this as a reduction in the number of belief traditions to be studied. Rather, this may imply a reduction in the number of key concepts to be covered in any programme of study.

Oates (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yDYjF_bQy4Q)

'I do not recommend trying to measure social emotional skills and then making decisions based on the results.' Christina Hinton, neuroscientist, Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Are we talking about the same thing?

- **Assessment:** finding out how well the pupils have learnt what has been taught, by making judgements based on identified criteria.

The purposes of assessment are to show:

- (a) how well the pupils are doing
- (b) what they need to do next to make progress
- (c) how effective the curriculum and teaching are.

- **Attainment:** a measure of actual outcomes relating to what pupils know, understand and do.
- **Achievement:** the extent of a pupil's achievement over time, relative to attainment measures and to the pupil's starting point.
- **Expectations:** a statement of the expected outcomes related to what pupils should know, understand and be able to do.
- **Progression:** a curriculum design characteristic in which content is arranged so that ideas and processes become more challenging over time.
- **Command:** secure and competent knowledge and understanding as measured by an expected standard of attainment, such as an end of key stage expectation; an indicator of rich, deep and integrative learning.

A Clear, Coherent Vision

When looking at different models of assessment teachers and planners need to keep the aims and objectives of RE in mind to ensure curriculum coherence, and to provide continuity between purposes, aims, content taught, progression, and statements of expected outcomes.

The Purpose of RE: Religious Literacy?

Since the publication of the NCFRE there has been increasing interest in defining the overall purpose of RE in terms of promoting *literacy* about religious and non-religious worldviews.

Three aims of the RE curriculum

The NCFRE offers a clear statement of aims for RE. After each aim we have made a statement about its relation to the way that pupils make progress in their learning and the ways in which expected outcomes might be expressed:

- A. **Know about and understand a range of religions and worldviews:**
Progression in this aim means designing a curriculum in which the range, depth and complexity of information about religions and worldviews becomes more challenging over time.
Statements of expected outcomes would focus on specific content, defining what is to be known and understood in a year or key stage. The content could be a religion or worldview, a series of concepts or a big idea (see Part 2).
- B. **Express ideas and insights about the nature, significance and impact of religions and worldviews:**
Progression in this aim means designing a curriculum which combines information about religious and non-religious worldviews with the skills required to express insights into their nature, significance and impact.
Statements of expected outcomes would focus on pupils' depth of understanding of the impact and influence of beliefs and practices on individuals, communities and society.
- C. **Gain and deploy the skills needed to engage seriously with religions and worldviews:**
Progression in this aim means designing a curriculum which increases the range, accuracy and sophistication of skills required, and advances the pupils' ability to apply their knowledge and understanding to enquiries.
Statements of expected outcomes would focus primarily on skills and applications.

Objectives of GCSE Religious Studies

Although not all students will take a full or short course in religious studies, the knowledge, understanding and skills that pupils develop in their religious education programmes should contribute to that which is needed for GCSE success.

GCSE assessment objectives (AOs) are set by Ofqual and are the same across all exam boards. The exams measure how students have achieved the following assessment objectives:

AO1: Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of religion and beliefs including:

- beliefs, practices and sources of authority
- influence on individuals, communities and societies
- similarities and differences within and/or between religions and beliefs.

AO2: Analyse and evaluate aspects of religion and belief, including their significance and influence.

New Models for Assessment in RE?

Since the removal of levels a number of new assessment models have been developed in RE. Although this is a necessary simplification, broadly speaking, these models fall into two groups: **Knowledge-Based Models** that prioritise the assessment of key ideas or concepts in religions and belief; **and Skills-Based Models** that prioritise pupils' ability to develop the skills needed to handle 'religious' materials.

Prioritising knowledge

Mainly prioritising NCFRE Aim A

Knowledge-based models of assessment emphasise *content*: specific aspects of knowledge, often defined as *concepts* or *key concepts* that pupils show they have grasped, have understood, and can make use of in reasoned ways. Such content is pre-selected by the teacher or syllabus writer so that there is no doubt about what exactly the pupils should be learning. Tasks can be set to test how deep pupils' understanding of such content goes. Skills can still be required in this model, but the emphasis is on the content: what have the pupils attained in knowledge and understanding, and how do they measure up against the expectations?

A general example of this kind of approach can be found in the recently produced *Understanding Christianity* (www.understandingchristianity.org.uk), which develops a programme of teaching and learning around *key concepts* within Christian traditions. Although the resource encourages development of certain skills, particularly related to the discipline of theology, assessment emphasises

measuring pupils' achievement against 'knowledge building blocks' and knowledge-based 'end of phase outcomes'.

Prioritising skills

Mainly prioritising NCFRE Aim C, with elements of B

Some models emphasise *skills*, that is, how well pupils interpret, analyse and evaluate the material of religions and beliefs. Content is still important in this model, but it is largely left to schools and teachers to decide upon it. The key is: how deeply can pupils go into the material in each enquiry or investigation they undertake: do they treat it superficially, or can they engage in more sophisticated ways? How does their attainment in the acquisition and development of skills measure up against the expectations?

General examples of this kind of approach can be found in the Hampshire agreed syllabus and in the work undertaken by Learn Teach Lead (<http://ltle.org>), which works with a modified version of Bloom's Taxonomy. Although LTL emphasise the need to incorporate knowledge within their assessment framework, this is left to the teachers, leaders and planners. Instead the LTL model uses a horizontal version of Bloom's Taxonomy, modified by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), which focuses on 'Cognitive Processes' (e.g. analysing, evaluating and creating), which run parallel to common understandings of 'skills'.

Each approach has its own strengths and weaknesses. In reality, most assessment schemes will combine elements of both models presented here. However, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of each extreme will help teachers and planners get a richer understanding of the different assessment models currently available.

Knowledge-based Models

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concepts can provide rich, thick descriptions of the expectations. • Provide the opportunity to identify limited 'core' content in clear words that teachers, parents and pupils can understand. • Help children to know what they have to learn to make progress in RE. • Provide flexibility for teachers to expand the content as appropriate for pupils, provided 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not cover all the NCFRE aims for RE. • Can be overly prescriptive and limit teacher autonomy. • Specifying content at a level required to assess deep learning and understanding of key concepts can be equivalent to writing a curriculum. Therefore, it is very difficult to generalise knowledge-based models in a context of locally determined.

<p>that the minimum content is covered.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get away from 'levels' of attainment, simplifying assessment in terms of whether pupils do or do not know the important elements of the religions and beliefs being studied. • Focus on <i>what</i> is to be learnt and minimises or avoids inherently subjective judgements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are many concepts, and if too many are used, the overall picture of pupil progress may become confused. • Those selecting the content may have their own biases and overlook material that others believe to be of vital importance to particular belief traditions. • Selection of too much content may be overwhelming for many pupils (and teachers) • If only a limited amount of content is to be prescribed for assessment e.g., focusing only on some aspects of Christianity and Islam, then some teachers might cover just this minimum and ignore the broader elements of a whole RE curriculum. • Emphasis on content and concepts can lead a focus on doctrine and beliefs as opposed to practices and lived experiences of believers. • Emphasis on concepts can focus too much on specific religions and beliefs, overlooking the study of the wider phenomenon of religion and belief.
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'Teachers are forced into a 'tick-box' approach to teaching and assessment, where pupils are rewarded for using certain features whether or not they are appropriate'
Daisy Christodoulou, Head of Education Research at Ark Schools

Skills-based Models

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Without specifying content, skills-based models can be generalised to a wide variety of different syllabuses and contexts. • Focus on pupils' ability to investigate, interpret and evaluate religion and belief. • Provide a guide for developing pupils' understanding and attitudes. • Make all the relevant skills for RE learning available for pupils of any age, rather than assuming that some higher order skills are only employed by older pupils. • Unpack the key RE skills of interpretation and evaluation into clear and understandable components. • Provides the opportunity to challenge pupils to deepen their understanding in each sequence of learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not cover all the NCFRE aims for RE. • Without specified core content, these models can be vague, lack rigour and be open to some of the same criticisms aimed at levels. • If such models are tied to content, it can be unclear who is responsible – syllabus designers, leaders or individual teachers – and how decisions about what content to cover are made. • Content may fail to focus on the core of the religions and beliefs being studied. • May lead to the production of formulaic 'enquiry' schemes of work that relate more to pupils' interests than to the teachings and practices of religions and beliefs. • May be too heavily reliant on teachers' subjective judgements of how well pupils are doing • May lead to complexity in devising assessment schemes: a return to the weaknesses of 'levelling' and 'sub-levelling' pupils' work?

'Don't replace levels with levels', Dawn Cox, RE Teacher

Analysing the ways in which different models for assessment emphasise knowledge or skills and the associated strengths and weaknesses is an important part of the process of ***making an informed choice*** about which framework for attainment to use. Ultimately an over-emphasis on either knowledge or skills will fail to assess the three NCFRE aims and can lead to confusion that hinders pupil progress.

Making a decision: Practical Steps

- **Make an informed decision:** analyse the choices available to you and ensure your framework is targeted at supporting deep, rich pupil learning and progression and provides you with tools to evaluate your own teaching.
- **Think about the purpose and aims of RE:** ensure your understanding of assessment, attainment and progression are clearly coherent and focused on the purpose and aims of RE.
- **Be an assessment Kleptomaniac:** gather questions that can be asked in class or formally in written work; gather examples of pupils' work and other teachers' assessment models.
- **Get your pupils to produce:** ongoing assessment is much clearer and easier if your students produce more content, both in terms of discussion and physical work.
- **Do more assessment:** remember more assessment can be a good thing as long as it's the right kind of assessment and is targeted directly at helping pupils learn, attain and progress.

'No one is ever going to get good at anything unless they go through the process of deconstructing high quality examples, and then 'seeing' the expert thought processes which go into creating an expert example. We learn poorly from watching experts perform. Instead, we need their performance deconstructed and broken down into chunks that can be thoroughly examined. The road to hell is paved with vague success criteria.' David Didau, 'What if everything you knew about education was wrong?' Crown House. p.365

When selecting or developing a model of assessment in RE, teachers and planners should attempt to find a middle ground between extremes of overemphasising knowledge or skills and find a framework that balances specificity with generalizability and prescription with teacher freedom. Part 2 of this document, therefore, offers an example of such a framework, adopting the best parts of the two different kinds of models presented above.