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Mr S Wilkinson  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mr Wilkinson

**Ofsted 2010–11 subject survey inspection programme: religious education (RE)**

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 16 and 17 March 2011 to look at work in RE.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text without their consent.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included: interviews with staff and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work; and observation of a range of lessons and an assembly.

The overall effectiveness of RE is satisfactory.

**Achievement in RE**

Achievement in RE is satisfactory.

- Standards attained at Key Stage 4 are broadly average. Results for short course GCSE are in line with the national average. Numbers of entry for full course GCSE have increased in recent years and results are above the national average, especially for boys.
- School assessments show that students in Year 11 are on track to meet their targets and are making satisfactory progress. A strength is the ability of students to analyse real-life situations and relate these to religious beliefs and ethical theories.
- Year 9 school assessment data indicate that attainment at Key Stage 3 is average. However, the use of assessment and monitoring data is

inaccurate and overgenerous. Students' progress is being hampered by the lack of challenge in lessons and written activities with an over-reliance on descriptive recall. Students' ability to analyse ideas and ask questions is limited.

- Students' attitudes to learning and behaviour are variable. They are generally interested in the lessons but become distracted when work is unchallenging. They can see the value of RE in terms of understanding diversity and learning respect for others but cannot make connections between the subject and wider questions of truth and meaning. RE makes a good contribution to their moral development but opportunities to contribute to spiritual and cultural development are restricted.

### **Quality of teaching in RE**

The quality of teaching in RE is satisfactory.

- The quality of teaching is uneven. It is generally stronger at Key Stage 4 where lessons are more challenging and students are given opportunities to investigate a variety of ideas and beliefs. Activities are varied and appropriate and good use is made of a range of resources.
- At Key Stage 3, lessons are less effective as activities are not matched to students' differing abilities. Students are generally given the same initial low level piece of work to complete. This is hampering their progress and is leading to a lack of engagement, especially those of higher ability. There is too much reliance on tasks for basic factual recall and little opportunity for students to ask questions and discuss ideas. Teachers rarely explain the 'big picture' by making links to previous learning. As a result, students do not develop a coherent understanding of beliefs and practices.
- Marking at Key Stage 4 enables students to know what they need to do to improve their work. Comments are clear and linked to specific examination criteria. Assessment at Key Stage 3 is weak. There is some use of self- and peer-assessment and teachers' comments do indicate ways in which work can be improved. However, the value of these is limited as level criteria for setting tasks and marking work is used inaccurately by teachers.

### **Quality of the curriculum in RE**

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory with some good features.

- The subject meets the broad statutory requirements of the locally agreed syllabus. An important strength of the provision is the opportunity for all students to accredit their learning in RE at the end of Key Stage 4. They can choose to take a full course GCSE and all students complete a short course. Numbers of entry for both courses have risen significantly in the last two years.
- RE is taught as part of an integrated humanities course in Year 7. This provides good potential for RE to be linked to wider themes, such as investigation of the local community linked with religious diversity in

Sunderland. However, some links made to RE are tenuous and do not enable coherence and continuity in learning. This provides students with insufficient opportunities to develop their understanding of religious beliefs and practices.

- In Years 8 and 9, RE is delivered as a separate subject. Students are given some opportunities to develop knowledge and understanding of religious practices and philosophical and ethical ideas. However, the sequencing and balance of work are leading to lack of progress, particularly in relation to a coherent understanding of core religions and the impact of faith for believers today.
- The opportunity to enrich learning through fieldwork and the use of visits is very limited. As a result, RE makes only a limited contribution to community cohesion.

### **Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE**

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is satisfactory with some good features. The capacity for improvement is good.

- For the last two years, RE has been led by the head of the humanities faculty who is committed to bringing about positive change. The school has recently appointed a specialist head of RE to work alongside the head of faculty.
- Monitoring and evaluative procedures are used well to identify specific areas for action and bring about improvement. The department analyses performance of different groups and can identify actions to raise achievement for all students. To bring about improvement, the school requested a local SACRE audit which identified weakness in Key Stage 4 provision. As a result, short course GCSE for all students was introduced and full course GCSE provision was strengthened. The school is revising the Key Stage 4 curriculum to take account of the proposed English Baccalaureate but will continue to enter all students for short course accreditation. Full course GCSE will remain as an option.
- The accommodation and resources for the subject are satisfactory although little use is made of information and communication technology.
- The subject is taught by specialist and non-specialist humanities teachers. Opportunities for training and continued professional development have been very limited.

### **Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:**

- ensuring greater challenge at Key Stage 3 to enable students to develop appropriate understanding of different religions and beliefs and questions of meaning and truth
- developing accurate use of levels for assessment and differentiated class activities
- providing opportunities for all students to encounter members of a variety of faith communities in the region.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop RE in the school.

As I explained previously, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and SACRE and will be published on the Ofsted website. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection.

Yours sincerely

**Isobel Short**  
**Additional Inspector**