

# GCSE Religious Studies: At a Crossroads



Mapping the impact of change in  
England 2017-18

Dr David Lundie

Dr Mi Young Ahn

## Executive Summary:

The total number of schools in England participating in GCSE Religious Studies decreased substantially; from 253,712 students in 2017, to 229,189<sup>1</sup> students in 2018.

This report seeks to determine the benefits of GCSE Religious Studies to secondary schools, with particular reference to those serving students experiencing social disadvantage.

On social disadvantage, students attending schools with higher levels of Free School Meal entitlement (an approximate measure of students in poverty) are less likely to have the opportunity to take GCSE Religious Studies. This may suggest socio-economic barriers to accessing RS. Not all of this variation can be accounted for by the demographics of schools with a religious character. Even among schools without a religious character, there is evidence suggesting schools that offer GCSE RS have fewer disadvantaged pupils, on average, than schools that do not offer the subject. While barriers exist to students accessing GCSE RS in some schools experiencing social disadvantage, where disadvantaged students do take GCSE RS, they have higher attainment compared to comparable EBacc subjects.

Religious character is becoming increasingly significant, with 95% of students in Roman Catholic schools being entered for GCSE RS, compared with 68% in Church of England schools and only 30% in schools without a religious character. Much of the drop in GCSE entry in 2018 is in schools without a religious character, suggesting that the subject may soon become endangered as a mainstream option outside the faith sector.

Examination of the 701 schools which entered students in GCSE Religious Studies in 2017 but not in 2018 reveals that these schools' measures against Progress<sup>8</sup>, Attainment<sup>8</sup>, and even against the EBacc measure, were lower than the averages of schools which participated in GCSE Religious Studies in 2018. Working on the hypothesis that schools dropped RS to focus on EBacc subjects, this data suggests such a strategy is counter-productive. There were also higher percentages of disadvantaged pupils (measured by FSM) among these schools than among schools entering students in GCSE RS in 2018.

## Contents:

1. Religious Studies, Attainment and Measures of Deprivation	p.3
2. Religious Studies and Schools with a Religious Character	p.5
3. Religious Studies and the English Baccalaureate	p.7
4. The Impact of the 2018 New Syllabus for Religious Studies	p.9
Methodological and Biographical Notes	p.10

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/news/falling-numbers-of-religious-studies-gcse-entries-suggests-schools-struggling-to-meet-legal-obligations/>

## Religious Studies, Attainment and Measures of Deprivation

Schools that participated in GCSE Religious Studies in 2018 have lower levels of all three measures of deprivation recorded in the census data than schools that did not participate. Fig.1a shows that the mean Free School Meal eligibility for the schools which did enter at least one student for full-course GCSE was 11.1%, as against 17.4% for those which did not. The gap is even larger for those students who have been eligible for Free School Meals at any point during the past 6 years (27.9% against 41.8%).

		Percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals	Percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals at any time during the past 6 years	Percentage of pupils at the end of KS4 who are disadvantaged
Schools which participated in GCSE RS in 2018	Valid	2791	2311	2347
	Missing	33	513	477
	<b>Mean</b>	<b>11.1</b>	<b>27.3</b>	<b>26.7</b>
	St. Dev	9.9	15.5	15.7
Schools which did not participate in GCSE RS in 2018	Valid	2528	1633	1580
	Missing	76	971	1024
	<b>Mean</b>	<b>17.4</b>	<b>41.8</b>	<b>41.8</b>
	St. Dev	18.0	19.1	22.6

Fig.1a - Socio-economic status of schools by participation in GCSE RS in 2018

School performance is explored by examining six variables: Attainment 8, Progress 8 for all GCSEs and Progress 8 for GCSEs included in the EBacc (which does not include GCSE RS), and Attainment 8, Progress 8 open and Progress 8 EBacc measures for disadvantaged students (those who have been eligible for Free School Meals in the past 6 years).

		Average Attainment 8 score per pupil	Average Attainment 8 score per disadvantaged pupil	Progress 8 measure for EBacc element – all pupils	Progress 8 measure for EBacc element – disadvantaged pupils	Progress 8 measure for open element – all pupils	Progress 8 measure for open element – disadvantaged pupils
Schools which participated in GCSE RS in 2018	Valid	2811	2298	2346	2290	2346	2290
	Missing	13	526	478	534	478	534
	<b>Mean</b>	<b>46.3</b>	<b>39.7</b>	<b>.019</b>	<b>-.376</b>	<b>.021</b>	<b>-.382</b>
	St. Dev	11.5	8.8	.555	.580	.537	.624
Schools which did not participate in GCSE RS in 2018	Valid	1669	1102	1332	1091	1332	1091
	Missing	935	1502	1272	1513	1272	1513
	<b>Mean</b>	<b>29.2</b>	<b>31.5</b>	<b>-.641</b>	<b>-.712</b>	<b>-.738</b>	<b>-.762</b>
	St. Dev	20.2	13.9	.941	.694	1.08	.845

Fig.1b Attainment 8 and Progress 8 measures for all students, and Progress 8 measures for disadvantaged students, comparison of schools that participated in GCSE RS in 2018 and those that did not.

Across all six measures, schools that participated in GCSE RS scored more highly than schools that did not. The average Attainment 8 score for schools that participated in GCSE RS was 46.3, while for schools that did not the average score was just 29.2. The gap between schools that did, and did not participate in GCSE RS narrows with regard to disadvantaged pupils. Importantly, schools which did not participate in GCSE Religious Studies did not appear to fare any better in EBacc Progress 8 measures, scoring .6600 lower for all students and .3362 lower for disadvantaged students.

## Religious Studies and Schools with a Religious Character

	Entered candidates for GCSE RS in 2018	Entered candidates for GCSE RS in 2017	Difference
Roman Catholic	354	265	-11
Church of England	262	285	-23
Jewish	7	11	-4
Muslim	25	29	-4
No religious character	2075	2450	-375
Other Christian	96	111	-15
Other Faiths	4	5	-1
<b>Total</b>	<b>2824</b>	<b>3257</b>	<b>-433</b>

Fig.2a - Numbers of schools participating in GCSE Religious Studies in 2017 and 2018 by religious character

As figure 2a illustrates, numbers of schools participating in GCSE Religious Studies declined overall across all categories from 2017 to 2018, though Catholic schools have proportionately the smallest decline (3.1%); among schools without a religious character, the decline was 18.1%.

	Number of schools	Number of pupils	GCSE RS entry, %		Average Attainment 8 per school	Average Progress 8 per school
No religious character	2,576	421,068	126,930	<b>30</b>	46.9	-0.01
Roman Catholic	309	49,639	47,236	<b>95</b>	49.3	0.13
Church of England	181	29,102	19,813	<b>68</b>	48.4	0.08
Other Christian faith	61	9,579	5,397	<b>56</b>	49.7	0.09
Jewish	13	1,346	753	<b>56</b>	59.8	0.83
Muslim	11	883	698	<b>79</b>	58.9	1.20
Sikh	3	345	338	<b>98</b>	54.4	0.62
Hindu	1	107	x	<b>x</b>	56.4	0.74
All state-funded mainstream schools	3,174	513,455	201,265	<b>39</b>	47.2	0.01

Fig.2b - Numbers of pupils entered for GCSE RS<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> GCSE and equivalent results in England 2017/18 (provisional)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/gcse-and-equivalent-results-2017-to-2018-provisional>

Combined with statistics from the Department for Education reported above, while the percentage of pupils in all state-funded schools that took part in GCSE RS in 2018 is 39%, for Catholic schools the levels are significantly higher at 95%, 68% for Church of England schools, but is now as low as 30% in schools with no religious character. These findings are troubling for the future of the subject outside of schools with a religious character.

While some of the variation in social disadvantage between schools which offer GCSE RS and those which do not can be accounted for by the different demographic characteristics of faith schools<sup>3</sup>, a closer look at the schools without a religious character which offer GCSE RS shows that this does not account for the entirety of the gap. Schools without a religious character which offered GCSE RS in 2018 had on average 2.3% fewer pupils eligible for free school meals, and 8.1% fewer disadvantaged pupils at the end of Key Stage 4. Pupil progress and attainment was higher across all measures, including the EBacc element, in schools without a religious character which offered GCSE Religious Studies, than in schools of all kinds which did not enter pupils in the subject in 2018. While progress and attainment measures were even higher in schools with a religious character which offered GCSE RS (Attainment 8 scores of 52.2 for Jewish, 48.2 for Roman Catholic and 42.2 for Church of England schools, for example). This comparison shows that students attending schools serving disadvantaged communities are less likely to have the option to take GCSE RS. Further, students attending schools which do not offer GCSE RS have lower whole-curriculum progress and attainment scores, even compared to students attending non-faith schools which offer GCSE RS.

		Percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals	Percentage of pupils at the end of KS4 who are disadvantaged	Average Attainment 8 score	Progress 8 Measure for EBacc element	Progress 8 Measure for open element
Schools without a religious character which participated in GCSE RS in 2018	Valid	2046	1802	2067	1802	1802
	Missing	29	273	8	273	273
	<b>Mean</b>	<b>11.6</b>	<b>26.8</b>	<b>46.2</b>	<b>-.005</b>	<b>-.019</b>
	St. Dev	9.9	15.9	11.2	.554	.539
Schools without a religious character which did not participate in GCSE RS in 2018	Valid	2367	1529	1537	1281	1281
	Missing	69	907	899	1155	1155
	<b>Mean</b>	<b>18.3</b>	<b>42.4</b>	<b>28.4</b>	<b>-.677</b>	<b>-.771</b>
	St. Dev	18.1	22.5	20.2	.924	1.08

Fig.2c - comparison of socio-economic status and attainment in non-faith schools only which offered GCSE RS in 2018, compared to non-faith schools which did not.

<sup>3</sup> See for example [https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Pupil\\_characteristics\\_and\\_performance\\_at\\_faith\\_schools.pdf](https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Pupil_characteristics_and_performance_at_faith_schools.pdf)

## Religious Studies and the English Baccalaureate (EBacc)

In 2018, 2,824 schools took part in GCSE Religious Studies<sup>4</sup> in 2018, a 13.3% drop from the 3,257 in 2017, according to our dataset.

	RS total entries	RS GCSE passes	Geography total entries	Geography GCSE passes	History total entries	History GCSE passes
N schools	2,824	2,659	3,697	3,561	3,615	3,425
N pupils	211,900	152,868	239,565	155,063	242,070	154,327
Pass rate (%)		72.1		64.7		63.8

Fig.3a - Rates of participation in GCSE Religious Studies compared to comparable GCSE subjects included in the EBacc.

While the total number of schools and pupils participating in GCSE RS are both lower than either Geography or History, the average pass rate (Grades C/4 and above) is the highest among the three subjects (72.1%, 7.4% higher than Geography and 8.3% higher than History). In addition, where schools did enter students in GCSE RS, there was a higher mean proportion of entries, with schools which entered students in RS entering, on average, more students per school compared to either History or Geography. This may in part be explained by schools in which GCSE RS remains a compulsory subject.

As reported in Figure 1b, Progress 8 measures for the EBacc were lower in schools that did not take part in GCSE Religious Studies, than in schools that did. The average Attainment 8 score per pupil for schools which participated in GCSE RS in 2018 was 46.3, higher than the national average in England (44.5)<sup>5</sup>. In addition, the average Progress 8 scores for the EBacc element per pupil (0.02) is higher than the average Progress 8 score of the state-funded mainstream schools (0.01), as shown in Fig 2b.

Figure 3b overleaf is the ‘GCSE outcomes in England’ published by Ofqual Analytics<sup>6</sup>. It illustrates that, while GCSE History and Geography have seen continued growth since the first inclusion of the EBacc measure in 2013, GCSE RS numbers have been dropping for the past 3 years. A sharp increase in full-course GCSE RS numbers in 2011 corresponds to the point at which the ‘Short Course’ GCSE ceased to be included in measures of attainment.

<sup>4</sup> At least 1 student entered for GCSE Religious Studies

<sup>5</sup> ‘Overall performance at end of key stage 4 in 2018 - all pupils’ <https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/schools-by-type?step=default&table=schools&region=all-england&for=secondary>

<sup>6</sup> Ofqual Analytics, GCSE outcomes in England <https://analytics.ofqual.gov.uk/apps/GCSE/Outcomes/>

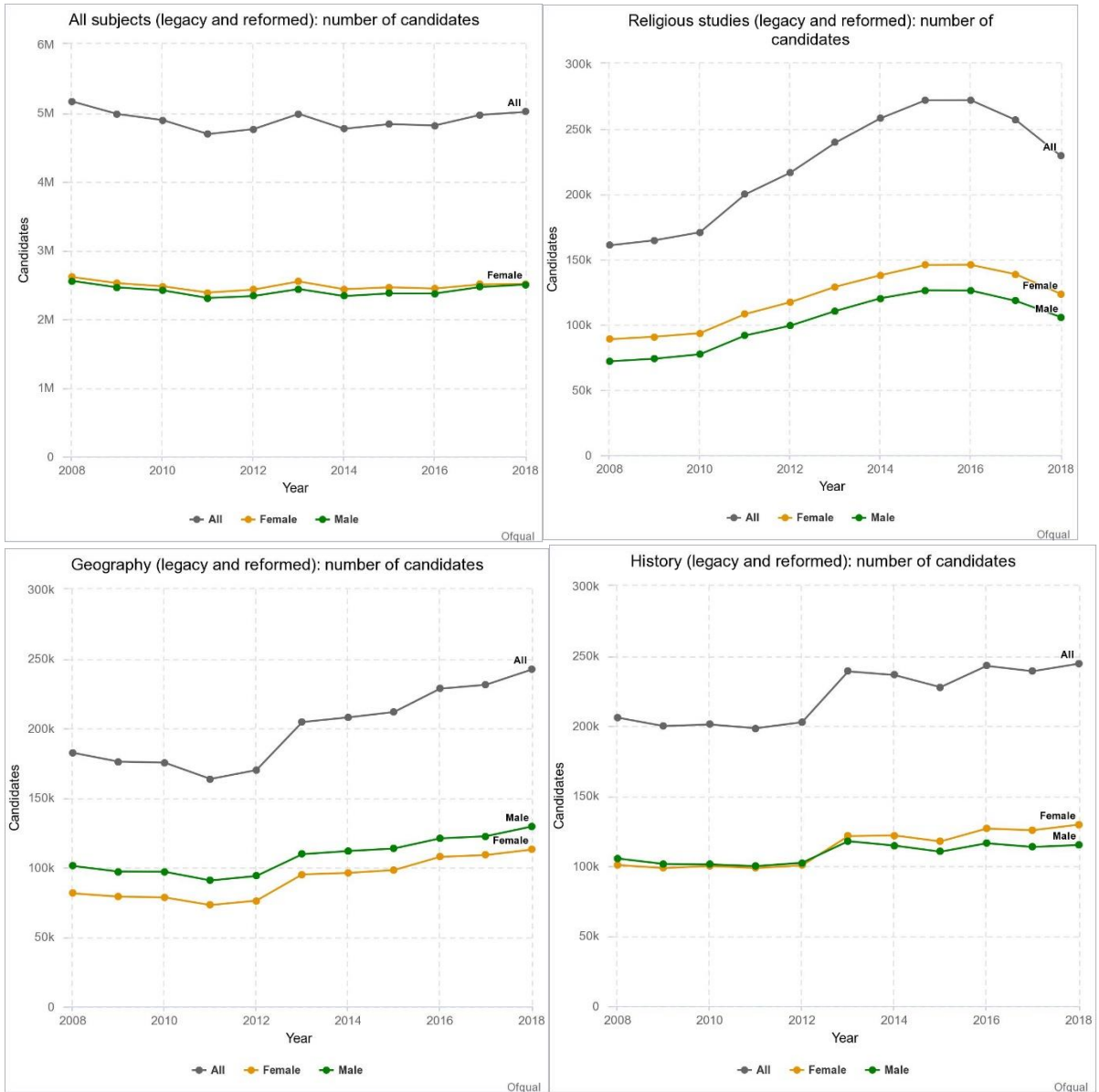


Fig.3b - 10 year comparison of growth and decline in GCSE numbers in Religious Studies, Geography and History (from Ofqual Analytics)



## The Introduction of the 2018 New Syllabus for Religious Studies

701 schools participated in GCSE Religious Studies in 2017, but did not participate in 2018. As presented in Fig 4a, These schools have lower average levels of disadvantage than the schools which were already not participating in 2017, but higher than the schools which are still participating in the new GCSE syllabus. This may suggest a further contraction in the subject's availability among schools serving even moderately disadvantaged communities. A number of factors may have contributed to the decision no longer to offer GCSE RS, including the perceived difficulty or breadth of content of the new GCSE syllabus, or due to pressures on curriculum time caused by focus on other subjects. Among the schools which did drop RS, attainment and progress measures remain lower than among schools which continued to offer GCSE RS, including progress measures for the EBacc element. There is therefore no evidence that dropping GCSE RS improves a school's performance in EBacc or other whole-curriculum progress and attainment measures. Nonetheless, the continued pattern of decline is a cause for concern.

More work is needed on the part of school leaders, examination boards, the RE community, government and the inspectorate to ensure that high quality Religious Studies at Key Stage 4 remains available to all students, regardless of social and economic disadvantage or school religious character.

		Percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals	Percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals at any time during the past 6 years	Percentage of pupils at the end of KS4 who are disadvantaged	Average Attainment 8 score	Progress 8 Measure for EBacc element	Progress 8 Measure for open element
Schools which entered students in GCSE RS in 2017 but not in 2018	Valid	652	498	557	536	553	553
	Missing	49	203	144	165	148	148
	Mean	12.9	32.8	30.8	40.1	-.245	-.244
	St. Dev	11.9	16.6	17.3	15.1	.716	.753
Schools which participated in GCSE RS in 2018	Mean	11.1	28.0	26.7	46.3	.019	.021

Fig.4a - Socio-economic status, progress and attainment scores of 701 schools which participated in GCSE RS in 2017 but not in 2018.

## Methodological Notes:

The whole population data was used, drawing on the Department for Education's School and College Performance Tables for 2017 and 2018<sup>7</sup>. Five datasets about all England secondary school data were compiled into a single dataset based on the school URN (Unique Reference Number):

- England\_spine (Identifying data on schools)
- England\_census (Free School Meals eligibility, pupil demographics)
- England\_ofsted\_school (Ofsted rating)
- England\_ks4underlying (GCSE results and entries for RS, History, Geography)
- England\_ks4revised.

After some adjustments, total 6959 schools with 36 variables were gathered and only schools which entered at least one student in at least one GCSE in 2018 were included for the analysis, a total of 4,615 institutions. The most analysis presented in this report therefore takes schools as the unit of analysis, exploring the following key variables:

- Demographic information: local authority, number of pupils, percentage pupils eligible for Free School Meals, percentage eligible over 6 years (Pupil Premium criteria), religious character of school;
- GCSE information: numbers of entries and results for GCSE RS, History and Geography;
- School performance data: Ofsted rating, Progress 8 and Attainment 8 measures.

Descriptive analyses and further statistical tests were carried out.

## Biographical Notes:

Dr David Lundie is Senior Lecturer in Education at Liverpool Hope University, he is the Principal Investigator on Culham St Gabriel's Trust's Research<sup>7</sup> research grant: Religious Education and Social Disadvantage, which sets out to determine the benefits and barriers to high quality Religious Education, with particular reference to pupils in areas of social disadvantage. He is Associate Editor of the British Journal of Religious Education and a member of the OCR Religious Studies Consultative Forum.

Dr Mi Young Ahn was Postdoctoral Research Associate on the Culham St Gabriel's Trust Research<sup>7</sup> grant: Religious Education and Social Disadvantage. She is a Research Fellow at the UCL Institute of Education since September 2019.

---

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/schools-by-type?step=default&table=schools&region=all-england&for=secondary>