

Religious Studies A-level and GCSE National picture 2020

We cannot as yet report to SACRE the data for York schools however this paper using information provided by the Religious Education Council of England and Wales and the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education gives the national picture for A-level and GCSE entries this year.

Religious Studies A-level

The number of Religious Studies A-level exam entries has declined at a lower rate than other humanities in 2020, performing better than some subjects despite a backdrop of overall declining entries and changes to the examination system. 15,692 RS A-level entries were recorded in England and Wales this year, compared with 17,490 in 2019. Although this represents a decline of 10.3%, it compares favourably with Geography (down 13.9%) and History (down 13.2%). The overall number of A-Level entries in England and Wales fell this year by 2.6% from 768,217 in 2019 to 748,905 in 2020. The reduction reflects both a smaller cohort of 18 year olds (599,393 in 2020 compared with 618,873 in 2019 [Office for National Statistics]) and changes to the assessment of A level and AS examinations that had an effect in 2018, when the majority of schools changed their policies to recommending three A-levels, versus four in previous years. The number of AS exam entries also declined by 24.6% following AS and A-level reforms. The demographic shift and changes to the examination system mean that it is difficult to draw concrete conclusions from comparisons with previous years, however the key outcomes of the 2020 A-level results in England and Wales for Religious Education are as follows:

- 15,692 RS A-level entries were recorded, a decrease of 10.3% on 2019.
- Despite the decrease in entries for RS, there are still 41% more entries than in 2003 (11,132 entries were recorded in 2003).
- The 10.3% decrease in entries for RS is smaller or the same as equivalent figures for some other subjects such as Geography (down 13.9%), History (down 13.2%), and Political Studies (down 11.1%).
- The increase of 41% in the number of entries for RS A-level since 2003 is greater than equivalent changes over the same period for subjects such as Geography (down 14.9%), Law (down 5.4%), and History (up 7.1%).
- Among arts, humanity, or social science subjects, only Sociology (up 61.9%), Economics (up 80.1%) and Political Studies (up 90.5%) have seen stronger growth since 2003.

The relative stability of entries suggests that candidates continue to recognise the value of RS A-level for Higher Education entry, graduate employment, and as a valuable life skill.

Religious Studies GCSE

The number of pupils taking GCSE Religious Studies in England and Wales has remained stable in 2020 despite ongoing challenges, reflecting the relevance of the subject and its popularity among young people.

In England, RS GCSE entries for the full course fell by less than 1% to 225,719 compared to 227,913 in 2019. In Wales, entries fell by a similar amount from 10,129 in 2019 to 10,037 in 2020. Overall entries in England, including both full and short courses, fell by 2.3% to 243,786, compared with 249,443 in 2019.

Full course entries in 2020 were still almost one third higher than in 2010. In Wales, combined entries fell by just under 2% from 16,327 in 2019 to 16,003 in 2020. Until this year, there has been a gradual decline in full course RS GCSE entries since a peak in 2016, when 269,839 entries were recorded in England. Full and short course entries reached a high of 461,795 in 2011 but declined rapidly as schools in England opted not to enter pupils into the short course following Government policy changes, despite a requirement among all schools, including Academies, to provide Religious Education to all pupils at all key stages. In Wales however, the short course entries have not declined at the same rate and fell by just 3.74% (from 6,198 to 5,966). In England, short course entries fell by more than 16%.

The key outcomes for Religious Education in England and Wales at Key Stage 4 in 2020 are as follows:

- There were 225,719 entries in England and 10,037 in Wales for the full course in GCSE RS, a fall of less than 1% from 2019 (227,913 England and 10,129 Wales).
- There were 18,067 entries in England and 5,966 in Wales for the short course in GCSE RS, a decline of 16.1% in England and 3.74% in Wales from 2019 (21,530 and 6198 respectively).
- There were 243,786 entries for GCSE RS (combined short and full courses) in England, a decline of 2.3% from 2019 (249,443). In Wales combined entry figures were 16,003 a fall of 1.98% from 2019 (16,327).
- Despite a decline since the peak in entries, the number of pupils receiving a full course GCSE in Religious Studies in England in 2020 (225,719) is still 32% greater than in 2010 (170,767). In Wales entries for the full course are 65% higher in 2020 (10,037) than in 2010 (6,100).

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
History	199852	200992	198316	202630	238928	236304	227619	242834	239027	244401	261537	273778
Geography	176034	175347	163604	169968	204497	207857	211721	228463	231297	242268	251121	255344
Religious Studies Full	164647	170767	199752	216373	239409	258067	271917	271973	256729	229189	227913	225719
Religious Studies Short	261399	254698	233998	211269	150621	99661	68890	53093	36962	26229	21530	18067
Religious Studies Combined	426046	425465	433750	427642	390030	357728	340807	325066	293691	255418	249443	243786

Sources:

<http://www.icq.org.uk/examination-results/gcse>

Looking ahead to Religious Studies A-level and GCSE examinations 2021

Ofqual confirms changes to some GCSEs, AS and A levels next year (2021) but not to examinations in RS

Following a national consultation, Ofqual released their decisions on 3rd August regarding the cohort of students who will be taking their GCSE's, AS or A levels in 2021. There are a few headlines to report.

1. No change to the assessment arrangements for Religious Studies.

The report stated that there will be no change to the assessments in Religious Studies for the GCSE (short and full course) AS or A level. Thus, students will be assessed in the same manner as previous years.

Ofqual did recognise that:

"Many respondents were concerned about covering all the content, given the lost time and difficulty of covering it in a normal year. This was raised for most subjects at GCSE, AS and at A level."

"Respondents often suggested this could be addressed through question optionality, which was discussed further below. In some subjects, for example, GCSE Religious Studies and GCSE English Literature, parallels were drawn with GCSE history and respondents urged that similar arrangements were made to enable content sampling in their subject."

However, Ofqual decided against making changes to Religious Studies.

2. The examination season has been put back by three weeks.

Final arrangements for examinations in 2021 have yet to be announced, but the government has confirmed that exams will be held three weeks later than usual in order to allow for more teaching time. The Schools Minister referred to exams in a debate in the House of Commons on 23 November:

"We have delayed this summer's exams of GCSEs and A levels by three weeks to free up teaching time. Ofqual have consulted in the summer on changes to assessment on issues such as science practicals, field trips, spoken language and optionality in history and English literature to help further reduce pressure on teaching times. And we'll be shortly announcing other measures to help ensure the exams are fair, including the approach to grading to ensure the 2021 cohort is treated fairly to previous years' cohorts of students."

3. There will be further information on how student outcomes (i.e. grades) are to be protected.

As noted above there will be further announcements from government. Ofqual are currently considering how the grades or outcomes of students taking the examinations in 2021 can be protected. They have said:

"The Secretary of State has asked us to advise him in the coming months how we might ensure students' outcomes are protected through our approach to grading next year, as we did to protect the interests of students who took the reformed qualifications for the first time. Our approach- using statistical

predictions to guide the first awards of reformed qualifications- worked well to protect the interests of students taking the reformed qualifications and we will consider its use next year. We did not consult on proposal for grading in summer 2021, but we will provide further information in due course.”

Sources:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/exams-and-assessments-in-2021>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/proposed-changes-to-the-assessment-of-gcses-as-and-a-levels-in-2021>

Other related issues:

At the end of July, the Department for Education announced that from September all pupils should return to school. The guidance sets an expectation that *“the curriculum should remain broad and ambitious: all pupils continue to be taught a wide range of subjects, maintaining their choices for further study and employment.”*

The DfE have advised that when planning for pupils’ return to school in September, subjects should not be removed from the curriculum. In relation to Key Stage 3 the guidance states, *“the curriculum should also remain broad from year 7 to year 9 so that the majority of pupils are taught a full range of subjects over the year, including...[.] Religious Education.”* Indeed, the suspension of subjects should only occur in *“exceptional circumstances”* and if this occurs, a school must be able to demonstrate that this is *“in the best interests of these pupils and should be subject to discussion with parents during the Autumn term.”*

For key stage 4 and 5 the guidance states that, *“the vast majority of pupils in year 10 and 11 are expected to continue to study their examination subjects.”* A year 11 pupil should only be advised to discontinue a subject in *“exceptional circumstances”*.