Text for email: Qualifications Wales Consultation- Religious Studies

Dear Sacre member

please find attached, a short briefing paper which may be of use when attending your next SACRE meeting. The paper assist when completing the online consultation Qualifications Wales consultation for the new RS proposals.

I am going to complete the consultation next week and intend to schedule a short briefing session on 17th November at 5pm to talk through the CES responses.

**CES Briefing for Catholic SACRE Representatives, October 2022**

The points in the briefing paper have been compiled considering discussions with the Welsh diocesan directors and colleagues within the CES.I have referred to the Proposal for GCSE Religious Studies in the briefing paper and excerpts are highlighted in yellow. The full proposal can be found online at <https://haveyoursay.qualifications.wales> and you must register to access the proposal and consultation survey.

**1. Structure**

The content for GCSE Religious Studies specification must be structured around the following themes: • Sustainability and responsibility for protecting the environment • Human rights • Life, Death and Belief in the Afterlife • Influence of Religion and Belief in and on Society • Engagement with diverse lived religious and non-religious experiences. (Qualifications Wales proposal)

Comment: We appreciate that the title Religious Studies has been retained and that there has not been a shift to a more values/ethics based title. However, the proposal appears to require a study of religions in terms of what they have to say about the themes they have selected as central. This is not religious studies; it is an issues-based curriculum. Within this structure the teaching of specific content of religion is only relevant in so far as it relates to the concerns that they have decided are central. It is a marginalising and reduction of all religion.

We would question therefore whether a revised WJEC exam in line with the Welsh proposals would offer the same academic rigor as the present GCSE. In addition, the proposed qualification does not seem to prepare for the current A level. Will this also be changed to reflect the GCSE? This is not good for those wishing to study RS at A level and may affect quality / numbers for recruitment of teachers of RE in the future. This is an issue of concern for Catholic schools.

**2. Catholic content**

Emyr George the Director of qualifications policy and reform stated, in his introductory video that the “brand new set of GCSE’S will help us to realise the ambitions for the curriculum for Wales and meet the needs for future learners.” (Qualifications Wales video)

We would assume therefore, that the needs of learners in Catholic schools will be met and we will be able under these proposals to continue offering high-quality, content-rich Catholic examination papers that are linked to the new RED as the WJEC offers currently.

It is essential to keep re-iterating this point and gain as many assurances in writing and otherwise as possible asking for clarification as to whether we will be able to have the kind of GCSE papers that will align with the RED as we have from the WJEC now.

Link this point to the notion of flexibility for schools to design a curriculum that suits the needs of their learners allowing Catholic schools to offer GCSE courses that build on the RE Directory and serve the needs of their pupils by enriching their knowledge of (Catholic) Christianity while developing critical thinking, considering ethics and inspiring curiosity.

All the areas in the proposed framework could be touched on with a revision of the WJEC framework if they are allowed to be seen through the frame of Catholicism, Laudato Si for example.

**3. Examination weighting**

Stakeholders involved in co-construction proposed that the external exam will include two papers (each of equal weighting): • Religion and belief paper: Knowledge and understanding of religion, beliefs, teachings, and practices • Thematic paper: Application and transfer of knowledge and understanding of religion and non-religious beliefs, teachings, and practices in new and unfamiliar contexts to demonstrate critical thinking, analysis, and evaluation, in drawing reasoned conclusions in relation to ethical topics and questions. (Qualifications Wales proposal)

The equal weighting Religion and belief paper with the thematic paper appears to be a downgrading of the RE content in favour of alternative views. If this not the case, can they explain why not?

There is also a natural follow up question would be about ensuring parity with England in terms of GCSE standards and skill development for Welsh pupils to ensure they are effectively prepared for further study if they choose to go outside Wales.

**4.Other religions and non-religious belief systems**

The following 3 sections should be considered together.

The specification must reflect that GCSE Religious Studies offers rich opportunities for learners to explore the cross-cutting theme of human rights and diversity, as described in the Curriculum for Wales Guidance. GCSE Religious Studies provides space for learners to make sense of and interpret human experience, the natural world, and their own place within in it, from a pluralistic perspective, understanding different religions and non-religious philosophical convictions in their own locality and in Wales, developing their sense of cynefin, as well as in the wider world. (Qualifications Wales proposal)

There must be flexibility within GCSE Religious Studies to explore other religions and nonreligious belief systems, teachings, practices, values, and philosophical convictions. These can be chosen from the following list: • Islam • Buddhism • Judaism • Sikhism (Sikhi) • Hinduism • Humanism (Qualifications Wales proposal)

The awarding body must give a rationale for the degree of choice and range of topics included in the specification. (Qualifications Wales proposal)

The RED prepares for the study of other religions and non-religious philosophical convictions, and we welcome the notion of flexibility. However, the list provided below covers main world religions but only mentions Humanism i.e., one conviction rather than a range. This is not pluralistic as it seems to suggest to schools that Humanism is the only non-religious philosophical conviction that has validity.

We would ask the awarding body to explain the rationale behind this decision.

In addition, how does this element of the proposal work with the assurance given that there will be a routeway for Catholic schools to access a Catholic paper?

**5. Alternative qualification**

A key point to make is that Catholic schools enter all learners for RE GCSE as the current model reflects the needs of the learners. The webinar responses have indicated that there will be a ‘route’ for Catholic schools to follow but it is still unclear whether this means the retention of the Catholic paper.

If this does not remain the case schools may be forced to consider entering pupils for qualifications from English boards or through Eduquas which offer a Catholic paper at GCSE and A level. Under its Eduqas brand, WJEC offers many of the listed GCSEs and A levels in England. It will also make all of those listed qualifications that it offers in this way available on publicly funded courses in Wales. The CES is seeking clarification if this can be allowed under the current regulations as it seems to suggest this is the case.

However, if this course of action was deemed necessary and would result in a negative impact on performance measures or funding for Catholic schools this would be an equalities issue as it is a situation that is not of the school’s own making.

This may also impact negatively on the consistency of national data.