

Addressing the Crisis: Revitalising Religious Education Teacher Recruitment



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ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The Religious Education Policy Unit (2023) report points out that the Department for Education (DfE) has consistently missed its RE teacher recruitment goals for a decade, with a mere 285 trainees in 2023/24, only 44% of its target. Enrolment in RE Initial Teacher Training courses has plummeted by 73% from 2019 to 2024 (DfE 2023/24 ITT Census), resulting in a 150% surge in RE job vacancies (School Workforce Census 2022). While the reinstatement of a £10,000 bursary has boosted applications by 34% for the upcoming year (DfE 2023/24 ITT Census), these gains are relatively small against the backdrop of a persistent and critical deficit of RE teachers.

One of the consequences of this crisis is an over-reliance on non-specialists for teaching Religious Education (RE) in secondary schools. This is compromising educational quality - a fact noted by Nick Gibb MP, former Minister for School Standards, who reported that 51% of RE teachers mainly teach other subjects and 155 schools do not employ a single teacher with a post-A level qualification in the subject. This use of teachers with other specialisms is particularly pressing in RE, more so than in Geography, History, or English and the negative impact on school standards has been repeatedly reported by Ofsted.

The 2021 Census underscores the diversity of England and Wales, with less than half the population identifying as Christian, highlighting the need for adept RE teachers who are able to plan and deliver provision that reflects our society's varied beliefs. This societal and educational need for quality RE is critical, as it helps students understand and empathise with different worldviews. Reinforcing the need for specialised RE teaching, a Savanta ComRes survey (2022), commissioned by Culham St Gabriel's Trust, found that 67% of parents consider their child's RE learning important for engaging with our multifaceted world. This data cements the case for targeted RE teacher recruitment and training initiatives.



POLICY IMPLICATIONS

1

There is a clear need for the DfE to develop more effective recruitment strategies to meet the shortfall in RE teachers. Including targeted advertising, enhanced career progression opportunities, and partnerships with religious and community organisations.

2

The £10,000 bursary boost has shown some positive effect, suggesting that financial incentives may be part of a successful approach to attracting more trainees, particularly in the cost-of-living crisis. However, current recruitment figures show that subjects attracting higher levels of support are recruiting more favourably. As the DfE considers the development of Teacher Degree Apprenticeships, it is essential that salaried and well-funded routes for RE trainees are seriously considered. Again recruitment data shows that salaried or higher bursaried routes are more popular with trainees.

3

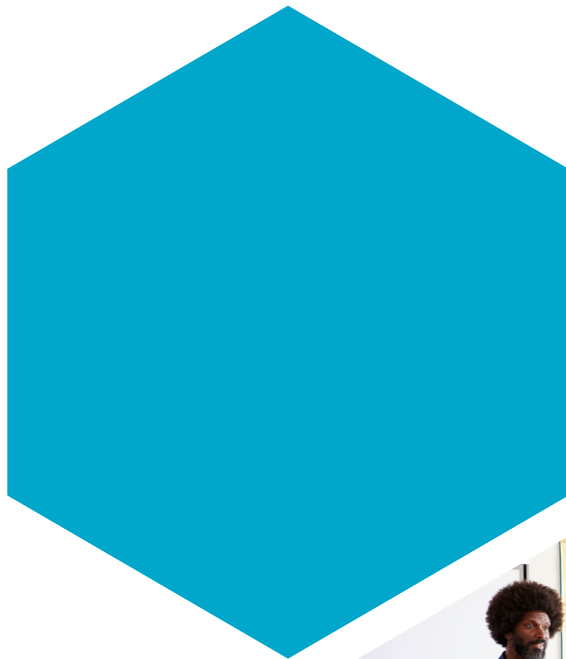
In order to meet targets, the government needs to draw on the capacity of both school and higher education led courses. Both need incentives to be attractive to recent post-graduates, more mature applicants and career changers.

4

Even though Ofsted had acknowledged the critical role that RE plays in equipping students to navigate a diverse and multi-faceted society in their 2021 Research Review on Religious Education, two years later, in its 2023 annual report concerns were again highlighted about the quality of provision. The report indicates that RE in many schools is of poor quality and not serving its purpose effectively. The evidence from Ofsted is that RE is suffering from a lack of clear government guidance and support. It is clear that Government policy needs to focus on enhancing the status and quality of RE in schools. This should include clearer curriculum guidance, increased investment in teacher training, and a strategic approach to ensure RE is given due consideration within the educational framework by adopting the National Plan (as demanded by the REC and NATRE) reflecting its importance for student development and societal cohesion.

CALL TO ACTION STATEMENT

The DfE need to implement targeted recruitment strategies, enhanced career paths, and partnerships to address the shortage of RE teachers. The relative success of the £10,000 bursary indicates that higher value financial incentives are crucial, especially amid the cost-of-living crisis; advocate for well-funded routes like Teacher Degree Apprenticeships to bolster RE education quality and status, ensuring students receive the necessary guidance for navigating our diverse society.



KEY FINDINGS



The reintroduction of the RE trainee bursary has shown marginal gains.



The DfE consistently misses RE teacher recruitment goals, with only 44% of the target achieved in 2023/24.



Enrolment in RE Initial Teacher Training courses has plummeted by 73% from 2019 to 2024.



Over-reliance on non-specialists compromises educational quality, with 51% of RE teachers often teaching other subjects and 155 schools without a teacher with a post-A level RE qualification.



Salaried RE teaching training routes are scarce, exacerbated by the ending of School Direct provision at the end of this academic year.



150% surge in RE job vacancies.

KEY FINDINGS



Concerns over poor quality RE teaching persist, highlighted by Ofsted in 2023.



RE teacher recruitment is now a post code lottery, with areas such as the East Midlands and the North East being particularly badly affected. Those with little flexibility to relocate in order to train are particularly affected.



Concerns have been raised by faith and belief community members regarding representation and accuracy of RE when taught by those with insufficient training and expertise.



Despite parental support for the subject, DfE investment in RE projects remains negligible, contrasting starkly with other subjects like Maths, Music, Computing and English.



Positive parental opinion of the subject is around 70%, with a recognition that the subject is vital in the preparation of young people for life in the modern world.

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