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ATINER's Conference Paper Series
EDU2012-0050

**An Evaluative Review of Evidence on the 'Enactment' of
the Non-Statutory National Framework Agreement for
Religious Education in England and Wales**

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URL Conference Papers Series: www.atiner.gr/papers.htm

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ISSN **2241-2891**

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This paper should be cited as follows:

King, Carolyn (2012) "An Evaluative Review of Evidence on the 'Enactment' of the Non-Statutory National Framework Agreement for Religious Education in England and Wales" Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: EDU2012-0050.

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Abstract

Governments world-wide consider education to be a priority, particularly in attempting to “deal with fundamental issues of economic well-being, globalization, climate change and social stability” (REC, 2007a: 2). England and Wales have invested large financial, physical and human resources in educational development within the last twenty years. Pluralism within Britain and across Europe highlights the significance of religion as a binding force relating to diversity and citizenship, and promoting community cohesion. The British government has a responsibility to ensure all citizens are treated equally and with respect. As we are a multi-cultural society, this includes citizens of all faiths and no faiths; the role of religion and belief plays an increasingly important function within communities and the wider social network.

A standardised or regulated approach towards Religious Education (RE) is common practice in most countries across Europe, but this has not been the case in Britain. Indeed, the 2004 curriculum ‘health check’ undertaken by The Religious Education Council for England and Wales (REC) revealed “continued curriculum incoherence in religious education ... continued low standards relative to National Curriculum subjects ... continued non-compliance with legal requirements [and] no consistent criteria ... to check the quality of RE” (REC, 2007a: 3). The intention of the 2004 Non-statutory National Framework Agreement for Religious Education (NFRE) was an attempt to address these issues.

The NFRE is therefore seen as the vehicle that will promote teaching and learning of RE, encourage a “clear and shared understanding” of all faiths and no faiths, and cultivate spiritual, moral, and social development in young people (QCA & DfES, 2004: 8). REC (2007b: 4) argues that the NFRE “provides for the first time an agreed national rationale for the subject”. The REC propose that implementation of the NFRE will enhance the RE syllabus and also improve the quality of RE taught in schools.

This paper explores some of the findings from a four year empirical study that I conducted in Lancashire, England. The research set out to explore specifically the response of a sample of faith-based and community schools to the NFRE. The paper explores the extent to which the theoretical aspirations of the NFRE have been met within the sphere of religious education. The paper also focuses on how and why the NFRE was developed and subsequent evolution of the policy from 2004 to 2012.

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The introduction of the National Curriculum in 1989 initiated unprecedented changes within the structure and assessment practices of education in England and Wales, and also the management and accountability of educational institutions themselves. Recently, concern has been centred on the role of education “regarding diversity and citizenship, and attaining social and community cohesion” (REC, 2007a: 2). Religious and cultural diversity within Britain and across Europe highlights the significance that religion plays in relating current government initiatives, such as citizenship, to faith communities. Religion itself, therefore, acting as a binding force within society that relates diversity and citizenship, and promotes community cohesion. Indeed, “religion remains a potent force in human affairs” (ibid).

Citizens of multicultural and religiously diverse societies should be treated equally, regardless of their faith orientation. It is a government responsibility to ensure this is a central tenant of political and social agendas. Educating young people about religion and beliefs and engaging them in discussions about how to live harmoniously with people of different faiths is a priority within Britain. Moreover, RE has been included within the curriculum since 1870, and was made a legal requirement of the curriculum in 1944. The RE legislation came into force so that students would be equipped with the knowledge and opportunity to challenge “future threats from ‘distorted religions’ such as Nazism and to build their capacity for making moral judgments” (REC, 2007a: 2).

In England and Wales religious education is a statutory part of the National Curriculum for community and voluntary controlled schools, both of which are funded by the government. It is taught according to a locally agreed syllabus which is supported and approved by local Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACRE). In voluntary aided schools, which are only partially funded by the state, RE is taught according to the schools’ trust deeds or the policies of the governing body and faith community. Independent schools with a religious character must teach RE in accordance with the tenets of one or more religions or religious denominations dependent upon the religious character of the school. Independent schools are self-funding; they do not receive any financial support from the government.

With the aim of reflecting the beliefs and practices of British citizens, the 1988 Education Reform Act ensured the representation of religious and non-religious world views within the RE curriculum. The introduction of the National Curriculum the following year inadvertently undermined the aims of both the 1988 Reform Act and religious education. The new assessment practices introduced by the National Curriculum “transformed the school curriculum as a whole and had the unintentional consequence of marginalizing religious education” (REC, 2007a: 3). Although SACRE are statutory within all local authorities, RE remains the only statutory subject without a national syllabus or national assessment practices.

Most European countries employ a regulated approach to development and delivery of RE, following a standardized curriculum. England and Wales have introduced a number of national initiatives across the curriculum in order to standardise educational delivery, assessment and practice of RE. These include widespread teacher training programmes, the introduction of a General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), the publication of the Quality & Curriculum Authority (QCA) teaching and learning guidelines, and The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspections of RE. These initiatives have only highlighted the inconsistencies of RE across the curriculum. Indeed, the 2004 evaluation undertaken by the REC revealed consistently low standards of RE in

relation to other National Curriculum subjects, lack of standard practice across the RE curriculum and poor quality on teaching and assessment (REC, 2007a: 3).

The REC, in consultation with QCA, major faith communities, the British Humanist Association and professional bodies, developed the NFRE with the intention of addressing some of these issues. The NFRE aims to bring “curriculum coherence and commonality to RE syllabuses and raise the quality of teaching and learning” (REC, 2007a: 3).

The REC, together with the RE Teaching Commission, presented proposals to the Department for Education & Skills (DfES) for a National RE Strategy. The strategy was deemed ‘educationally necessary’, based on the premise that “an educational understanding of the religious and spiritual dimension is fundamental to our common humanity” (REC, 2007b: 8). The REC believes “a national RE strategy would send an important signal both to those communities who feel their faith is misunderstood and also to the wider community who will be reassured that something is being done to tackle the on-going threat at a ‘hearts and minds’ level” (ibid). The NFRE is seen as the medium that will advance quality provision of RE, regulate teaching, learning and assessment nationally, and promote collective understanding of different religions and beliefs, together with cultivating social and moral awareness in young people (QCA & DfES, 2004: 8). The REC (2007b) further argues that the NFRE will provide a coherent national structure for RE, and this enhancement to the RE curriculum will also:

- Improve the quality of the RE taught in community schools so that faith communities can feel confident that their faith is being accurately and sympathetically portrayed.
- Encourage those responsible for RE in faith-based aided schools, academies and independent schools to consult and use as appropriate the non-statutory NFRE in planning their RE syllabuses.
- Where these [faith denominations] are rooted more specifically in one particular faith, they [will] have the opportunity – or, as many would say, the obligation - to accompany this with deliberate attention to the faiths of others.
- Encourage schools generally to strengthen this inclusive approach to RE, by developing links with faith communities in their local areas. (REC, 2007b: 3)

The NFRE became government policy in maintained schools across the education sector in England and Wales in 2004. It was disseminated via Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and faith communities, and is monitored by SACRE and QCA.

The aim of the document is, amongst other things, to provide “quality of religious education ... raise standards in the learning and teaching of religious education ... [give a] ... clear and shared understanding of the knowledge and skills that young people will gain at school” (DfES & QCA, 2004: 3). The purposes of the NFRE are:

- To establish an entitlement – endorsing an entitlement to learning RE by all students irrespective of social background, culture, race, religion, gender, differences in ability and disability ...
- To establish standards – set expectations for learning and assessment and standards of attainment for all students ...
- To promote continuity and coherence – seeking to contribute to a coherent curriculum that promotes continuity ...

- To promote public understanding – educational aims to increase public understanding of, and confidence in, the work of schools in religious education. (NFRE, 2004: 9).

The NFRE contains a brief outline of the new structure for RE at each key stage; it also includes a rationale for the knowledge, understanding and skills that should be promoted within the curriculum. There is a recommended programme of study for students aged 5 to 19 accompanied by an 8-level scale of attainment, and a summary of expected attitudes to be developed by students studying RE. In addition the NFRE includes the legislative status of the document and the declaration that it is the basis of government policy on RE; despite its supposed status as non-statutory.

Difficulties encountered within the RE community relate specifically to supporting the student attainment of purposes, aims and objectives set out within the NFRE document. Teachers have difficulty interpreting the NFRE recommendations, understanding the levels of attainment and also aligning attainment levels within a local context (Ofsted, 2007). For example, the NFRE recommends that teachers encourage students to have positive ‘attitudes’ towards different faiths and no faith – how do teachers measure this objective?

The new attainment levels set out in the NFRE have certainly been confusing. In the main, levels of attainment are not clear, and there is a great deal of repetition, which makes progression targets from one level to the next difficult to identify. The levels of attainment are not sufficiently detailed, particularly beyond level 7, nor is there an adequate guide to support teachers in understanding them. Evidence from The Annual Report of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools (2005, HMI - 2480) noted that, although the problems within RE have not been resolved, there have been marked improvements within primary schools, but not in secondary schools. The survey report suggests that this is because primary-school RE teachers have used levels of attainments in other subjects as a guide to RE rather than the NFRE attainment targets. Although this practice has produced good results, it is certainly a long way from adopting the recommendations outlined in the NFRE. Indeed, there seem to be a general lack of understanding of the how attainment levels map across RE, and a general lack of enthusiasm in incorporating the NFRE across the RE curriculum.

Moreover, Ofsted (2007: 22) report that “teachers need a detailed understanding of the levels and how to integrate ... attainment targets in planning modules of work and individual lessons”. Perhaps a more detailed guide and certainly more rigorous consultation can be offered to schools and RE teachers in the future.

In an attempt to evaluate the impact of the NFRE, a consultation process was established between 2004-2007 by the DfES and QCA. Although RE is a statutory subject, it does not have a national curriculum document; rather, RE is determined locally. By law, each local authority must establish a SACRE in order to develop a locally agreed syllabus. The syllabus is reviewed every five years and either amended slightly or revised completely. Local authorities and SACRE establish Agreed Syllabus Conferences (ASC) in order to complete this task. SACRE are therefore responsible for RE development and ensuring that RE is sustainable within educational advancements, social evolution and local expansion. Although “the introduction of a non-statutory Framework for RE was the single biggest issue discussed by SACRE” (QCA, 2004: 5), an accurate reflection or representation of the effect of the Framework could not be reached. Indeed, “some [SACRE] have delayed a review of their agreed syllabus until final publication” (QCA, 2004: 5). Ofsted

(2007: 5) report that SACRE and ASC “find it difficult to gather robust evidence about trends in standards and provision in order to evaluate the impact of the agreed syllabus and undertake its five-year review”.

Local authorities are responsible for supporting SACRE in their role of provision to RE and faith communities. Without sufficient resources SACRE cannot fulfil their support role effectively. Ofsted (2007: 7) found that many local authorities “do not ensure that SACRE have sufficient capacity to [act] effectively”. In addition, a reduction in the number of local authority religious education advisors has had massive implications for the dissemination of the NFRE – many schools did not receive support, guidance or advice concerning the aims, objectives or delivery of the NFRE. Indeed, the QCA Report (2004: 4) states that “concern has been expressed about the trend to reduce Local Education Authority RE advisers and the growing dependency of some LEAs on either independent consultants or advisers who have other responsibilities”. Despite these concerns, QCA (2008: 21) claim that “an RE specialist subject adviser or consultant will be able to provide support tailored to your context”. In direct contradiction to this claim, the schools involved in my own research study had never heard of the NFRE; their introduction to the Framework was my project. This was indeed cause for concern, particularly considering the human and financial investment in supposedly reaching and supporting faith communities. Perhaps the aspirations of the NFRE have been mediated by regional to local level through Continued Professional Development (CPD) or RE curriculum workshops; this, however, had not been clearly or directly communicated to the sample schools.

Ofsted (2007) reported continued inconsistency across England and Wales in teaching practice, quality of provision, assessment practice and compliance with NFRE recommendations. The 2007 Report highlighted weaknesses in locally agreed syllabuses, stating that many “do not define progression in the subject clearly enough and therefore do not provide a secure basis for effective teaching and learning, curriculum planning and assessment” (ibid: 5). According to Ofsted, this directly affects assessment strategies, which inspectors found to be ‘weak’. Ofsted also found this affected the RE teachers’ ability to identify students’ strengths and abilities, and to prioritise areas requiring improvement. Inspectors found “serious weaknesses” in the way the NFRE “levels of attainment are used in planning and assessment” (ibid: 6). They further state that “aspects of teaching, assessment, curriculum and leadership and management are not good enough in many secondary schools” and that teaching “is unchallenging” (ibid). A specific aim of the NFRE is to encourage awareness of faith issues at local, national, international and global levels. Ofsted (2007) found that the RE curriculum was lacking in emphasis on any of these issues, particularly relating to political and social contributions; they found RE curricula unchallenging for students.

In secondary schools, teachers have struggled introducing the NFRE. They have, however, introduced features of the teaching and learning strategies outlined within the document. Unfortunately, the lack of continuity from one lesson to another, and from one topic to another, has been detrimental to student learning. Indeed, Ofsted (2007: 21) reported that student “progress in individual lessons is not translated into positive achievement over the longer term. Weak assessment often prevents teachers from recognising this problem”. Higher achievers have found RE lessons un-engaging, and lower achieving students have found them inaccessible. Ofsted (ibid) point out that “not enough is being done” by schools to address these problems. Indeed, secondary school assessment is “weaker in RE than in any other subject and there is little evidence to suggest that it is improving” (ibid).

Ofsted (2007: 8) made several recommendations to bring about improvement to RE. These were aimed at specific audiences i.e. DfES. Ofsted (2007) further emphasised the need to either employ teachers with specialist knowledge in RE or ensure effective training for non-specialist teachers delivering RE. Ofsted (2007) link the lower improvement levels in RE in secondary schools to the lack of specialist RE teachers. This has been a recurring theme in Ofsted reports, which have noted that secondary schools often employ “non-specialist” RE teachers and have difficulties in “securing sufficient specialist RE teachers” (Ofsted, 2007: 23). However, government investment during 2006/07 extended training programmes and incentives to promote graduate progression onto Post-graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) courses, particularly RE teacher training programmes. Ofsted report that these initiatives have had a positive “impact on applications for a place on PGCE courses in RE [with] an increase of over 17% on the figures for 2005” (ibid). Although the government reduced places for secondary PGCE training overall, they increased places for RE training. It is hoped that recruitment onto RE teacher training programmes will continue to increase. This, however, depends on whether government bodies continue to support the recommendations made by Ofsted. How far these recommendations will be met remains to be seen.

In general, Ofsted (2007) found that the use made by ASC of the NFRE was variable and confused. In response to this, QCA produced guidance for agreed syllabuses on how to use the NFRE (QCA, 2008). The Guide claims to show “SACRE and ASC how their own agreed syllabus can use the Framework in ways that are both coherent and flexible”, and also support SACRE and ASC in how to “make the best use of the Framework” (QCA, 2008: 6). The Guide emphasises that the NFRE, although non-statutory, is the “main national expression of standards and breadth in RE” (QCA, 2008: 19). However, the Guide does state very clearly that the NFRE is not an RE syllabus; it is the basis on which they should be founded. Indeed, “as with any Framework, it needs interpreting and making relevant to the local context; this is the job of the ASC” (ibid). Although the Guide supports interpretation at a national level, it would seem that this also leads to further confusion. Many ASC and LEAs prefer to adopt segments of the NFRE into their current syllabuses rather than using the whole Framework. This enables them to maintain continuity with current practices whilst giving them time to amend their curricula to match the NFRE. The Guide, however, recommends otherwise and draws attention to the fact that the NFRE forms the basis of the new GCSE, Advanced Subsidiary Level (AS-level) and Advanced Level (A-level) examination criteria and also newly published RE teaching material and supporting resources. Indeed, the concepts and content of the NFRE are the bases of all RE assessments in England and Wales. If ASC and LEAs do not use the NFRE, then their agreed syllabuses will not contain the same criteria being examined at national level. Further, by choosing not to use the NFRE, teachers are at a disadvantage in developing and implementing quality RE and supporting their students through the syllabus and assessments.

There are two implications that need to be seriously considered. Firstly, that local authorities could interpret the NFRE in radically different ways, thus undermining the aim of ensuring national “coherence across the local authority’(s)” (QCA, 2008: 19). Secondly, the NFRE is supposedly non-statutory. However, it would seem that by aligning national awards to the NFRE the government are actually imposing the NFRE in a similar manner to a statutory framework.

The REC (2007a: 3) claim that “in February 2006 faith communities with their own schools signed up to the use of the Framework in aided school programmes of

religious education”. Yet the sample faith schools involved in my research were not familiar with the NFRE, nor had they been invited to ‘sign up’ to use it. Indeed, they followed either the Icons Programme for Key Stage 3 and Edexcel for Key Stage 4, or another locally agreed syllabus.

The REC (2007a: 3) also state that the NFRE is potentially the first “common and inclusive approach to religious education in all schools in England alongside the National Curriculum”. This may be true up to a point, but my study provides evidence that the faith-based schools involved in my research deliver an inclusive religious education programme without reference to the NRFE – and have been doing this successfully for years.

In addition, the REC further claim that SACRE are “vital local agents for promoting RE and for assisting faith communities acquire a fuller understanding of the nature and value of the NFRE [and that] they are well placed to monitor the effective implementation” (REC, 2007b: 7). They do not, however, indicate how or when this support will be initiated or how and when an assessment of the schools’ understanding of the NFRE will be undertaken, or even how SACRE will be resourced and supported in fulfilling this role. Indeed, QCA (2004: 3) reported that “SACRE are largely dependent on Ofsted inspection reports to monitor RE. There is real concern that the new framework for inspections will not provide the source of data that SACRE have hitherto depended on for their monitoring of agreed syllabuses” (ibid). Moreover, Ofsted (2007: 8) made a specific recommendation that SACRE should be fully supported by DfES and local authorities, but without adequate resources SACRE cannot promote the NFRE or community cohesion effectively. It would seem that nobody is really sure who is supposed to be supporting whom.

Between 2007 and 2009 there were numerous conferences regarding the effectiveness of the NFRE, and consultation reports have been very mixed. Indeed, it is even difficult to ascertain exactly who has and who has not been involved in the consultation process, and even more difficult to ascertain if there are conclusive results. It is apparent, though, that the NFRE did not achieve the original aims of bringing about standardised educational delivery, assessment and practice within religious education, and it is obviously clear that there is a desperate need for clarification on how to use the NFRE effectively. This has led the Dept for Children, Schools & Family’s (DCSF)¹ to produce yet another guide: the Religious Education in English schools: non-statutory guidelines 2009.

As the ‘national umbrella’ for religious education, the REC provides the organisation, management and members of the NFRE Steering Group, and plays a ‘key role’ in the implementation of the RE national strategy. Supporting bodies include the Professional Council for Religious Education (PCfRE), the Professional Association for RE inspectors, Advisers and Consultants (AREIAT), the Association of University Lecturers of Religious Education (AULRE) and Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACRE). Although the REC (2007b: 7) claim that faith communities such as the Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Free Churches have “actively supported the NFRE”, and that other faith traditions such as Bahai, Buddhists, Hindus, Jains, Jews, Muslims and Sikhs “welcome the increased significance and seriousness being given to RE” (ibid), it seems that many

¹ The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) is now the Department for Education, but will be referred to throughout the thesis as DCSF to align with the referencing of document sources. This will also apply to all other government agencies that have been re-named or re-categorised.

individual schools either do not know anything about the NFRE and/or believe they are delivering a comprehensive RE curriculum that is already inclusive (King 2012).

Ofsted inspectors are engaged by the government to evaluate the performance of schools across England and Wales in relation to the quality of teaching provision, the alignment of curricula and syllabuses to the National Curriculum, the academic achievement levels of students and the standardisation of assessment practices – amongst other objectives. Three years after the recommendations by Ofsted (2004) for schools to implement quality within the teaching and learning of RE and attain some kind of standardisation in assessment, community schools were still seemingly failing to attain these goals. Neither, it seems, have the majority of community schools made any advancement in this area despite the introduction of the NFRE in 2004. Indeed, the subsequent 2007 Ofsted Report highlighted specifically the lack of national coherence across the RE curriculum content, provision and assessment practices within community schools. It was noted that “lack of clarity about continuity and progression in the curriculum, and weaknesses in the way pupils’ progress is defined and assessed, contribute significantly to the slow pace of improvement in RE” (Ofsted, 2007: 32). One year later, the REC picked up the theme again and advised that “there is constant evidence of some persistent weaknesses in the subject [RE], particularly in community schools” (REC, 2008: 2). The document also highlights that within community schools there are “cases [of] continuing non-compliance with legal requirements for RE” (ibid: 6). In contrast, the same REC evaluation document praised faith-based school curriculum and teaching practice, and also noted that these schools “fare better in terms of resources and time for RE” (ibid).

Unfortunately, and another three years later, the 2010 National Ofsted Report echoed the same concerns regarding community school implementation of RE. The Report states that the curriculum content, assessment practices and teaching provision, in the majority of community schools, were “no better than satisfactory quality, or in some cases inadequate, and the effectiveness of RE observed was not good enough” (Ofsted, 2010: 4), and that “there is uncertainty among many teachers of RE about what they are trying to achieve in the subject resulting in a lack of well-structured and sequenced teaching and learning, substantial weaknesses in the quality of assessment and limited use of higher order thinking skills to promote greater challenge” (ibid: 6). Ofsted refer to the NFRE in both the 2007 and the 2010 National Reports, stressing the need for community schools to engage with it. Although Ofsted have stipulated that schools need much more support from SACREs, and that specialist teachers are a necessity, perhaps they should also recommend that RE is given more status and credit within community schools’ curriculum and timetabling.

A standardisation of the RE curriculum and assessment practice is absolutely essential, particularly when viewed in the light of the apparent haphazard nature of current practice within community schools. However, my research – and certainly the evidence generated by government bodies (Ofsted, 2007; Ofsted 2010; REC, 2008) – testify to the fact that faith-based schools not only deliver a pluralistic perspective within the RE syllabus (as stipulated within the NFRE), but also engage specialist teachers, provide an interesting and challenging RE curriculum content, maintain quality and standardised assessment practices, produce high attainment levels across the student body and adhere to legal requirements; all of which Ofsted National Reports (2004, 2007, 2010) have emphasized as being essential components of quality provision. Perhaps the NFRE should be directed specifically at the schools which require the support rather than those which seemingly do not.

My research demonstrates a lack of direct support from government or official bodies, at least to the sample schools in Lancashire. This alone suggests a gap between theory and practice. Needless to say, the absence of effective dissemination of direct or explicit information to schools participating in my study regarding the NFRE has been damaging. I highlight in particular the adverse effect this has on curriculum development in the light of the alignment of GCSE, AS-level and A-Level assessments to the NFRE. Moreover, it has yet to be determined whether the NFRE has accomplished its intended aims and objectives. The initial outcome of my evaluation highlights, in particular, concerns over the extent to which the intentions of the NFRE have been matched by the results. Although I do not claim that my study represents the situation in every school within England and Wales, it does draw attention to some negative outcomes. If the initial results of my study are a true indication of the success or failure of the NFRE within Lancashire, then at least for this area they conflict significantly with the claims made by the REC and QCA regarding the dissemination, consultancy support, school guidance, implementation and successful integration of the NFRE recommendations into the RE curriculum.

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