

BRIEFING NOTE

May 21, 2013

To: Minister of State for Schools, Rt Hon David Laws MP
From: John Keast OBE, Chair of the RE Council

The case for reinstating bursaries for RE teacher training

1. ***A large number of specialist RE teachers is required to cover the demands of the subject.*** RE is a statutory subject and must be taught to all pupils in state schools, with the exception of the 'very few' (Ofsted) withdrawn by their parents. The total GCSE entry for Religious Studies full and short course (over 400K) remains one of the highest after English, Maths and Science. Over 18K students took RS A Level in 2012.
2. ***There is a serious shortage of RE specialists.*** The latest figures from the DfE show that 29% of RE lessons (c.f. 15% history) are taught by teachers who have neither a degree in RS or a related subject nor have completed their training in RS (PGCE, BA(QTS) etc)ⁱ. As a result there is a far higher percentage of non-specialists teaching RE than most other subjects.ⁱⁱ
3. ***Non-specialist teachers' lack of subject knowledge and understanding has a detrimental affect on standards in RE.*** Ofsted has found that the lack of teachers' subject qualifications is a key factor affecting pupils' examination successⁱⁱⁱ. The DfE has also argued that pupil attainment is affected "above all other factors" by the quality of their teachers^{iv}. However, nearly half of those teaching RE are unlikely to have the subject knowledge to meet the DfE's own teaching standards.
4. ***As teacher training becomes increasingly school based, more high quality RE specialists are needed to train newcomers to the profession.*** There is worrying evidence that some Teach First participants are the only RE specialist in the school and are receiving no subject-specific teaching^v.
5. ***Specialist RE trainee recruitment instead of increasing is in decline.*** The latest GTTR figures show that in the third week of May 2013 506 RE trainees had been recruited compared to 681 at the same time in 2012. This is a worrying decrease of 25.7% compared to a 7.2% reductions in applications for all subjects.
6. ***The removal of the bursary for RE trainees is a huge disincentive and disadvantage.*** Respondents from higher education to the APPG inquiry identified three negative outcomes from the removal of bursaries for RE trainees:
 - i. Theology/RS graduates are deterred from applying for training places
 - ii. There is a particular shortfall in applications from older graduates who have mortgages to pay and families to support. These people are a great loss to the profession
 - iii. some prospective RE teachers with combined degrees are applying for training places in subjects such as history, which carry bursaries, with the intention of applying for RE posts. This will add to the existing number of non-specialists.
7. ***No coherent argument has been given for the removal of bursaries for RE trainees.*** In recent months the DfE has given the REC three reasons for the removal of bursaries:
 - i. Ministers want to focus spending on high priority subjects, (letter from Mark O'Donnell from the DfE's Public Communications Unit: 30.10.2012). The decision as to which subjects are 'high priority' is somewhat arbitrary. It is difficult to understand why Ancient Greek, taught to a small minority of pupils, should be a

'priority' and should warrant a bursary while RE, which is taught to all pupils, is not.

- ii. Indications are that the DfE will meet its target of 450 RE trainees. This is true, but DfE targets are based on misleading data, which explains why we still have insufficient qualified RE staff in spite of recruitment targets being exceeded for several years. According to the latest School Workforce Survey there are currently 15,400 teachers of RE in secondary schools. This is the figure for 'teachers in service' on which trainee targets are based. However **this figure includes as an RE teacher anyone who teaches at least one lesson a week, i.e it includes all the non-specialists**. In other words, targets are based on an acceptance that nearly half the RE workforce has no subject qualifications. A realistic target for the number of RE specialists needed would be calculated on the basis of the number of **qualified** RE specialists in the workforce, not the number of teachers teaching RE. The DfE has recognised this flaw in its calculations (for all subjects) and has recently conducted precisely this analysis of the number of specialist teachers that would be needed to teach the hours taught by non-specialists in EBacc subjects^{vi}. The APPG for RE called on the DfE to revise its targets for RE trainees in the same way (ibid p5).
- iii. RE is not a shortage subject (see the note of our recent meeting). We have already shown that this conclusion is based on a misrepresentation of data (and an unreliable way of data gathering) in the School Workforce survey. Overall only 33% of secondary RE teachers have a degree in the subject compared to 63% of history teachers. An additional 8.5% have a PGCE in RE and 5.4%¹ have 'other' qualifications. It is difficult to know how much worse the situation should become before RE was designated a 'shortage subject'. Parents might reasonably expect their children in secondary schools to be taught by specialists with the expertise to teach their subjects effectively. This principle is recognised by the current Secretary of State for Education, who has argued that the quality of teachers is central to the task of raising standards in schools^{vii}.

Recommendations

1. Reinstate bursaries for RE trainees
2. Act on the recommendation of the APPG for RE that the DfE should 'revise the methods by which it gathers information about the number of RE teachers in secondary schools. A sensible strategy for all subjects would be to gather and present full time equivalent totals, and use these as the basis of the department's calculation of teacher training targets.

ⁱ DfE (April 2013). School Workforce Survey. November 2012.

ⁱⁱ Only Spanish is taught by a higher proportion of non-specialist teachers (42.2%), for a far smaller number of pupils. 15% of history lessons are taught by non-specialists.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ofsted (2010). *Transforming Religious Education*. p14

^{iv} DfE (2011). Training our next generation of outstanding teachers. Implementation Plan. page 4.

^v APPG for RE (2013). *Religious Education. The Truth Unmasked*.

^{vi} DfE.(2013) Evidence to the STRB: The 2013 Pay Award. C18

^{vii} DfE (2010a). The Importance of Teaching. The Schools White Paper 2010

¹ Please note that this figure is a correction to an error in the published table 13 acknowledged by Richard Howe of the DfE Data and Statistics Division in an email to an REC officer; Deborah Weston on 23rd May 2013