On the up!
By Julie Haigh

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It’s undeniable; RE is on the up! The profile of RE is now not only vastly improved in educational terms, there are also key individuals and groups who are clamouring to promote its value and use for understanding the wider society we live in. Even David Cameron has got in on the action. At Prime Minister’s Questions he was asked by Stephen Lloyd, chairperson of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education, why the release of the RE exam criteria appeared to be stuck in a blockage in his office. Cameron replied that he would, ‘go into Dyno-Rod mode and try to get rid of it.’ He even earned himself the nickname, ‘Dyno-Rod Dave’. A mere 12 months or so ago it seemed infeasible that RE would be mentioned in the House of Commons, let alone be addressed by the Prime Minister as a matter of urgency.

Sea change
Much of this sea change in approach has come from us, the humble RE teachers who have pushed for the recognition our subject deserves. We have put in the hours and changed the attitudes of many students and, slowly, many parents. Long gone are the lessons full of learning scripture by rote and going through different faiths in a dry and fruitless fashion. Students now expect challenge and learning in RE that requires something of them beyond simple information regurgitation. It’s becoming what we’ve always known it should be – a subject that takes learning to a level that few others can. RE puts the students firmly in the society they are preparing to play a bigger role in and gets them to address how they understand themselves and those around them, as well as considering what their responses would be to questions of greater and greater significance. Lessons at Key Stage 3 have changed beyond recognition in the last 5 to 10 years and now, finally, we have the new criteria for GCSE that the exam boards will build their specifications around. And, it’s interesting.

I say ‘interesting’ as the document offers a number of opportunities as well as challenges. I’m sure I’m not alone in thinking that, at Key Stage 3, we have the chance to do some amazing work, developing skills, challenging understanding, exploring concepts and reflecting on the known and the unknown, and then find ourselves in a more prescriptive and time-pressured world at Key Stage 4. It almost feels like a step backwards at times. The new criteria for the GCSE seems to address this a little by appearing to require more of the students and suggesting that the focus should be a balance between what they can know and what they can apply and reflect on.

A comparative and reflective course
The criteria seems to offer teachers the opportunity to create a much more comparative and reflective course, exploring at least two faiths and applying them across a number of issues and concepts, including the chance for textual studies. The stated aims of the criteria include developing the students’ knowledge and understanding of religious beliefs and practices, including non-religious beliefs such as atheism and humanism. This is such a positive development and one I hope that the exam boards will embrace, as it should give the students the chance to understand religious faith alongside secular belief systems and see the value and role of them all.
Students’ values
On a more thought-provoking note we also find the following aim: ‘challenge students to reflect on and develop their own values, beliefs and attitudes in the light of what they have learnt and contribute to their preparation for adult life in a pluralistic society and global community’. This is a fantastic aspiration and one that I would hope all RE teachers aim for in their work anyway, but it will be interesting to see how this is translated into each exam syllabus.

Faith in real life
I was one of the authors involved in producing the Living Faiths series, and the approach we took – to extensively involve real-life families living by their faith – seems to be increasingly relevant. The guidelines of the new criteria encourage teachers and students to explore the impact of different perspectives, between and within religions, on the modern world. This gives the students the understanding that there is not just ‘one way’ to be a Christian or a Buddhist, but that there are a number of different interpretations and traditions that exist. This will be one of the key challenges because, as well we know, students often turn up to the classroom with pre-conceptions and misunderstandings that will take time to address.

The greatest challenge
And here we come to the greatest challenge that these new criteria present. Time. As a subject, for a number of reasons, it is often found that less time is given to teach the GCSE syllabus. Not always, but too often not to mention. Many teachers are already struggling to get the material covered in the time they have and to include the systematic study of two faiths, despite the many admirable aims for this inclusion, is going to be a challenge. It is one that will be met, for RE teachers are a resourceful and innovative bunch. We have to be and we are good at it. Our love for the subject and our understanding of its huge importance in each and every child’s education is why we do what we do. Thankfully, those in power are starting to recognise this. Long may it continue and let’s wait with interest to see what the exam boards produce. I’m looking forward to it.

Best wishes

Julie Haigh
Julie is Head of RE at Stroud High School in Gloucestershire

Julie is part of the author team for the Oxford KS3 RE series, Living Faiths. This series focuses on bringing real families of faith into the classroom through case studies and specially-commissioned film clips. To find out more please visit www.oxfordssecondary.co.uk/livingfaiths.