
A discussion about the new Norfolk Agreed Syllabus

Questions by Paul Smalley and answers by Kathryn Wright.

The newly published Norfolk Agreed Syllabus is quite different from Agreed Syllabi published to date, in that it is multi-disciplinary. Can you explain this, for those who have not seen the syllabus?

Norfolk SACRE discussed the primary purpose of RE as being about developing religious literacy. Therefore, the new Norfolk syllabus promotes an understanding of religion and worldviews which best fulfils this purpose. It's different in that it is rooted in a multi-disciplinary understanding of the subject.

What does it mean to be multi-disciplinary?

RE as an academic school curriculum subject is not itself a single discipline; instead it is rooted in a range of different disciplines or disciplinary fields. We need to understand which disciplines it draws on in order to understand the object of investigation and the research methods to employ in RE. This ensures that content chosen for RE is appropriate and well-established within academic traditions and ensures that pupils use and develop a range of subject-specific skills.

In the Norfolk syllabus we assert that RE is rooted in three key disciplines or disciplinary fields. These are theology, philosophy and the human/social sciences.

Where did this multi-disciplinary approach come from?

It is an approach I have worked on for a while with others. We considered what the best way of understanding the subject was if the primary purpose is to help pupils become religiously literate. I worked with other advisers including Jane Chipperton, Kate Christopher, Gillian Georgiou, Dr Richard Kueh and Olivia Seymour in order to put it into practice as the key principles in this syllabus.

Was there lots of discussion about the 3 disciplines – history as a part of social science, not a discipline in its own right, for example?

There was some discussion, but all Diocesan schools and academies were already using the three disciplines and the Agreed Syllabus Conference felt it wise to use a similar approach. It is worth noting that there are one or two exemplar units which do draw out a specifically historical focus for example.

I'm really interested that the Commission on RE (CoRE)'s National Entitlement is not a 'foundational principle' for the syllabus, and wonder what led the ASC to that decision?

OK, the reason for this is that the syllabus was largely written before CoRE came out!! It was in a full draft form in July 2018. We made changes after CoRE to align it with the religion and worldviews language. I would say it is CoRE complimentary, or that it reflects the Statement of Entitlement particularly bullet point nine which refers to different disciplinary approaches to the subject.

I'm also interested that the "aim of RE is to develop religious literacy" – which of course would be contested by many...

Yes it is contentious!! We decided to use this as teachers find it helpful and were already using this language. We have also clearly defined what we mean by it which we hope will help, although we realise some will not agree with it. Through my work in the Diocese (particularly 2016-18) we found that focusing on the aim as religious literacy helped teachers understand what they were doing in RE and raised standards. So, the reasoning is partly pragmatic I think.

And was there much discussion about the role of RE in spiritual development? I notice Spirituality is not mentioned (except on page 8), and this is to be expected in a knowledge based, academic conceptualisation of RE – but was this contested within the ASC or the Working Group?

The ASC decided they wanted a very slimmed down agreed syllabus. So this meant stripping away anything that was not specifically about RE as an academic curriculum subject. The agreed syllabus acknowledges that RE will contribute to spirituality, personal development and so on, but does not want this to detract from the primary purpose of the subject. This was not really contested to be honest. The pedagogical approach is still an enquiry one, and there is certainly space for spiritual and other forms of personal development. Personally, I think there needs to be more discussion in the RE community about the interaction of the learner with the subject they are studying. I said a bit about this in my keynote to LTLRE Conference in the South West which is available on their website. <https://www.ltlre.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Keynote-October-2019-Kathryn-Wright.pdf>

The Age Related Expectations are skills based. This was a surprise – I was expecting it to list expected knowledge, in the three disciplines.... Was this discussed?

This probably needs further conversation. The aim is that the Age-Related Expectations will be rooted in the core knowledge. So, although generic and rooted in the methods/body of knowledge of each discipline they must be tied to the knowledge pupils are studying. This is explained in the full version of the Age-Related Expectations which schools can choose to use if they wish. We deliberately made them non-statutory. This approach should also be clear in the exemplar materials. In addition, it is worth noting that the Age-Related Expectations were written originally for the Diocese of Norwich Academy Trust (DNEAT) for a particular time and place. I fully acknowledge that much more thinking needs to go into assessment and how we understand progression through the different disciplinary fields. I'd love to know if anyone is interested in developing this further.

How much did Norfolk spend creating the syllabus?

I'm not sure but Norfolk have a small budget of around £5k per year, and the Agreed Syllabus was paid for from within this budget over the 24 months of development.

Is it available for other SACREs to adopt or adapt – freely or at a charge? (and can we advertise this, if it is, in the SACRE Briefing?)

Good question! I actually don't know for certain as I'm not on Norfolk SACRE anymore. I had to stand down when I took up my current role as CEO at Culham St Gabriel's Trust. I know of other SACREs who are interested in the syllabus and I understand that it is likely to be available through a free registration system.

I think that everyone associated with the syllabus, and with RE in Norfolk should be proud of this work!

The syllabus is notably different. Norfolk SACRE see this as very positive. The syllabus has been created by a SACRE with local teachers. This I believe has empowered the teachers who were involved in its development and has enabled them to be part of creating a comprehensive curriculum rationale for the subject. As you say this is a good thing.

Finally, can people have a read of the new syllabus?

Yes! It is on the Norfolk website – and the link is here

<https://www.schools.norfolk.gov.uk/School-management/SACRE/index.htm>