

Religion Studies

2011 Assessment Report



Government
of South Australia

SACE
Board of SA

RELIGION STUDIES

2011 ASSESSMENT REPORT

OVERVIEW

Assessment reports give an overview of how students performed in their school and external assessments in relation to the learning requirements, assessment design criteria, and performance standards set out in the relevant subject outline. They provide information and advice regarding the assessment types, the application of the performance standards in school and external assessments, the quality of student performance, and any relevant statistical information.

SCHOOL ASSESSMENT

Assessment Type 1: Sources Analysis

The sources analysis tasks provided strong evidence of the performance standards for knowledge and understanding.

Moderators found that the responses that included transcripts of the multimodal or oral presentations gave clear evidence of the performance standards.

Moderators also found that having the sources included in the evidence helped to accurately determine levels of analysis and evaluation.

Most students adhered to the maximum length requirements of 800 words for a written response, 5 minutes for an oral response, and the equivalent for a multimodal presentation. (When the transcript of an oral or multimodal presentation is included, it is acceptable for the word limit to exceed 800 words; the presentation, however, must be no longer than 5 minutes.) Examples of best practice included the use of media sources such as interviews and articles, giving students the opportunity to provide evidence of 'In-depth and well-informed analysis of the various ways in which religion and spirituality in Australia have an impact on, and are influenced by, sociocultural, historical and/or political events and attitudes' (description of A level performance standard for the analysis and evaluation criterion, page 32 of subject outline).

The sources analysis tasks that were designed to assess students solely on the assessment design criteria knowledge and understanding and analysis and evaluation (as specified in the subject outline) gave students more opportunities to achieve higher levels.

Responses that achieved the highest levels were those designed with the focus on the assessment design criteria. They also had clear questions set by the teacher to structure the response, ensuring that the students' answers addressed the assessment design criteria.

The most successful tasks in the 10-credit subject were those that related to the core topic (as specified in the subject outline).

Assessment Type 2: Written Assignments

Written assignments were well designed and the word count was adhered to. Those that met the highest levels were structured as an essay or in a report format. Responses that had been clearly structured by teachers often helped students to provide evidence for the higher levels of the performance standards.

The tasks that were directly designed to address the knowledge and understanding, investigation and application, and analysis and evaluation assessment design criteria enabled students to achieve.

Tasks that were selective in the assessment design criteria being assessed (e.g. those that did not require students to show evidence of all the specific features of the assessment design criteria) also enabled responses to be more specific, and gave students more opportunity to meet the standards at a higher level. Students demonstrate evidence of each of the specific features of the assessment design criteria through the set of assessments as a whole, but need not aim to meet all features in each task.

Moderators appreciated the inclusion of assessment task sheets. They found that tasks that were specific in terms of criteria being assessed, word count, time frame, and number of religions to be included gave students more opportunity to be successful.

Assessment Type 3: Practical Activity

The most successful tasks were those that were explicitly designed to elicit evidence of the assessment design criteria (knowledge and understanding, investigation and application, and reflection).

Most tasks adhered to the need to be practical (rather than another written assignment).

Responses that included all evidence (PowerPoints, transcripts, recorded evidence) enabled moderators to use the range of work to find evidence to support teachers' assessment decisions.

Examples of best practice included responses that provided evidence of in-depth reflection based on religious and/or spiritual traditions and knowledge.

The strongest practical activities were connected to trips that enabled students to build on the observations and recordings they had made to include knowledge and understanding, investigation and application, and reflection. By design, these allowed students to include insightful and critical reflection on the personal significance, and/or to reflect on the social significance, and/or to explore the relevance, of the religions or spiritualities in contemporary Australia.

If the evidence of learning is to be assessed through a practical activity such as a retreat, a service learning activity, or a liturgy, the evidence provided should include the academic aspects that are required by the assessment design criteria (e.g. notes/plans/photographs that enable students to show evidence of knowledge and understanding, evidence of investigation and application, and evidence of reflection).

EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT

Assessment Type 4: Investigation

This was the first year in which the external assessment of Religion Studies took the form of an investigation. Some excellent investigations demonstrated incisive thinking and good teaching and the students were rewarded in the marking process. Many choices of topics were innovative and allowed the student to demonstrate performance against the assessment design criteria. Markers could often discern the sense of discovery in students' investigations.

It is clear, however, that there is still uncertainty as to what is required for the investigation. The subject outline specifies two main steps.

As a first step, with help from the teacher, the student chooses a religious phenomenon (religious experience, sacred myth, religious ritual, religious beliefs, religious ethics, religious symbols or the social structure of religion including sacred place, sacred time, and sacred persons) or a religious issue (an issue connected with, for example, religion and science, religion and society/culture, religion and ethics, religion and the state/politics, religion and law, religious pluralism, religion and history). The investigation should begin with a general study of such a phenomenon or issue. This consists mainly of researching secondary sources in the literature, the media, or perhaps by focus interviews.

In relation to the topic choice, a question has arisen about the specific feature of the knowledge and understanding assessment design criterion for the A level performance standard that requires 'Insightful explanation of different religious beliefs, perspectives and experiences, within and across traditions'. The performance standard applies to the whole Religion Studies program and would apply specifically to this investigation only if relevant (i.e. if the investigation covered more than one religious tradition). There is no impediment to a student who wants to concentrate on one tradition for the investigation (e.g. 'Is polygamy still allowed in modern Mormon practice?'), although a comparison with another tradition would also be acceptable (e.g. 'What do American Methodists believe about polygamy in the modern Mormon Church?') but not obligatory. The comparison could also be between discrete religious traditions (e.g. 'How do American Methodists and Theravada Buddhists justify their religious ethic on drinking alcohol?'). The teacher must ensure that there is an opportunity for students to address this performance standard, although not necessarily in the investigation.

The opportunity for addressing all specific features of the assessment design criteria will be monitored when individual learning and assessment plans are submitted to the SACE Board for approval.

The student undertakes the investigation proper by linking the chosen phenomenon or issue to contemporary Australian society or global society. Within the context the student chooses a question or questions, a problem, an inconsistency, an unanswered aspect. This requires the student to determine a method to further the investigation.

The method could be quantitative or qualitative (e.g. ethnography, action research, feminist research). The methods used could include interviews (e.g. with experts in the field), questionnaires, and analysis of current media sources. Students need instruction, guidance, and feedback at this stage to ensure that they are carrying out ethical and effective research.

The investigation is best done over the course of the subject, with students collecting relevant information and data throughout. Students should maintain a collection of their reference materials in a folio that verifies not only their progress, but also the authenticity of their research. The folio of materials is not submitted to the SACE Board for assessment.

The final written report is submitted. There is no need to submit raw data from the investigation, only those summaries that are part of the report on the investigation. A copy of a blank questionnaire might well be appended for reference. Other appendices are for the most part unnecessary.

Examples of some major concerns encountered in the 2011 assessment are listed below:

- There were errors of grammar, spelling, and sentence structure that impeded clear communication.
- Serious errors of fact about the beliefs and practices of religious groups brought down the standard of knowledge and understanding.
- Essays sometimes replaced the required investigations and provided information and description but little analysis. Students should investigate, not simply repeat their sources. They need to evaluate their sources and make judgments about the information they obtain; they need independently to produce at least a minimal advance in new knowledge.
- Many students did not return to focus questions that had been posed initially, to show how their investigation had advanced their knowledge.
- At times there was inappropriate use, or complete lack, of appropriate research methods. For example, students should know that from a small or biased sample only tentative conclusions can be drawn. Some students interviewed a small sample (sometimes a population of one) of a particular religious group and concluded that the opinion of one person or a very small number of people could be generalised to the entire religious community. With no research method, there cannot be an investigation.
- The use of inappropriate sources and websites. Students need guidance in this matter and should be warned about accepting all web-based information as accurate.
- In some cases there was no or poor referencing and no bibliography, which raises questions about plagiarism.
- Some topics were too general, trivial, or unlikely to provide scope for good investigation skills or to allow the performance standards to be addressed. Further, some schools have adopted the practice of proposing a short list of topics to their students and also providing resources for each of these. This may limit the independent work carried out by these students. The practice can also lead to plagiarism and even collusion.

Some operational comments on the presentation of the investigation can be made:

- Occasionally student names and/or school names were included in the text of the investigation.

- The word count was quite often left off. The teacher should verify that it is included and accurate.
- Names of interviewees were included with their stated opinions. There should be documentation that the interviewee has given permission, otherwise the results should remain anonymous.
- Some diagrams were illegible, requiring colour for readability.

In conclusion, the investigation should be seen as a summative item of assessment that is developed carefully. The student needs to learn much about some aspect of the structure and phenomena of religion and then to see how religion plays out in society, whether Australian or global. At some the student should be able to see how the investigation satisfies the following questions: Does it demonstrate knowledge and understanding of a religious phenomenon or issue? Has it been applied to an Australian or a global context by means of a research method? Have conclusions been justified by the student's investigation and referencing? Does the assignment read clearly and have sequence? Does it have a bibliography? Is it within the required word limit?

OPERATIONAL ADVICE

Teachers' attention is drawn to the 'Variations — Moderation Materials' form (see under Forms on the subject page on the SACE website). Any explicit information about why some work may be missing from the samples or about specific penalties applied for plagiarism or breach of word count should be entered on this form.

Religion Studies
Chief Assessor