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Religion Studies

2015 Chief Assessor’s Report

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## Overview

Chief Assessors’ 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

Moderators noted that a wide variety of sources were used for analysis in this assessment type. Interesting sources included religious artworks (especially challenging contemporary paintings and sculpture), films with religious or spiritual themes, news headlines, cartoons, memorials, mini-pilgrimages (such as to Mary MacKillop sites), current news articles, photos, and religious brochures. Where the questions asked in the task led students to explore the source(s) in depth and include knowledge of expert religious theorists, the evidence presented by students often demonstrated the highest level of learning. Less successful sources analysis tasks required students to respond to multiple sources with many short-answer questions, allowing very little depth in the responses and limiting higher levels of understanding and analysis. Moderators noted that, in this situation, many responses resorted to description or recount of the source itself with limited analysis. It was also clear to moderators that, where teachers allocated marks to small sections of a sources analysis (for example, giving two marks out of a possible four marks in a section), finer discrimination in assessing achievement was not possible which tended to lead to an inflation of the student’s grade.

Task sheets and sources themselves were included, allowing moderators to understand the nature of the task and the context of the source used. Generally, where more than one source was included for students to analyse, this led to higher levels of analysis. However, by directive wording in the task, such as ‘Using the source presented and your knowledge of theorists, analyse what the source reveals about definitions of religion and its role in society today,’ teachers also guided students towards demonstrating evidence at the higher grade levels, and signalled to students that they needed to investigate beyond the source(s) given.

The use of previous Religion Studies examination sources to prompt student analysis appeared to engage students less than use of more contemporary sources. Teachers are referred to the current subject outline that states:

By analysing various sources, students apply their understanding of the concepts, theories, and definitions of religion and spiritualities; the nature of ‘the sacred’ and ‘the profane’; case studies of religion in society; religious issues; or contemporary trends that have been studied.

Teachers are encouraged to use the correct year’s subject outline when designing their tasks and grading student work. The 2015 and the 2016 Religion Studies subject outlines both require teachers to use performance standards to assess student responses.

Assessment Type 2: Folio

Moderators noted that the subject outline changes for 2015 had been generally well applied, with the changed requirements for tasks allowing for greater depth and complexity in student responses. Most teachers adhered to the recommended minimum number of folio assessments: two for the 10-credit subject and three for the 20-credit subject. In several instances, teachers had required students to complete four or five folio tasks, and it was clear to moderators that these extra tasks did not always allow students time to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding in enough depth to achieve a high standard.

Moderators commented on the range of interesting tasks included in the folios, including excursions, responses to guest speakers, oral and multimodal presentations, and group tasks. It was noted, however, that it was not clear to moderators in all cases which student had completed which aspect of a task. This was particularly problematic in liturgy tasks, where no accompanying evidence was included (such as videos or photos) to demonstrate what each individual student had contributed. The evidence submitted by students for liturgy tasks was, on the whole, limited to description and narration of the event, rather than demonstrating deep knowledge, understanding, and analysis of aspects of religion. It was sometimes difficult for moderators to find enough evidence to be able to confirm teachers’ grades. If group tasks are used as part of a folio, it is imperative that these clearly document each individual’s contributions.

The most successful tasks were designed to lead to analysis and critical evaluation rather than narrative, recount, or description. Assignments that led to narrative, recount, or description often limited students’ achievement to the C grade or less.

Many classes were set tasks that asked students to compare spirituality and religion. In most cases the actual task sheets were not included in the moderation package, but the evidence presented by students suggested that they were asked to give their opinion rather than to investigate definitions and theories of religion and spirituality. Moderators noted that opinion pieces did not meet the subject outline assessment design criteria and often contained significant errors about the nature of spirituality. For example, there was little mention of the rich tradition of Australian Indigenous Spirituality, of the spirituality of the Mystics, or the ancient spirituality of Judaism or Sufism. Spirituality was discussed by the majority of students as something very modern and ‘self-centred’. The work was not referenced, so moderators could only assume that it was the student’s own opinion.

The Religion Studies performance standards for knowledge and understanding state (in the subject outline) for the C grade band that there is ‘Some considered explanation of different religious beliefs, perspectives, and experiences, within and across traditions,’ and ‘Generally relevant knowledge and informed understanding of religious and spiritual ideas, concepts, and issues in selected sources.’ Personal opinion, if used, therefore needs to be supported and appropriately referenced so that it can be seen to be informed. The performance standard for reflection states that there should be evidence in the C grade band of ‘Considered reflection on the personal significance of religions and spiritualities in traditional and contemporary societies,’ and ‘Generally informed consideration and explanation of the social significance of religions and spiritualities in traditional and contemporary societies’ and ‘Informed exploration of the relevance of religions or spiritualities in contemporary Australia.’ These performance standards require students to demonstrate evidence of their understanding of religion and its influence on human behaviour, and the shaping of personal and group identity, and also that religions and spiritualities are living and dynamic.

There were some effective reflections on excursions, for example, to places of worship, memorials, or religious monuments. Reflection that included questions from the teacher directly supporting the performance standards assisted students in organising their reflections in a way which demonstrated their increased knowledge and understanding of the religion being studied.

Oral presentations that were well researched and included transcripts or PowerPoint presentations, as well as teachers’ assessment decisions, supported moderators with their work. Moderators noted that many teachers included both written transcripts and PowerPoint presentations as well as video evidence on a USB drive. Such thorough documentation of student evidence was much appreciated by moderators and made their task much easier. Moderators appreciated the inclusion of highlighted or circled performance standards, as these clearly made the teachers’ grading decisions transparent.

Word-counts were mostly adhered to in this assessment type.

## External Assessment

Assessment Type 3: Investigation

As in previous years, markers found that the most successful investigations demonstrated that students had completed thorough background research, enabling specific deeper primary and secondary research; this allowed students to reach well-supported and valid conclusions. The most successful investigations were focused on wholly religious research questions. Where students focused on an issue linked to, but not entirely focused on, religion, there was a tendency to drift away from the religious and spiritual focus that the subject outline requires in order to meet the performance standards.

Markers found that there were many more investigations than in previous years with a social, rather than a religious, focus. Such a focus limited students’ ability to demonstrate achievement beyond a C or D level against the performance standards. It is essential that both students and teachers thoroughly familiarise themselves with the specific features of the performance standards, as well as the exemplar investigations on the SACE website, to understand the qualities of the evidence required in the investigation. The subject outline states: ‘Students choose a religious or spiritual phenomenon or a religious issue linked to Australian or global society for investigation.’ In so doing, students are expected to show evidence of explanation of religious beliefs, perspectives, and experience across traditions; understanding of religious and spiritual ideas and concepts; knowledge and understanding of religions and spiritualities; detailed explanation of religious and spiritual phenomena; and analysis of religious and spiritual ideas. The emphasis in this subject is on the religious aspect of the topic or issue rather than social aspects.

Investigations based upon thorough primary and secondary background research avoided the inclusion of statements that tended to stereotype adherents or practices of the religion being investigated. A common error was students assuming that all Christians believe and practise their religion in the same way. The most successful investigations acknowledged the limitations of their research, and avoided the mistake of treating one interview, for example, as representing the official view of the whole of that tradition.

The wording of the overall guiding question was crucial in focusing the investigation on religion (rather than society) and aiding students in demonstrating depth of knowledge and understanding, and insightful analysis. Effective investigations were clearly structured around focusing questions or subheadings, which minimised the risk of including irrelevant material such as the student’s own personal opinions.

Some of the most successful and interesting topics chosen for investigation this year were focused on:

The legalisation of gay marriage

The effect of the Shoah on modern Judaism

Growing discrimination towards Muslims

Christian beliefs based on Paganism

Cambodian funerals in Australia

Deepening Faith through Christian meditation

The sacredness of near-death experiences

The claim of Abrahamic religions to the Holy Land

The role of meditation in the lives of Australian Buddhists

The importance of Ramadan for Muslims in Australia

The contribution of Rudd’s ‘Sorry’ speech to Australian spirituality

The role of school pilgrimages overseas in promoting social justice and deepening spirituality

Links between personal health and fitness and spirituality

Conflicts between belief and practice for Catholic politicians

The nature of a religious vocation

The significance of Mary, Mother of Jesus, to Vietnamese Australians

The sacredness of the confessional seal in the Catholic Church

The contribution of Pope Francis towards renewing the Catholic Church.

Topics or research questions that led to the most successful investigations were chosen individually by the student and were different from those of other students in the class. Where students were limited in the choice of topic, and the same topics were repeated across a whole class or school, evidence shown against the criteria of knowledge and understanding, investigation, analysis, and reflection tended often to be limited to the C grade band of the performance standards. Students are strongly encouraged to use contemporary sources such as *Compass*, the ABC Religion and Ethics website, publications of the Australasian Religious Press Association, and the *Southern Cross* newspaper. There are also many religious online publications that are up to date and well referenced. Once a topic is chosen, then students are advised to plan an investigative question that focuses on a definite religious or spiritual aspect of the topic and guides the course of the investigation. Ideally, every student in the class should choose his or her own topic for investigation; one that is different from others in the class.

Again this year, the least successful investigations were those that explored semi-social issues such as divorce, compulsory religion in school, religion and teenagers, asylum seekers, and terrorism. These tended to place far too much emphasis on the social aspects of these issues, with inadequate exploration of the associated religious and spiritual dimensions that are required by the performance standards. If such issues are chosen for investigation, then there must be evidence against the specific features of the assessment design criteria, such as knowledge and understanding of the religious beliefs and perspectives on the issue; analysis of religious and spiritual ideas associated with the issue; analysis of the ways in which religion has impacted on social practice and beliefs in relation to the issue chosen; and an explanation of how religion has been, and is, significant regarding the issue in contemporary society. The focus must be on the religious and spiritual ideas, beliefs, and practices, not on the social issues.

Markers noted an increasing tendency for many investigations to be built upon the personal opinion of students, especially via surveys. Generally, surveys as a primary source of information were not done well, as students limited their achievements by surveying only peers from their school. They often then attempted to apply these findings to society at large, making unfounded generalisations. Students need to be aware of the restrictions of school-based surveys, which often limit achievement to the C grade band since teenage students generally do not have the level of expert knowledge and understanding of religions and spiritualities required to provide depth to the investigative report. It appeared to markers that students had not evaluated the worth of surveys as a primary source, but conducted them because surveying peers was convenient.

All statements made must be referenced using one of the accepted referencing conventions. Where a bibliography or reference list accompanies the investigation, it should include only those sources actually used in the investigation. In many cases appendices need not be included. Markers are instructed not to read any attachments, as they are expected to read up to the prescribed word-limit (1000 words for the 10-credit subject and 2000 words for the 20-credit subject). Any relevant survey graphs referred to should be inserted as an image at the appropriate place in the text. Interviews must be analysed and compared with other sources to extract relevant information. There is no need to include full transcripts of interviews in the body of the investigation.

Markers were pleased to note that most investigations, for both the 10-credit and the 20-credit subject adhered to the word-limit for each subject.

## Operational Advice

School assessment tasks are set and marked by teachers. Teachers’ assessment decisions are reviewed by moderators. Teacher grades/marks should be evident on all student school assessment work.

The presentation of materials for moderation in Religion Studies this year provided moderators with many challenges. Many schools over-packaged tasks by placing them within manila folders or inside individual plastic sleeves which were then put into the SACE clear plastic bags, and then also sealed with sticky tape. Occasionally neither the student name nor registration number was able to be seen. It is suggested that tasks be packaged by assessment type. All sample folios should be placed in one plastic bag, and all sample sources analysis tasks in another plastic bag. All individual samples should have a cover sheet attached to the front, and include student name and SACE registration number, and final grade for the assessment type.

Moderators found that circled or highlighted performance standards, allowed them to better understand teacher’s decisions. A cover sheet that details the final assessment type grade (with individual grades on separate pieces of work) helps moderators to easily see how the final grade is decided.

As specified in the SACE guidelines on the Religion Studies minisite, an addendum should be submitted if changes have been made to the original learning and assessment plan. Also, any specific details of special provisions should be included for moderators, using the Variations — Moderation Materials form.

## General Comments

An issue that came up across all of the assessment types was referencing. Referencing should be consistent, whether Harvard style or footnoting. A bibliography alone is not sufficient.

Most teachers are using the performance standards, and designing tasks to meet them. Students are being given good opportunities to achieve in this subject, which is being presented as an interesting and varied study of world religions. Students are being encouraged to explore relevant aspects of religions that they can relate to and find interesting.

Teachers are strongly encouraged to join marking and moderation panels in 2016. The experience gained from marking and moderating is invaluable and an excellent form of professional development. Please contact the SACE Officer — Curriculum for more information.

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Chief Assessor