

Religion Studies

2014 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 good selection of sources was used for this assessment type. Sources included a range of religious artworks, films with religious or spiritual themes, articles, cartoons, memorials, statues, paintings, excursions, and quotes from faith leaders such as Pope Francis. Using contemporary, interesting sources increases students’ engagement and thus led to higher levels of understanding and analysis.

The task sheets and sources themselves were included in most cases, which aided moderators in understanding the task and the context of the source used. (Including photos of statues or memorials, for example, helps in understanding what the students are referring to in their analysis.)

The tasks that best allowed for students to achieve upper levels of the performance standards had provided students with a range of sources to choose from and refer to, rather than allowing students to gather the sources by themselves. Also, clear scaffolding that adhered to the performance standards directed the students’ responses, as opposed to allowing for them to go off on a tangent. Teachers also presented these tasks to students well by using more than one source in order to generate comparison, which led to sound analysis.

Moderators did note that occasionally this task became more of a general written essay rather than a specific analysis of a key source (or sources). Teachers are encouraged to utilise the 2015 subject outline when designing their tasks.

Generally, tasks were well designed with the performance standards in mind; tasks had clear structure to support students to achieve their potential. Word-counts and time constraints were also adhered to.

Assessment Type 2: Written Assignments

The most successful examples of written assignments contained specific questions, written to direct students to the performance standards. The most successful assignments dealt with a specific religious issue or phenomenon. Also, tasks that were directed to fewer, specific features, as opposed to a wide range of features, allowed students to meet the higher end of performance standards.

Generally, most students approached these tasks in an objective, academic sense, avoiding the use of words such as ‘us’ or ‘our beliefs’. Moderators also noted that this year there was less personal opinion appearing in written tasks.

This year there was significant use of relevant, contemporary social facts; for example, quoting from Tony Abbott or Pope Francis for contemporary leaders who have commented on matters of faith. Moderators also noted an increased number of tasks focused on Aboriginal spirituality.

Occasionally, some tasks that encouraged a reflection on the changing nature of Australian religions over time led to some students recounting the general history of Australia, rather than focusing on the religious aspects of the Australian religious experience. Teachers are encouraged to design tasks to avoid this approach by students.

Word-counts were mostly successfully adhered to.

The most successful topics led to analysis and critical evaluation rather than narrative, recount, or description. Assignments that led to narrative, recount, or description limited students’ achievement.

Some successful written assignments included:

* a response to a guest speaker or relevant film/documentary with guided questions
* a magazine article on a social justice topic with reference to religious beliefs
* a research essay (for example, on the definitions of religion)
* an essay in response to a given question.

Assessment Type 3: Practical Activity

The use of community service activities as a basis for practical tasks was generally well done. This was aided by scaffolding questions for the students to use after the activity to reflect on their participation, and to link their actions to religious teachings. Moderators commented that this could be further improved on with images of the activity (for example, photographs evidencing the action would back up quotes from the students about what they had done).

There were also some effective reflections on excursions (to places of worship, memorials, or religiously significant monuments). Again, those reflections including questions from the teacher directly supporting the performance standards aided students in organising their reflections in a meaningful way that supported the teachings of religions. The scaffolding also discouraged students from completing personal recounts of their experiences that lacked connections to religion.

Presentations that were well researched and had transcripts or PowerPoints, as well as teachers’ assessment decisions, supported moderators with their work.

Surveys as a practical task were not always done well. Often, students limited their achievements by surveying only peers from their school. They often then attempted to apply these findings to society at large, generalising for large populations of believers. Students need to be made aware of the limitations of school-based surveys, which should be reflected in the task design. At best, school-based surveys often limit achievement to the knowledge and understanding criterion, as opposed to allowing for the investigation and application criterion or the reflection criterion.

Moderators remarked that some tasks based around school masses were done well, specifically when students reflected on certain parts with directed questions that linked to the performance standards. Generally, however, using school liturgies has not led to high achievement in the practical tasks, particularly if the student recounts the event, focusing on what happened as opposed to why.

Oral tasks occasionally became more recounts of activity rather than linking religious beliefs to the action. Again, tasks that kept the assessment design criteria at the forefront best allowed for sound student achievement.

If group tasks are to be used as a practical assignment, it is imperative that these clearly document each individual’s contributions, as it can become difficult for moderators to see each member’s participation, particularly in larger group tasks.

## External Assessment

Assessment Type 4: Investigation

As in previous years, markers found that the most successful investigations demonstrated that students had completed thorough initial 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 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 spiritualties; detailed explanation of religious and spiritual phenomena; and analysis of religious and spiritual ideas.

Investigations based upon thorough, initial primary and secondary background research avoided the inclusion of statements that tended to stereotype adherents or practices of the religion being investigated. Inaccuracies about the religious tradition being investigated should not appear. 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.

Those investigations that had a clear, specific focus were more successful in demonstrating depth of knowledge and understanding and insightful analysis than those that attempted to compare two or more religions, especially within the 1000‑word limit of the 10‑credit subject. Successful 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. Successful investigations were also written in an objective style; for example, a statement such as ‘Christians believe that God loves human beings and sent Jesus Christ to earth to save them from sin’ is an objective statement.

Some of the most successful and interesting topics chosen for investigation this year were focused on the nature of the soul; the importance of prayer to a religious adherent; the seal of the confessional in Catholicism; the possibility of belief in both creation and evolution; religion and the problem of evil and suffering; Christianity and beliefs about divorce; Samoan customs of prayer and worship; the importance of the Sabbath; the spiritual role of a godparent; the secularisation of Holy Days such as Easter Sunday, Christmas Day, and Good Friday; and the continuation of Indigenous spiritual beliefs and practices. Topics or research questions that led to the most successful investigations were chosen individually by the student and were different from 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 of the criteria of knowledge and understanding, investigation, analysis, and reflection tended to be limited to the C grade band of the performance standards. There is a great range of religious and spiritual topics and students should be encouraged to research a topic that interests them. Once a topic is chosen, then students are advised to devise an investigative question that focuses on a definite religious or spiritual aspect of the topic and guides the course of the investigation.

Teachers and students are reminded that there are no specific features in the performance standards that require evidence of description except at the D grade band, so students who submit lengthy descriptions of liturgies, retreats, or social justice activities are potentially limiting themselves to an achievement at the D grade band.

Investigations that explored issues such as euthanasia, surrogacy, asylum seekers, and war tended to put too much emphasis on the social aspects of these issues, with inadequate exploration of the associated religious and spiritual aspects that are required by the performance standards. If such issues are chosen for investigation, then there must be evidence of the specific features of the performance standards, 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 is on the religious and spiritual ideas, beliefs, and practices, not on the social issues.

Successful investigations were built on thorough and specialist, authoritative research enabling in-depth knowledge and understanding. Markers noted a tendency for many investigations to be built upon personal opinion of students, which is not required by the performance standards. If an opinion is given in the conclusion, then it must be based on and supported by solid and objective evidence. Likewise, the best investigations went further than repeating stereotypical media opinions about a religious issue, such as ‘terrorism’, and explored and analysed the bases of the religious teachings about the issue and whether or not these teachings were generally accepted and followed by religious adherents.

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. Appendices should 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 10-credit subject and 2000 words for 20-credit subject). Any relevant survey graphs referred to in the student’s text 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.

Investigations that integrated the sources used (both primary and secondary) to address focus questions or religious aspects of the topic being investigated were more successful in meeting the assessment design criteria than those that divided up the investigation by headings such as ‘Interviews’, ‘Surveys’, and ‘Background Information’. Such an approach led to recount rather than analysis. Comments about whether or not the interviews and surveys were enjoyable or successful are unnecessary.

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. For the external assessment component, registration numbers only should be used and anything that may identify the student or school should be removed. Surveys distributed only to peers are not helpful, as they do not add to the depth of knowledge and understanding required by the subject performance standards. Conducting a survey must have a real purpose and not be undertaken simply for the sake of having a readily accessible primary source. Graphs that are poorly reproduced in indistinguishable shades of black, white, and grey are unable to be assessed. Inserting long quotes, such as those 100–200 words long from an interview or secondary source, is not appropriate, as these words are the words of a third person rather than evidence of the student’s own knowledge, understanding, or analysis.

## Operational Advice

The presentation of materials for moderation in Religion Studies was exemplary. Nearly all schools packaged tasks by student, in a clearly organised fashion that made it extremely straightforward for moderators to handle. 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. Moderators found that circled or highlighted performance standards, allowed them to better understand teacher’s decisions.

From 2015 there will be two assessment types for Religion Studies (please refer to the subject outline for 2015). Teachers are asked to clearly identify which tasks correspond to each of the two types. A new learning and assessment plan will be required in 2015.

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. This was also presented well this year.

## General Comments

An issue that came up across all of the assessment types was referencing. Both in‑text referencing and bibliographies provided concerns for moderators. Students need to ensure that they use a consistent method of referencing, as explained in the SACE Board guidelines for referencing. Simply stating ‘class notes’ is not sufficient. Teachers are encouraged to provide the detailed reference for any notes they give to their students so that the students may reference properly. It is difficult for moderators to ascertain which work is a student’s voice, and which is not, without clear, consistent, and appropriate referencing.

Teachers are clearly using the performance standards, and are 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 2015. 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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