

Religion Studies

2013 Chief Assessor's Report



SACE
Board of SA

RELIGION STUDIES

2013 CHIEF ASSESSOR'S REPORT

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

The standard of student responses in this assessment type was generally high. Students had often been given interesting and relevant sources, and had been guided to write structured responses that met the performance standards.

Moderators commented that including the sources (articles, pictures of art etc.) for moderation purposes, whenever possible, helped them in understanding the context of the task during moderation.

Moderators also commented that the most successful examples of sources analysis tasks were those for which teachers, rather than students, had chosen the sources; students often chose inappropriate sources. Sources chosen by teachers enabled students to select and use evidence.

Assessment tasks that were designed with the performance standards in mind ensured that students' answers provided evidence against the performance standards. This led to students meeting the performance standards consistently and at a higher level. This was particularly helpful for the analysis and evaluation assessment design criterion.

A good example of a source was used for religion in art. A piece of religious art was used in tandem with a guest speaker, providing depth in knowledge and understanding of the source. It was also an innovative way of considering religion in traditional and contemporary societies. Other good examples of tasks included media articles, television programs, radio interviews, films, and excerpts from religious texts. Teachers also presented these to students well by using more than one source in order to generate comparison, which led to sound analysis.

Generally moderators commented that the maximum of 800 words if written or 5 minutes if oral or the equivalent in multimodal form was adhered to for a sources analysis assessment.

Moderators could see the difference in standards between work that had been completed in class, with no time for the student to edit, as opposed to work that students had been allowed time to draft. Teachers may approach the tasks as they

choose, as the subject outline states; however, giving students a chance to edit school-assessed tasks could potentially mean that they meet the performance standards at a higher level.

Referencing was limited in this task, which made it harder to find evidence of the investigation and application assessment design criterion. Students should use a consistent method of referencing, as outlined in the SACE Board guidelines (available on the Religion Studies minisite). It is sometimes difficult for moderators to separate students' voices from their quotations when a consistent referencing system is not used.

Assessment Type 2: Written Assignments

Careful scaffolding of written tasks gave students the best opportunity to meet the performance standards that were being addressed.

Assignments that were designed with a narrow range of specific features allowed students to meet the higher levels of the performance standards. Assignments that addressed the specific features of several of the assessment design criteria often led to a challenge for students who had difficulty meeting such a variety of requirements within the limit of 1000 words.

The best 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.

Some pieces of work were clearly drafts as they still showed where the teachers had highlighted errors in knowledge, lack of analysis, or faulty spelling and sentence structure.

Some successful written assignments included:

- a response to a guest speaker
- a magazine article on a social justice topic
- a research essay (on the definitions of religion)
- an essay in response to a given question.

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.

Assessment Type 3: Practical Activity

Successful practical activities included researching religious phenomena, using appropriate sources. Trips that were planned specifically with the assessment design criteria in mind gave students a clear structure for their responses. Creating pieces of art and writing a reflection on their religious relevance allowed students to individually connect with their work.

Teachers who provided evidence of individual contributions to group tasks enabled moderators to find evidence of the performance standards for each student. When large groups completed assessment tasks, the opportunity for moderators to see evidence of individual group members' achievement was potentially limited.

Students who conducted surveys sometimes limited their achievement in the knowledge and understanding assessment design criterion. This was most evident

when students used fellow students from the same school as their sample group, and then referred to the results as if they represented the view of the whole of society.

Liturgies as a practical activity often led to descriptive recounts, and limited students' opportunities for in-depth analysis and reflection. If students are completing liturgies for their practical tasks they need to be carefully guided to ensure that they complete a meaningful reflection afterwards; this reflection could explore the meanings of religious teachings.

The most successful practical activities allowed for the investigation and application and the reflection assessment design criteria, as well as the knowledge and understanding criterion. Liturgies and some trips became recounts and only allowed students to demonstrate evidence of knowledge and understanding, limiting their overall achievement.

Responses that included evidence such as PowerPoints, transcripts, and recordings enabled moderators to use the range of work to support teachers' decisions.

EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT

Assessment Type 4: Investigation

Some outstanding investigations showed evidence of learning at the highest level of the performance standards. However, markers were disappointed to find that again, in this third year of the investigation as the external assessment, many investigations centred on social or ethical issues that are outside the scope of the subject. An over-emphasis on the sociocultural aspects of an issue instead of a clear focus on the religious aspects meant that many students could not achieve in the A and B bands of the performance standards. In Religion Studies the investigation must focus on religious phenomena and traditions, not simply on society, culture, or ethics. Some excellent investigations focused on contemporary aspects of religion, such as the secrecy of the confessional, prayer and mental illness, the contemporary relevance of saints, sharia law, the role of school chaplains, the relationship between religion and science, and the role of religion in the gay rights debate.

In this subject, all but two of the specific features of the assessment design criteria refer specifically to religion [italic emphasis added]:

- KU1 Explanation of different *religious* beliefs, perspectives, and experiences within and across traditions.
- KU2 Knowledge and understanding of *religious and spiritual* ideas, concepts, and issues...
- IA2 Application of knowledge and understanding of *religions and spiritualities* in local and global contexts.
- IA3 Investigation and explanation of a range of *religious and spiritual phenomena*.
- AE1 Analysis of *religious and spiritual ideas*, concepts, and issues...
- AE2 Analysis of how *religion and spirituality in Australia* have an impact on, and are influenced by, sociocultural, historical and/or political events and attitudes.
- AE3 Critical evaluation of definitions of religion and spirituality.
- R1 Reflection on the personal significance of *religions and spiritualities*...
- R2 Consideration and explanation of the social significance of *religions and spiritualities* in traditional and contemporary societies.
- R3 exploration of the relevance of *religions and spiritualities*...

This clearly means that evidence submitted by students must focus on religion and spirituality and not primarily on the social or ethical aspects of the topic being investigated. Markers noted that many students had not been sufficiently guided to follow the specific features of the assessment design criteria, and therefore were able to demonstrate only limited achievement.

Any investigation that does not fully explore and justify the religious underpinnings of beliefs and practices related to social issues such as euthanasia, abortion, sperm donation, environmental issues, or gay marriage cannot meet the assessment design criteria of Religion Studies.

Students who had explored such issues with reference to sacred texts such as the Quran, the Bible, the Guru Granth Sahib, or the Book of Mormon, and who also had interviewed leaders in the relevant tradition to gain in-depth information, were able to demonstrate a sound grasp of the religious dimensions of the issue, and to analyse the extent to which the scriptures shed light on beliefs and practices about contemporary issues for followers of various traditions. The most successful investigative reports used authoritative primary sources (such as interviews with religious leaders from a tradition) to explain contemporary teachings. Students whose investigations relied on surveys, particularly of peers, could not demonstrate the required depth of understanding and analysis. Sources used should be able to be justified in the depth of understanding they give about the issue or investigation undertaken. All sources used should be referenced, using a consistent referencing system, and have a correctly formatted bibliography attached.

Teachers and students are reminded that the external assessment for Religion Studies is an investigation and not an essay. Both of these have different purposes and forms. An investigation requires a thorough exploration of the investigative question, using both primary and secondary sources, a synthesis and analysis of findings, and a conclusion that summarises the findings. The most successful investigations had a narrowly focused guiding question with a clearly defined purpose; the least successful investigations were based on a broad 'topic' (such as sacraments, marriage, wars), making it more difficult for the evidence to remain focused and centred on aspects of religion, as required by the performance standards.

Markers also noted that many of the investigations were based on personal opinion and read more like a reflection than an investigation. Successful investigations were written in an objective way and used evidence from both primary and secondary sources to develop and support the discussion and conclusion. These investigations followed a very thorough approach and resulted in reports that were well structured, interesting, insightful, and, most importantly, addressed the performance standards.

Students who appeared to devise their own investigative question, rather than selecting a topic from a class list, seemed to engage with the process of the investigation more than those whose investigations appeared to be based on topics very similar to those of many others in the group. Markers found that many batches had an overly disproportionate number of investigations that pursued exactly the same topic. The most striking aspect of these cases was that only a handful of investigations showed evidence of analysis. This may have been because students were given a topic rather than being encouraged to pursue something more complex that reflected a topic of personal interest.

Students who used surveys as a successful primary source ensured that they knew

the credentials of those surveyed rather than relying on anonymous respondents who may not have known anything at all about the religious aspects of the topic. The information gathered by students who relied on SurveyMonkey to collect data was generally less valid and meaningful. Students should analyse the relevant information collected from the surveys rather than undertake a sociological analysis of the age and gender of respondents. Comments such as ‘the younger generation had little knowledge but the older generation had more knowledge’ do not provide evidence of any of the Religion Studies criteria. An evaluation of the personal skills developed through completing surveys (or interviews) is not appropriate in this subject. Graphs of survey data need to be inserted in the text rather than included as an appendix.

As mentioned in previous Chief Assessors’ reports, it is recommended that students seek out knowledgeable people as primary sources to interview and provide specialist knowledge or in-depth material for analysis. When interviews are conducted, the information gathered needs to be reported in students’ own words, not inserted as a string of quotations verbatim from the interviewee. Long descriptions of how well the interview went are irrelevant and do not meet the assessment design criteria for this subject. In the most successful investigations, students analysed information gathered from interviews (and possibly other primary sources) and combined this with analysis of relevant secondary sources to present an in-depth and knowledgeable synthesis of findings leading to a conclusion.

In the 10-credit subject (with a 1000-word limit), the most successful investigations adhered to a well-structured format, with a brief introduction stating the guiding question, purpose, and methods, followed by a discussion and analysis, with a brief conclusion drawing findings together.

Markers noted the following points:

- Word limits were generally adhered to.
- Many investigations were strengthened by the use of some direct quotations from relevant and authoritative primary sources, allowing room for the student’s voice. On the other hand, when students relied on an over-abundance of direct quotations, it was difficult to provide evidence of the student’s own knowledge and understanding.
- Successful referencing does not give licence to write in words that are not the student’s own.
- Some investigations appeared to be written from a ‘confessional’, rather than an objective point of view, giving priority to Christianity or Roman Catholicism, with an assumption that these were the ‘main’ or ‘most important’ religions. There should be no evidence of comparisons implying that one religion is better than another.
- In some investigations students tried to cover topics that were far too wide-ranging, especially given the 1000-word limit in the 10-credit subject.
- Once again, markers found evidence of substantial errors about aspects of certain traditions or religions. Such serious errors of fact about the beliefs and practices of religious groups brought down the standard of knowledge and understanding, and limited achievement to the lower levels of the performance standards.
- No appendices should be attached to the final investigation that is submitted for marking. The word limits of 1000 words for a 10-credit subject and 2000 words for a 20-credit subject must be adhered to.
- Students are advised to number the pages of their completed investigations, as markers noted that, in some cases, when pages had been inadvertently stapled in the wrong order, it was very difficult to make sense of the text and be certain of the intended order.
- Evidence reported in the investigations should be based on research

(investigation) not on assumptions, which were often incorrect (for example; ‘all students who attend state school are atheists’).

- Students who made full use of the word count (allowing for the greatest advantage in presenting evidence of the assessment design criteria) were more successful than those whose investigations fell short of the word count.

The most successful investigations were: based on an aspect of religion in contemporary debate, or of deep personal interest to the student; had a narrowly focused guiding question that allowed for depth of understanding and analysis; and made full use of relevant and authoritative primary sources. Markers commented that, overall, the standard of investigations presented was generally higher than in previous years.

OPERATIONAL ADVICE

The presentation of materials for Religion Studies was exemplary. Nearly all schools packaged tasks by student, in a clearly organised fashion that made it extremely straightforward for markers to handle the materials for moderation. (A small minority were packaged by assessment type across the class, as opposed to a collection of all assessment tasks for each student; this is not necessary.)

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.

It is not necessary to ‘de-identify’ individual student work for moderation, but this should be done for the external task, leaving only the school number and the student’s SACE registration number visible. Teachers should remind students to ensure that they carefully check their references for potentially identifiable information. (School chaplains, principals, and teachers are occasionally identified by name and school.)

GENERAL COMMENTS

Generally the standard across Religion Studies has improved each year since the introduction of the combined subject, and this year has been no exception. There has been further improvement in the overall standard and achievement during 2013. 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 thus find interesting.

Teachers are strongly encouraged to join marking and moderation panels in 2014. 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.

Religion Studies
Chief Assessor