

Institution: UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM
Unit of Assessment: D33 Theology and Religious Studies
Title of case study: Designing the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education and promoting inter-faith relations, social cohesion and solidarity in Birmingham
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Enshrining 24 moral and spiritual dispositions, the 2007 Birmingham Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education, the outcome of years of Marius Felderhof's research into educational principles, marks a dramatic departure from previous RE syllabuses. It has been officially adopted by Birmingham City Council, welcomed by civic leaders, endorsed by Birmingham faith leaders, and implemented in nearly 400 Birmingham schools. In addition, it has stimulated debate on RE provision nationally and internationally, and has been the subject of studies and conference debates in the UK and elsewhere. Shifting the focus of RE teaching from imparting information to moral and spiritual formation, it is acknowledged as introducing the most radical changes to RE in decades.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Dr Marius Felderhof, Senior Lecturer in Philosophical and Systematic Theology, specialises in religious education and its underlying theological and philosophical principles. In the wake of government statutes in the 1990s that reconfirmed the requirements of the 1944 Education Act, he developed an interest in the practical and theoretical issues raised by the obligation on maintained schools to provide religious education and collective worship. His reflections on these issues through the early 2000s are documented by a selection of his articles listed below, in particular his contribution to <i>Inspiring Faith in Schools</i> (2007), of which he was co-editor (the outcome of a series of colloquia he helped to organise in order to pursue further his vision of religious education). The theological position that underpins his work is summed up in his book <i>Revisiting Christianity, theological reflections</i> (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).</p> <p>Felderhof's main principle is that in their religious education young people should be approached as whole persons through their experience. Educating them about religion should provide them with guidelines for life, for which the profoundest insights of the great religions can be tapped. The task of religious education is not simply to impart facts, but to help young people to recognise the spiritual and moral dimensions of life and to make them their own. In advancing this approach, he challenges many assumptions about RE that are built into current UK curriculums. For him the primary focus should be on educating young people in what it is to be religious and moral, with their development as whole individuals uppermost in mind, rather than on learning the detached intellectual study of religion - this comes later. So, he has taken the four cardinal virtues and three theological virtues of classical Christian theology and related them to equivalents in other religious traditions. On the basis of this he has developed 24 moral and spiritual dispositions.</p> <p>Felderhof has spoken about these 24 dispositions at specialist conferences and has written articles on them for academic journals from the early 2000s onwards. They lie at the heart of the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education, published in 2007. This Syllabus, which was drafted by him, is the main outcome of the body of research that underpins this case for impact.</p> <p>Since the Syllabus was officially adopted and implemented, Felderhof has continued to reflect and publish on the implications of the principles about religious education he advocates. He has particularly focused on the place of secular humanism and atheism in the curriculum, and on the cognitive, affective and conative dimensions of this method of education.</p>
<p>3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)</p> <p>R1) 'On Understanding Worship in School. Part One: on schooling and education', <i>Journal of Beliefs and Values</i> 20 (1999) 219-30 [DOI: 10.1080/1361767990200207].</p> <p>R2) 'On Understanding Worship in School. Part Two: on worship and educating', <i>Journal of Beliefs</i></p>

Impact case study (REF3b)

and Values 21 (2000) 17-26 [DOI: 10.1080/13617670050002291].

R3) 'The New National Framework for RE in England and Wales: a critique', *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 25 (2004) 241-8 [DOI: 10.1080/1361767042000251645].

R4) 'R.E.: Religions, equality and curriculum time', *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 26 (2005) 201-14 [DOI: 10.1080/13617670500164965].

R5) 'Religionsunterricht in Grossbritannien' ['RE in England and Wales'], in *Religionen in der Schule, Bildung in Deutschland und Europa vor neuen Herausforderungen*, Bad Homburg v. d. Hohe: Herbert Quandt Stiftung, 2007, 171-87 [available from HEI on request].

R6) Marius Felderhof, David Torevell and Penny Thompson (eds), *Inspiring faith in schools*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2007 [available from HEI on request].

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Felderhof has been a member of Birmingham's Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) since 1982. In consideration of his distinctive contributions to the debate about RE as outlined above, in 2005 he was invited to draft the new **Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education for Birmingham City Council**, the largest education authority in the country. The work on this involved producing a text on religious education in schools from early years to secondary level (see source 1 below), steering it through a scrutiny committee and sessions of the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus Conference, consulting regularly with teachers and educators across the city, and briefing the Birmingham Faith Leaders' Group. Felderhof was instrumental in ensuring that everyone affected by the syllabus, including members of nine different faith groups and different departments of the City Council, accepted and associated themselves with it.

This intensive process resulted in the **adoption of the syllabus** by Birmingham City Council in June 2007 (source 2), and its implementation throughout the Birmingham Education Authority area. By 2012 an impressive **385 primary and secondary schools** were teaching it, together with a number of early years education providers. In addition it was **adopted by Birmingham Diocese** for use in its church schools, and also by Nishkam primary, a **Sikh school** in Handsworth, where it is at the heart of the educational philosophy (source 3). This means that since the syllabus was introduced it has reached literally thousands of young people in the Birmingham area, meaning that Felderhof's distinctive insights into the nature of RE, enshrined in the Agreed Syllabus with the 24 dispositions prominently included, have wide and deep effects on many young and developing lives. This is **the only RE Syllabus constructed along these lines currently available in the UK**.

Faith leaders in Birmingham readily endorsed the syllabus and gave it their full support, as was vividly demonstrated when the Anglican Bishop of Birmingham, David Urquhart, wrote to government ministers in 2009 to commend it in place of the government's draft guidance on the Non-Statutory National Framework for Religious Education, 2004 (source 4). In response, Jill Loosely, Deputy Director of the Curriculum Policy Division in the Department for Education, visited Birmingham in September 2011 to find out more, while Nick Gibb MP, Minister of State for Schools, planned to come on 2 October 2012 (a cabinet reshuffle prevented this).

The **City Council gave substantial backing** to the Syllabus through an **on-going budget** for its implementation to SACRE. First allocated from 2011, this budget funds a website for teachers which sets out the rationale and aims of the syllabus, and provides schemes of work, lesson plans, films of good classroom practice, and other resources (sources 5 and 6).

The Syllabus has generated **widespread interest and debate** outside Birmingham, both in the UK and abroad. Birmingham SACRE **has received enquiries** about it from Bristol, London, Coventry and Manchester, while **Felderhof has given invited talks on it** at conferences for religious leaders, academics and educators in Israel (June 2010) and the USA (April 2011), to the government of the Sudan (April 2011), at the Museum of World Religions in Taiwan (November 2011), at the International Symposium on Religion, Spirituality and Education for Human Flourishing in Marrakesh (March 2012, co-convened by the Guerrand-Hermes Foundation for Peace and the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations), and a keynote address to an audience of researchers and educators at the Westhill Trust seminar on Spirituality and RE in Leeds,

Impact case study (REF3b)

November 2011. He was also invited to join Birmingham political and spiritual leaders in their **representations on RE at the Department for Education**. In 2009 he was part of a delegation to consult a London-based Queen's Counsel on the legality of elements in the government's draft Guidance for RE (2009), in particular the status of the Non-Statutory National Framework for RE (2004). As a result, the final Guidance issued by the government in 2010 was significantly changed from its draft form, acknowledging the right of local authorities to continue to issue their own syllabus and to make the major religious traditions the basis of their contents.

Evaluation of the impact of the Syllabus has begun. In preparation for a full-scale study, in 2012 a pilot study was made by Penny Jennings to compare pupils' responses with many similar questions asked in a survey done some years ago in Cornwall. One observation was: 'Although aware that comparisons cannot be made without the relevant statistical analyses and unless samples are comparable in size and composition, [we] noticed that the responses to some sections of the Birmingham pilot study differed greatly from those in the earlier Cornwall survey. For example, Birmingham's Year 9 pupil responses to items examining attitudes to "spiritual" experiences appeared to be predominantly positive, whereas Cornwall's Year 9 and 10 pupil responses in this section were predominantly negative.' (source 7)

Praise for the Syllabus has been consistent. As early as 2008, Tony Howell, then Director of Children's Services for Birmingham, commented: 'It is probably **one of the most exciting curriculum developments** we have seen over the last few years' (source 8), and in 2011 Professor Trevor Cooling, Director of the National Institute for Christian Education Research at Canterbury Christ Church University, wrote: 'If RE went down this road it would be **the most radical change since the shift stimulated by Ninian Smart's work**' (source 9). Its influence on faith cooperation in Birmingham is summed up in the 2011 report of Councillor Les Lawrence, Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families, to the City Council: 'The experience of delivering the 2007 Birmingham Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education ... has **brought the faiths together** in a common purpose and has created mutual support among the religious communities' (7 February, 2012).

Most significant of all, **teachers themselves** have commented on how their students approach RE in a new way. Bethan Ruth, Frankley School, says: 'Historically it was just about learning facts. Now it's about **what they get out of it** and what the benefits are and if any of those benefits could be applied within their own lives. So it's a lot more about learning from religion as a result of looking at how faith has an impact in a believer's life. I very rarely get them asking why they are learning this. It's more about "**this is really interesting** and I want to learn more" and "this is my view on it. What motivates someone to come from that view on this?"' (source 10). In addition, other **educational practitioners** have begun to see the potential of the syllabus. In September 2013, Ian Jones, the head of St Peter's Saltley Trust, Birmingham, raised the possibility of applying it for FE students, explaining: 'If it's true that employers as often value good character as specific skills or knowledge, some of those fundamental dispositions (such as being accountable and living with integrity, being open, honest and truthful, being merciful and forgiving) will surely be key to that. Indeed, recently I showed the 'Faith makes a Difference' site to a new FE college chaplain who was looking for ideas and resources, and he got quite excited about how relevant the dispositions could be within his context' (source 11).

These high commendations were endorsed in August 2011, when **an issue of the *Journal of Beliefs and Values* was dedicated to Felderhof** and his innovative work (source 12), showing that his original insights into the nature and function of RE, expressed in the 24 dispositions, have not only reached great numbers of school children in the West Midlands, but have also influenced thinking at high levels among educationalists and practitioners. The impact of his research is clearly both pervasive and profound and it continues to spread.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- [1] *The Birmingham Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education* (2007), <http://www.faithmakesadifference.co.uk/landing#node-92>.
- [2] <http://www.birminghampost.net/news/west-midlands-news/2007/06/25/religion-key-to->

Impact case study (REF3b)

- [making-pupils-model-citizens-65233-19353009/](#) (article in *The Birmingham Post* about the official adoption of the syllabus by the City Council).
- [3] Factual statement provided Sikh businessman in Birmingham, detailing the adoption of the dispositions by Nishkam primary school, with the intention to adopt it more widely.
- [4] The Bishop of Birmingham's communication to government ministers, 2009 (available on request).
- [5] www.faithmakesadifference.co.uk.
- [6] The Bishop of Birmingham's press release for the launch of the new website in 2012 (http://www.birmingham.anglican.org/content/content_yourchurch_news_story.asp?id=873).
- [7] Appendix to P. Jennings and M. Felderhof (eds), *Teaching Virtue*, Bloomsbury, forthcoming.
- [8] DVD, 'Religious Education in Birmingham', Birmingham City Council, 2008 (available on request).
- [9] Factual statement provided by Director of the National Institute for Christian Education Research at Canterbury Christ Church University.
- [10] <http://www.faithmakesadifference.co.uk/landing#node-94>.
- [11] Factual statement provided by head of St Peter's Saltley Trust, Birmingham.
- [12] *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 32/2 (August 2011), a special issue dedicated to Felderhof, with a tribute by Birmingham Councillors Alan Rudge and Les Lawrence (http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjbv20?open=32#vol_32).