

Religion not lost on students of trial RE program

High school students who participated in an alternative Religious Education program that prioritised dialogue and access to media and technology found talking about religion more personally valuable than formally studying it, new Australian Catholic University (ACU) research has found.

A two-year review of the Archdiocese of Brisbane's *Religion, Meaning and Life* curriculum, offered as a Religious Education pilot course for Year 11 and Year 12 students in 17 Catholic schools, found students who studied the unit had a stronger understanding of Christianity and other world religions, and were more accepting of differing world views, due to the emphasis on dialogue in the classrooms.

Some of the 276 students surveyed for the research, led in partnership by ACU's La Salle Academy and Brisbane Catholic Education (BCE), also revealed that the structured yet informal nature of the unit, which did not contribute towards an ATAR, had a positive impact on their mental health.

The full findings are expected to be published by Springer later this year.

La Salle Academy deputy dean Associate Professor William Sultmann AM, who was one of the authors of the research publication, said the *RML* highlighted the importance of dialogue and inclusivity among young people who were seeking to find meaning and purpose in their lives.

"Our research into the *RML* curriculum revealed that young people can respectfully learn about religion if their classes are delivered in a relevant and engaging way," Dr Sultmann said.

"In fact, our research into the *RML* showed that young people with no faith background responded extremely positively to a Religious Education curriculum in a classroom environment that was dialogical, relational and experiential.

"We know the decline in religious affiliation in Australia, especially among young people, is having a significant impact on the delivery of Religious Education curriculum in Catholic schools across this country, driving many dioceses to reimagine what RE looks like.

"In re-evaluating their Religious Education curriculum, the Archdiocese of Brisbane has created an innovative and highly relevant program that caters to the changing landscape of our country, whilst still inviting young people to explore religion and seek answers to life's questions and contemporary issues."

Among the other experiences of the students, parents and teachers surveyed, the review found:

- Students had an improved understanding of religion when given the ability to discuss their views and listen to the views of their peers
- Students responded positively to the option of participating in a religion class while still having adequate time and energy to focus on their tertiary entrance subjects
- Teachers of the program reported their students having greater freedom to engage in deep and thoughtful conversations about religion, ethics, and morals
- The role of teacher as witness, specialist and moderator greatly improved classroom engagement

BCE Education Officer Mark Craig, one of the developers of the *RML* and a co-author of the research publication, said prior to the *RML* pilot program, students were known to question Religious Education as an obligatory unit of study.

However, ACU's research into the program was further proof that, with the right approach, religious education could be personally meaningful to young people.

"There's a social phenomenon of young people moving away from institutional religion, but they're not moving away from an interest in spirituality and seeking deeper meaning," Mr Craig said.

"We've seen evidence of this in the *RML* where some of the students who have done the program leave school found it a rich experience and they have come away with a positive experience of Catholic education.

"That's a really positive outcome."

BCE Head of Catholic Identity, Alain Pitot, said the *RML* unit allowed schools to maintain a strong Catholic faith tradition while also meeting the spiritual needs of its students.

"Catholic schools in Australia are accepting of all students, which means we also need to find appropriate and engaging ways of sharing the Catholic faith tradition with a diverse range of young people," Mr Pitot said.

“The *RML* curriculum does exactly that, giving students the opportunity to learn about religion and spirituality, specifically through the lens of the Catholic faith, all within a safe and supportive environment that encourages dialogue and interpersonal reflection. Most importantly, the feedback from Brisbane Catholic Education students who have taken this course has been overwhelmingly positive.”

Dr Sultmann said the research should be encouraging to Religious Education leaders in Australian Catholic schools.

“The *RML* is an innovative curriculum that serves the Catholic school’s mission in supporting the holistic development of the person, as well as advancing peer to peer and teacher to student relationships within the Catholic school, and certainly has the potential to become a blueprint for more alternative Religious Education offerings nationally,” Dr Sultmann said.

Notes for media:

- The *Religion, Meaning and Life* curriculum was a joint initiative of Brisbane Catholic Education, under the guidance of former Executive Director Pam Betts, with support from Archbishop Mark Coleridge in the Archdiocese of Brisbane. The pilot program commenced in 10 schools in 2020.
- ACU La Salle Academy’s Janeen Lamb and ACU Faculty of Theology and Philosopher Senior Lecturer Dr Peter Ivers were also involved in the review of *RML*.

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